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Excommunicated sister finds healing

by Zoe Ryan



Mercy Sr. Margaret McBride (photo/Brian Roewe)

MILWAUKEE -- Caught in a controversy over medical ethics and excommunicated, Mercy Sr. Margaret McBride thought she would find all of her healing from the church. But she said she found healing in a conversation with the patient who unwittingly was at the center of the debate.

McBride, a former vice president of mission integration and a member of the ethics committee at the St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix, was in the news last year when it became public that the ethics committee assented to the abortion of an 11-week-old fetus in order to save the life of a pregnant woman suffering from pulmonary hypertension.

For this, McBride was excommunicated *latae sententiae*, or automatically, Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmsted said in May 2010. In December 2010, Olmsted withdrew formal recognition of St. Joseph's as a Catholic hospital.

McBride's life intersected with the patient's life once again this year. The woman had started taking street

drugs and returned to the hospital in February. The doctors told McBride that she had to see the woman to figure out what was wrong.

"And I went in and I had one of those terrible pastoral visits that no one ever wants to have. It was just awful: it was 'hello, yes, no, everything is fine.' So I walked away and I said I think that we need to have a psychiatric intervention just to help her talk about what it is that's bothering her right now.

The psychiatrist left McBride a message saying the mother wanted to talk with her. It was Valentine's Day.

"I walked into the room and of course I burst into tears and she burst into tears, and she said, 'I'm so sorry for all these terrible things that happened to you. You saved my life, and all these terrible things happened to you,'" McBride said.

"And if I were to say where I thought I was going to get my healing, it would have been from the church. But the healing really came from the woman, who graciously told me that her life had been changed because of me, but that now she felt guilty that so many things had happened to me. And I told her 'you just don't see my support, you don't see the employees, you don't see the doctors, you don't see the board of directors and the Catholic Healthcare West who have supported me through this interesting time.'"

McBride also told the mother "that in some wonderful and beautiful way, when you go through difficulties and challenges, there is a tremendous amount of grace that comes to you, that I never would have experienced, that I never would have realized had it not been for this experience."

She related her feelings in the aftermath of the controversy and being excommunicated.

"And in that strange sort of way, it connected me even more to the church, and even more to the suffering church," she said.

"You know, the word excommunication has a very powerful meaning when you're sitting in the midst of being excommunicated," she said. "It's when you want the Eucharist, it's when you want to be in the presence of the Catholic community, and when it's suddenly denied to you."

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She told the audience that she complied with the bishops' two requests for the excommunication to be lifted. One request was that she had to go to confession to a priest, and the other was she had to resign her position.

"So I want you to know that in my journey I did reconcile with the church," she said. "The church means something very different to me today. Something has to be taken away sometimes for you to appreciate it even more. So it is now that I believe I am called to do something and I don't know what that something is, but I pray that through the grace of God to give me that opportunity to know what the next step is for me."

McBride received the Call To Action 2011 Leadership Award at the Call To Action national conference Nov. 6 because she represents the "true meaning of a 'pastor' " according to Call To Action, a Catholic church reform group.

About 25 Sisters of Mercy joined her on stage as she accepted the award.

She concluded with a statement aptly fitting in with the rest of the weekend. "It's living on the margins that gives us that vista that we need in our church today."

[Zoe Ryan is an *NCR* staff writer. Her e-mail address is zryan@ncronline.org.]

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