

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION
IN THE LIGHT OF
CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Thank you for the invitation to be with you tonight. I am honored to be your invited guest speaker and for this I am grateful. You have made me reflect deeply on the topic of this evening and have made me reassess our own diocesan approach to socio-human problems.

Let me begin by saying something about the story of the refugees from El Salvador who had to leave their small villages and flee to Honduras. In Honduras they had to live in conditions characteristic of war concentration camps. They had practically nothing and they realized very soon that in order to survive they had to organize themselves in such a way that everyone looked out for the needs of others. Intuitively they arrived at the conclusion that the method by which they would organize themselves, had to insure that all members of the community would share whatever resources and food that was available. This resulted in a spirit of cooperation and mutual support that in turn, led them to create totally new structures. Soon the refugees realized that these new structures were the leaven of a new society and the hope emerging from the struggles in El Salvador.

Out of that experience they returned to their homeland of El Salvador carrying with them this newly-acquired wisdom and strategies to reorganize their lives together.

Their innate Christian Catholicism reinforced the principals of how they were organizing themselves. The Gospel insistence on fraternal love and the Church as community served to reinforce what they had discovered. Those of us who have recently visited El Salvador have been enormously impressed by how well these new organized villages operate. What we found there is a spirit of sharing, trust and discipline. Somehow they have managed so far to avoid the pitfalls of selfishness and greed. Many projects such as cattle grazing, schools, waterworks, health clinics and housing are done by the village communities at large. In addition to these things, cooperatives are being organized such as bakeries, small shoe and clothing factories, as well as agriculture. What they have created is reminiscent of the early Christian communities described in Chapter 4 of the Acts of the Apostles.

"The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather everything was held in common...nor was there anyone needy among them, for all who owned property or houses sold and donated the proceeds. They used to lay them at the feet of the Apostles to be distributed to everyone according to his need" (Acts 4, 32-35).

The principals of Catholic social teachings come dramatically alive in situations such as in El Salvador and throughout Latin America. They come alive in similar third world-type situations in our own country such as in Doña Ana County of the Diocese of Las Cruces that borders with Mexico, and I am sure also in the poverty stricken areas of upstate New York such as in your own City of Rochester. The one hundred years of Catholic social teaching since Rerum Novarum have underscored several very important principles; these have been the foundation stones for Catholic Social Ministry in the Diocese of Las Cruces: the dignity of the human person, the principle of common good, human rights and human responsibilities, the dignity of workers and their rights to organize, the option for the poor

and the principle of solidarity with all who are committed with the social message of the Gospel. To these I would add the principle of subsidiarity, which has taught us that individual groups and communities are keenly aware of their own problems and solutions at their local level. The role of the diocese, then, becomes that of a catalyst rather than the controlling agent. This happened in Roswell, New Mexico, where the problem of undocumented immigrants was so acute. We decided early in the process of the Amnesty Program, that our diocesan role was to help the local agencies, church and otherwise, to develop the capacity to provide the necessary immigration services. Actually, this may have been out of the financial situation of the diocese. We knew we did not have the financial resources to take care of the entire project by ourselves and we needed the pooled resources of the community.

The latest encyclical of Pope John Paul the II Centessimus Annus, written on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, offers a powerful reaffirmation of the paramount importance of Catholic Social teachings and challenges us all to take up the cause of the poor and the pursuit of peace with new urgency and determination. Rerum Novarum has reference not only to the encyclical of 1891 by Pope Leo the XIII but is symbolic of all the teachings that have been forthcoming since then to the present. Almost every Pope since Leo the XIII has contributed to the development of Catholic Social teaching. What I would call "the Rerum Novarum challenge" consists in our looking anew at Catholic social teaching in the light of the new challenges brought on by the socio-human issues of today.

When we ask people what those issues might be, they will usually answer with such things as racism, poverty, chemical addictions and environmental concerns. While these are real phenomena, I believe we must look behind them and see them as symptomatic of something much deeper. I would suggest that we identify some of these social concerns as symptoms of the real problem and that is the uncaring attitude of the nonpoor. The problem pure and simple, seems to stem from human greed and selfishness.

In February of this year, an article appeared in Life magazine written by Mr. Lee Attwater assisted by another writer.¹ You will recall that Mr. Attwater gained notoriety within the Republican party for his negative campaign tactics. His three bibles, books that he carried with him everywhere, were Machiavelli's, The Prince, Plato's Republic and Sun Tzu's, The Art of War. These books are all on either politics or on the acquisition and use of power where the ends justify the means. After Bush was elected, during a speech where Attwater was ridiculing Dukakis as a "rocky squirrel riding a war tank", he felt intense pain in his leg, fell to the ground, and shouted, "Help me, help me!" He was rushed to the hospital where the diagnosis showed that he had a tumor the size of an egg in his brain. He goes on in his article to tell the story of his deteriorating health and what went on in his mind and in his heart as he faced impending death, an ordeal that he considered to be the most formidable challenge of his life in what was to be his "last campaign".

He called his friends and picked the minds of religious people, ministers of all faiths. He reached the conclusion that the common denominator of all religions and

denominations was the golden rule, "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." He also decided that he must come to terms with his Maker. Prior to this he had no religious leanings, he neither prayed nor read the Bible. Now he found himself being kind to people and found it in his heart to reconcile with such people as Ron Brown, Chairman of the Democratic Party and even with Michael Dukakis. He decided that he needed to let go of the control that he once thought he had and remembered the words of Charles Coleson: "You thought that you were in control, but you never were."

Prior to his conversion, he had always sensed that something was wrong, deeply wrong, with this country. It became dramatically clear to him during his illness that what America had gone after in a relentless kind of way, was acquisition, the acquisition of power, wealth and prestige. He admitted that he had acquired more than his share of these things, and further concluded that even if one has these things in great abundance there is always something missing. What was missing in America is what was missing in his own heart and soul, and that was the spiritual dimension. If the leaders of the 80's had emphasized power, wealth and prestige, the leaders of the 90's needed to lead us along the lines of spiritual values. He states in his article that what America needs is "a bit of heart and a lot of brotherhood." In fighting his illness, he discovered that this spiritual lack is the tumor in the soul of America. Lee Attwater died just a few weeks after the article appeared at the age of 40.

The lesson of Lee Attwater is as clear as it is powerful. The temptations of greed and selfishness in terms of wealth, power and prestige resound so closely to the temptations of Jesus in the desert, and they are the temptations that we all experience at one time or another, and, like Jesus, we are tempted throughout our lives.

In order to confront these powers of evil, Christianity has created many communal or group approaches for solving the problems in society. From the very beginning, the Church relied heavily on some kind of organization or group arrangement. But the Church did not invent the phenomenon of community. There already were existing models in the immediate environment where Christianity began around the Mediterranean Sea. The apostles and their successors simply took advantage of the existing models of community, converted some of them, and set them on fire, so to speak, with the light and principles of the Gospel. Among those models from the Mediterranean environment were:

1. The household, the "basic cell" of the Christian movement which included not only immediate relatives but also slaves, freed men, hired workers, and sometimes tenants and partners in trade or craft.

2. The voluntary association such as clubs, guilds and associations of all sorts. An example of the voluntary association were the so-called burial societies.

3. The synagogue, particularly the Diaspora synagogue, which may have been for newly converted Jews; this was the newest and most natural model mainly because of Israel's history as people of God and its ritual from which Christians developed their own.

4. The philosophic or rhetorical school, communities of disciples around noted teachers, both philosophers and rhetoras. Some scholars propose that from these models the schools of St. Paul arose around different places in early Christianity.²

At first Christianity was a movement: Jesus' disciples rallied around him, the charismatic leader. There did not seem to be any shared authority and when Jesus left, he designated the next leader. The Jesus movement, like any other movement, served to lift consciousness and to promote an ideal, rather than to aim at social reform; there did not seem to be a great emphasis on financial needs but there was a large amount of enthusiasm.

What the Church very quickly realized it needed to survive was to place some handle on the movement and this came about by way of creating institutions. As Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, says, "if you want to do something only once, you only have to do it. If you want to do something over and over again, though, you have to institutionalize it in some way. You have to institute some program that will insure that the job gets done, not just today or this year but also tomorrow and next year and the year after that. Human life would be chaotic were it not for institutions. It would be like having to reinvent the wheel day in and day out."³

Institutions are set up for the purpose of the institutions maintaining themselves. The leader in the institution is generally an administrator and the energy level is fairly low. In order to help the poor, for example, we organize such things as St. Vincent

de Paul Societies, soup kitchens and the like, which are necessary and fine as far as they go, but they do have a rather narrow focus.

What I understand is that your interest is in broad based community organizing. This approach incorporates a good deal of diversity, different people who have a like mind, that is, they have a common greater interest. Broad based community organizing has as one of its major functions of developing leaders rather than to simply maintain the institution. The common denominator of those who belong to this organizing effort is self-interest, either for one's family or for one's neighborhood. The energy level of this kind of organization may not be as high nor as enthusiastic as that of a movement, but it is certainly greater than that of an institution.

In broad base community organizing many people take an active role and the kind of people that are first recruited are those who are more likely to recruit others. These, in Industrial Areas Foundation terms, are the secondary leaders. The primary leaders are those who are able to speak to politicians, business people and other influential personages in the community. The primary leaders also involve themselves in the training of other leaders. They have a broader vision of the community. They look beyond their individual issue and think about building the organization that will empower the community.

In many places where community organization has taken place, and you are most surely familiar with this, the effort is labeled as communist, un-American and

unpatriotic. The truth of the matter is that community organization exists precisely to make democracy work in educating people to take their rightful role in being involved in decisions that affect their lives and those of their families.

Let me share with you how we have gone about social ministry in the Diocese of Las Cruces. As you know, our diocese is a fairly new one, eight and one half years old, to be exact, and we were faced with the challenge of having to organize everything from the ground up. Among those things we were challenged by were the social realities of our southern New Mexico existence, with all its problem of poverty, history of discrimination, pockets of economically-depressed areas such as mining and oil areas, affected by a recession that seems to have affected us much earlier than most of the rest of the country. We decided that what we would do with out limited resources was to some degree symbolic, since we knew we could not tackle it all, and--given the best geographical area that the diocese incorporates--it would be impossible to be effective everywhere. As we say in Spanish "el que mucho abarca, poco aprieta."

We started with an ambitious survey, done by telephone in every community of the diocese. In all, there were close to 2,000 telephone interviews conducted and on the bases of these, the Office of Catholic Social Ministry wrote and published a report, A Study on Social Concern; A Framework for Analysis and Report on Findings (Diocese of Las Cruces, June, 1985).⁴

In order to follow a Christian approach the framework taken as a springboard was the Thomistic analysis of the virtue of prudence, since social action deals with prudential decisions and actions. St. Thomas breaks down the virtue of prudence into the three steps of observation, judgement and action. This approach has been used extensively throughout Latin America, particularly at the Bishops' Conferences at Medellín and Puebla; they have also been the bases for much of the work at the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio.

The writers of the report stated:

The See/Judge/Act process is not a value free and detached endeavor. We are guided by a firm belief in the value and dignity of the human person and the belief in our obligation as a Christian community to respond to the sufferings of our brothers and sisters. It is our firm belief that we must join together in the process of resurrection from suffering to a fullness of life. We are also guided by the recognition that our analysis would be incomplete if we did not reflect on the theological, historical and structural aspects of our reality....

Theological reflection is an indispensable step in the process if we are to respond to the Christian command of a preferential option for the poor. The question we must ask here is 'What is God's Word?' As we JUDGE we focus on what God said is just, proper, prudent, and life-giving. JUDGING is taken into consideration what God is telling us and how he enlightens our understanding of what we experience. The theological basis for JUDGING is the personal and comunitarian reflection on sacred scripture and the teaching of the Church whose elevating dynamic is based on faith, hope and charity.⁵

We were guided in laying the foundation of our work by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., from the Center of Concern in Washington.

Our ministry in the diocese focuses around three areas: Farmworkers, economic development and an environmental concern. A good deal of this work is partially funded by the Campaign for Human Development.

The farmworker project is really divided in two, the work done directly with the farm working communities in the farming areas near the city of Las Cruces and the work done with the farmworkers union, headquartered in El Paso, Texas, to the South of us, where many of our farmworkers commute to and from the field. Some of these farmworkers also commute between the agriculture fields in New Mexico and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. With the farmworkers union our social ministry deals with issues of workers rights, safety and wages. The work centers around trying to restructure the three-tiered arrangement that includes the farmer, a contractor and the worker. What we would really like would be for the workers to deal directly with the farmers.

The work with the farmworker communities in the Las Cruces area began with the usual processes of interviews and visits to farmworker households. At first we thought the issues were wages and working conditions, but we discovered that the people were really concerned about public safety (fire, police), roads and their maintenance, recreational facilities for children, more adequate housing, and assistance in changing from butane to natural gas, a cheaper fuel.

Much of the work in the farmworker project has to do not only with the education of the farmworkers, but also with that of contractors and farmers. We are concerned about everyone, not only the farmworker. Our goal is fairness for everyone and that everyone's basic needs be met. We recognize education to be the fuel for an organization and working arrangement that reflects the wisdom that has as its source the real experience of people. Besides educating the people about their rights , we also want them to validate their intuitions and experiences and then help them articulate those intuitions.

With the environmental issue of a landfill that is located in one of our communities dangerously close to the schools, it has become a priority to teach people how the judicial system in this country works. They have a clear notion of justice, but this is mainly abstract and conceptual. The people there thought that a loud and angry demonstration would take care of getting rid of the landfill. It has taken some doing to bringing them along the lines of community organization. They also thought that if the bishop would simply come and order people to rally behind them, that this would do it. We had to convince them that this shortcut would not work. With the direction from our social ministry office, the people are now forming alliances with other environmental groups and have hired a lawyer to help them along.

The economic development project in Grant County, an area depressed by mining cutbacks, is inspired by the famous Mondragon Experiment in Spain. In the 1940's

a priest from Spain, wanting to help his people after the devastating Civil War of 1936, traveled to England to study the cooperative concepts of Robert Owen. The priest came back to Mondragon and slowly began to educate the people along those lines. It took many years, but finally they started to organize a small cooperative that eventually became a system of economic enterprises locally-owned by the workers themselves. From the Mondragon experience we have learned that it is important to educate the people to create the framework that will later support the various cooperatives. We are willing to be patient through this educational process that involves preparing the ground for the planting of the seeds. Nonetheless, even now, one cooperative is already been organized, "La Capilla", a construction company that hires a handfull of workers who themselves have ownership in the company. Plans are for other cooperatives for the future: a plant for the production of pelletized fuel and a small company that will assist people in retrieving insurance claims.

We have learned that working for the common good goes beyond ethnic boundaries; these projects work better with a good mixture of talents and skills, wherever they may be found.

I think also important for your consideration is a principle, nowhere else articulated so clearly as in the National Hispanic Pastoral Plan. The Plan is useful not only for Hispanic Communities but for the Church at large, and I sincerely hope that all of you will become familiar with it if you are not already. The principle is that of "Pastoral de conjunto". The closest we can get to it is the expression in English collaborative ministry,

but pastoral de conjunto goes beyond simply working together as teams. Pastoral de conjunto is defined in the Plan as "a corresponsable, collaborative ministry involving coordination among pastoral agents of all the elements of pastoral life and the structures are the same in views of a common goal: The Kingdom of God."⁶ What this in effect means is that there needs to be a well-coordinated pastoral effort involving all levels and all programs in the Church. In other words, all ministry and ministers must move together in the same direction. The emphasis of pastoral de conjunto is to express both a community experience and a community effort. Pastoral de conjunto is a living and active witness of what the Church is supposed to be: The Body of Christ a Sacrament that effects what it symbolizes and symbolizes what it effects. The emphasis is to do things in a communal way and thus the method is expressive of the essence and mission of the Church which is Communion.

What this in practice means is that our diocesan and parish efforts must at all costs be well-coordinated. No one can work alone in any Church project. No office can go off by itself and do its own thing without somehow connecting with the whole works. Social Ministry, for example, can and must connect with all educative efforts; members of social ministries teams need to see as part of the work being advocates in all educational endeavors, including our school institutions. There even needs to be a connection in social ministry and the diocesan office for worship or liturgy. We cannot celebrate in a vacuum and neither can we serve without bringing our efforts in community to the Eucharistic table

of offering and celebration. Another logical connection is with the offices of family and pro-life.

We have learned that creating partnerships are key in any successful social venture. You may have heard the dictum, "no permanent friends and no permanent enemies." I don't especially like the first part but I love the second part. What this points to is the section in the U. S. Bishops' Pastoral letter on the Economy on "A New American Experiment: Partnership for the Public Good." The U.S. Bishops say:

Completing the unfinished business of the American experiment will call for new forms of cooperation and partnership among those whose daily work is a source of the prosperity and justice of the nation. The United States prides itself on both its competitive sense of initiative and its spirit of teamwork. Today a greater spirit of partnership and teamwork is needed; competition alone will not do the job it has too many negative consequences for family life, the economically vulnerable, and the environment. Only a renewed commitment by all for the common good can deal creatively with the realities of international interdependence and economic dislocations in the domestic economy." (No. 296)⁷

I would like to end this evening's talk with the words of two great organizers of our day and whom I have been proud to have as friends, Ernie Cortez and Willie Velásquez.

Ernie Cortez won a McCarthur Grant a few years ago and was later interviewed on public television by Bill Moyers. At the end of the interview, Moyers asked

Ernie to say one last thing since he had a few more seconds. Ernie enunciated what for him is a chief guiding principle:

"Don't do for others what they can do for themselves." Ernie calls this the "iron rule".

It's the opposite of learned helplessness. The iron rule respects people's dignity. It says, 'You have to challenge people.' It's the opposite of what Alinsky called 'Welfare Colonialism,' where you treat people as if they were children. John Stuart Mill wrote an essay on representative government which said that the act of participation teaches people confidence in their own competence.⁸

What this tells us specifically is that we need to avoid all elements of wanting to be paternalistic and in control all the time. We need to trust in the Spirit-guided intuitions of the people themselves. Very often we must change from the posture of educators to learners. The folks out there have an awful lot to teach us. Wise men and women become wiser when they stop talking and start listening.

Willie Velásquez organized the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project. Almost single handedly he restructured the political scene in the southwest at city, county, district and state levels. Because of his work, hundreds of minority peoples are now in elected offices throughout the southwest. Much of what he did was by means of using the judicial system, knowing the law and applying it to situations where injustice existed. He also worked extensively in registering people to vote and getting good people to run for office.

Willie in his early forties got cancer about two years ago and he went very fast. The night that Willie died he told his wife and few friends that were present on his deathbed that he was very tired and he probably wouldn't make it through the night. Later that night he woke for the last time, held his wife's hand and said, "¡Qué bonito es el nuevo mundo!," which means "the new world is so beautiful!" And he repeated, "¡Qué bonito es el nuevo mundo!," and died. It will always be a good question what Willie Velásquez meant with that phrase. He could have been referring to the vision of heaven and how beautiful it is. He also could have been looking at the accomplishments of his life and seen how much more beautiful the world is because of what he did. But also it could have been the vision of the new heavens and the new earth, the Kingdom of God, articulated by Jesus himself in the Gospels -- the Kingdom where peace, justice, mercy, love and understanding reign. I suppose this is what we are all about in all our pastoral and social ministry, doing our bit in making the world more beautiful, according to the plan of God, and perhaps at the end of it all, we can say with Willie "¡Qué bonito es el nuevo mundo!"

ENDNOTES

1. Lee Atwater, "The Last Campaign", LIFE Magazine, (February, 1991), pp. 61-67.
2. Wayne A. Meeks, The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 75-84.
3. Richard Rohr, O.F.M. and Joseph Martos, Why be Catholic? Understanding Our Experience and Tradition, (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press), p. 46.
4. Antonio Luján, James D. Williams and Celia Geck Anchondo, eds., Study on Social Concern: A Framework for Analysis and Report on Findings, (Diocese of Las Cruces, June 1985), p. 9.
5. Ibid. p. 2
6. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry, (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1987), p.14
7. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1986), no. 209.
8. Andie Tucher, ed., Bill Moyers, A World of Ideas II: Public Opinions from Private Citizens, (New York: Doubleday, 1990) p. 147.