

Faith in a World of Uncertainty

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“Do not worry about your life,” Jesus commands us in Matthew 6:25. This teaching has always proven rather difficult for me to follow. I seem to have a special gift for worrying, and if I let my mind wander, I can usually find *something* to get anxious about.

Recently, for instance, I’ve been thinking a lot about the future of faith-based social services. I entered a Master of Social Work program last year, and have had a great first two semesters. I am excited for the opportunity to dedicate my career to serving people in need, and it would be especially meaningful to carry out that service within a Catholic organization.

However, there is more than a little anxiety mixed in with that excitement. I recognize, as many CSWNA members do, that not everyone shares our commitment to religious freedom. Some argue that people of faith should either violate their conscience by participating in services that go against their religious beliefs, or leave the healthcare and social services fields altogether. If I am unwilling to subordinate my religious identity to present-day cultural standards, they imply, then I should not be pursuing a career in social work at all.

There is plenty I have to say on that subject, and hope to do so in the future, but I would first like to reflect on the environment of uncertainty that this debate has created. After I graduate (God willing) in May 2018, I hope to practice social work with a Catholic organization. Yet I have no way of knowing what new freedoms or restrictions will be placed on practitioners like me by then. I don’t know what protections will be available to me at a secular or faith-based agency if a client or supervisor asks me to violate my conscience.

I’ve come to realize that this uncertainty will not just exist for a couple of years or for one presidential administration. It will accompany me throughout my career. Various laws and court rulings at the local, state, and federal level will either facilitate or inhibit my ability to serve people in need. Even if one Congress signs a landmark religious freedom bill into law, another Congress could overturn it. A groundbreaking executive order signed by one president may be overturned by the next.

How, then, should I respond to this uncertainty? Even before I entered my Master of Social Work program, I was aware of the potential threats that Catholic social workers and others face. However, I did not want to let those threats limit my career path. If I avoided the social work field because of potential threats to my conscience, I would be letting the other side win. I did not want fear to keep me from a cause that I deeply believe in.

Currently, I see three positive ways to respond to this uncertainty—and really, this anxiety—that faces me as an aspiring social worker. First, I can borrow from the cognitive-behavioral model, which teaches that our response to circumstances is mediated by our thoughts and beliefs. I recognized recently that when anxieties and worries about the future of social work enter my head, I have the choice to entertain those thoughts or dismiss them. The more I dwell on those thoughts, the more frequently they’ll come. The better option is to ignore them, and let them fade away on their own.

By this approach, I do not mean to imply that we have nothing to be concerned about as Catholic social workers. However, I’ve found that brooding on these threats to religious freedom

accomplishes nothing for me, and only leads to greater levels of fear. For my own well-being, I have to resist the temptation to consent to the fears and worries that enter my head.

The second step is to consult with experienced, trusted practitioners as much as possible. I have already benefited immensely from talking about these concerns with other Catholics, including Catholic social workers and my spiritual director. They have offered me invaluable wisdom, advice, and encouragement. I am also grateful for the National Catholic Bioethics Center, which has already helped me navigate the complex world of healthcare ethics, and for legal organizations like the Thomas More society who are ready to advocate for my rights as a faith-based practitioner. I hope to remain in dialogue with these individuals and organizations throughout my working life. And this dialogue, of course, will include working together to advocate for our rights as Catholic social workers. The CSWNA has already taken a leading role in this mission, and I have a sense that their advocacy work will be even more crucial in the years to come.

Finally, and most importantly, I must place my faith and trust in God. To be honest, I'm still working out what exactly this means in a professional context. For example, I can't ask God to promise me a specific position at a specific organization. Nor can I demand that God never allow trials to come my way; such trials, painful as they may be, are opportunities to develop my faith and witness to others. However, I do choose to believe that God will meet my deepest, most fundamental needs: my need to love and to be loved; my need to serve others (ideally, but not exclusively, as a social worker); and my need for spiritual and social support. I don't know *exactly* how things will work out, but I choose to have faith that they will.

To conclude, I have come to accept that there will always be some uncertainty about the future outlook for faith-based social work. However, I cannot let that uncertainty paralyze me, or dissuade me from seeking to serve people in need. Instead, I must rely on God, whose love and support I *can* be certain of. As Saint Teresa of Avila concludes in her famous prayer: "Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices."