

Catholic Social Teaching and World Poverty Symposium

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“Alleviating Poverty Through Justice”

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I'd like to tell you a story about the journey of CRS. It is appropriate for this forum since our journey is filled with the heartfelt desires and efforts by many, many people to alleviate world poverty for almost 70 years. It is also one that has been enriched by Catholic Social Teaching and the pursuit of justice. Indeed, Catholic Social Teaching and justice have transformed CRS into the agency that many of you know today. That is the journey I would like to share with you.

In the early years, the journey was primarily about providing relief – food, water, clothing, medicine and solace – to refugees at the end of World War II. War Relief Services, as we were called at the time, worked through Catholic structures and religious congregations. When that mission ended, the U.S. bishops turned their attention to developing countries and the global concerns stemming from emergencies and poverty, renaming the organization as Catholic Relief Services. As U.S. foreign policy began to focus on the expansion of Communism, CRS, by virtue of its American and Catholic identity became a primary recipient of government funds. CRS became the largest supplier of surplus food for the purpose of feeding impoverished developing nations. Relief continued to be a major focus of operations including in emergencies such as Biafra and the Ethiopia famine. CRS also began to look at poverty reduction through development programs, primarily in agriculture and health.

The approach to relief and development was pretty straightforward – you give people some help to get them off the ground and some skills so they can stay there. The first is a transfer of resources – money, food, clothes, and such. The second is a transfer of technical abilities. The shorthand would be that you give somebody a fish to eat so they are not hungry and then you teach them how to fish so they stay that way. Problem solved. Certainly, that's what we thought at CRS for many years – that the alleviation of poverty was a technical problem that could be solved if we had enough resources.

Even as CRS did excellent work all over the world, helped a lot of people lead healthier and more prosperous lives in the short term, some of us had nagging doubts about that equation. I was working in South America watching us run large food programs that

reached a lot of people but was concerned whether the programs would have any real long term sustainable impact once the resource transfers stopped. The American dream that anyone could move out of poverty by pulling up their bootstraps, studying more and working harder, just didn't exist for the poor. The political, economic and social structures were such that the poor had no escape from the conditions they were born into. And the good produced by our development programs paled in comparison with the size of these seemingly intractable conditions.

By 1991, in other parts of the world, communism was collapsing and with it the Cold War paradigm that had driven so much foreign aid for the previous 40 years. Yugoslavia was coming apart. Somalia began falling into chaos. Violence was erupting in virtually every region in the world. But the politics and social unrest that drove the violence were not part of our mission. Development work became difficult or impossible in many areas. All we could hope for in these circumstances were short term responses while we waited for the political and social situation to stabilize.

During this period, our Catholic identity was lost and confused. Many of our staff thought CRS was most successful when we were indistinguishable from others such as CARE or Save the Children. Some went so far as to suggest that we take the name Catholic out of our name – to be identified as Catholic was seen as a liability, that we had to continually explain that we didn't serve just Catholics, that we didn't proselytize, that we didn't just hand out charity but were a serious development agency.

It was at this point in 1993 that Ken Hackett became our new Executive Director. He faced a perfect storm. He had a mandate from our Board of Bishops to focus on our Catholic identity. Neither he nor we knew where that would lead. Staff morale was low. Our resources, which at the time were predominantly from the US government, were in rapid decline. It was apparent that the approaches of the past could not be used as operational models for the future. Without some dramatic change, we were a few years from going out of business.

Then Rwanda happened. The genocide took the lives of 800,000 people in just three months. Some of our staff and their family members perished. Others left the country – for good. Decades of “development work” were lost. Many felt a sense of hopelessness and despair, questioning our mission.

As all of these forces gathered, as an agency, we knew we needed something fundamentally different if we were going to survive. We began by asking ourselves what we had to change if we were to be relevant to those we serve. We knew that the answer needed to be holistic. So we started by looking at our field programming and strategic partnerships, fundraising strategies, organizational management and culture. Some amazing, and surprising, history began to unfold.

We rediscovered our Catholic identity. We began to develop a sense of who we were. Then something else wonderful happened.

We discovered Catholic Social Teaching.

Human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, rights and responsibilities, the common good, these concepts were new to us. Others, such as the preferential option for the poor, had been part of our thinking but not in ways that provided new insights about what we needed to do. As we grappled with these teachings, they opened new windows for our outlook. We could begin to imagine what the world would look like if there were human dignity for all. These principles gave us a whole new, and exciting way of approaching what we did. Catholic Social Teaching was not just a set of theological concepts or theory but became a very practical guide for what we believed in, what principles we espoused. It helped us to rethink what we do.

As our thinking began to shift, we also discovered that we had been asking incomplete – and in some cases the wrong - questions about our relief and development work. We had been concerned about whether we would be more effective if we did, for example, more health programs and fewer agricultural projects. What we weren't asking were about the fundamental relationships *within* the societies where we worked. Were there structural problems related to class, ethnic or political divisions built into these societies, leading to a lack of social cohesion? Were such underlying tensions keeping people in poverty? Were these tensions the root causes of the spreading violence?

These new questions changed our perspective. They highlighted the burning platform that threatened not just local communities but entire countries and regions. We knew that even taking into account the different contexts and histories of each society, the violence and the intractable poverty we were seeing could not be attributed merely to the lack of relief and development. Thus, a continuation of an operational lens based on resource transfers and technical solutions alone would rarely, if ever, show long term sustainable fruits. We realized that only by addressing the underlying tensions and the lack of social cohesion would CRS be relevant into the next century.

Our identity as a Catholic organization gave us a moral imperative to address these challenges. It guided us to build a new plan with a foundation of moral courage, active peacebuilding, perceptive alliance-building, persevering reconciliation and dynamic compassion for the poor and vulnerable. From this, we highlighted several considerations:

We saw that the Church would be called to play a significant role as defender of the rights of the poor, as a voice of the oppressed, as a witness to do good amidst corruption, torment, self indulgent struggle and exploitation, as a force for love when

there is hatred, as a force for moderation where there is fanaticism. As an organization of the Church, we were part of its new evangelization.

We also saw that the realities of the future world would certainly call for an on-going reflection about Catholic Social Teaching. We could not be truly effective until we found practical ways to incorporate its tenets into our management, our operations and our outlook.

We realized that we must work towards a fuller sense of our mission by making **the promotion of justice, rooted in charity, as central in our action.**

Making this determination was seen as the only option for us to be true to who we were. To do any less, was to not be faithful to our agency, our values and commitment. This led to the creation of what became known as the "justice lens". This was to say that justice would be a new lens through which decisions would be informed and made. Justice was not another programming option but must permeate and be incorporated within all CRS strategies and activities. It was indispensable in bringing together acts of compassion in the world.

This was a radical departure for the institution and many of us as individuals. It required much soul searching, many painful discussions and challenges. In the end, it led to a multi-year effort starting from answering basic questions.

What is justice? Justice is not about what people deserve. It is first and foremost about right relationships. It applies to relationships between people and God, between individuals, within each society, and throughout the world. Within societies, it may also be manifested through its institutions. It includes but goes beyond the laws and legal structure. The question must be asked whether those institutions create relationships whereby the rights of all are protected and opportunities are created for all to participate in, fulfilling their responsibilities to society, or whether some groups are left out either by design or negligence. It also impacts on how human needs are met and how resources are distributed.

It is precisely in the area of justice that CRS as an agency of the US Catholic bishops has a special mandate. The principles of Catholic Social Teaching laid a clear foundation for the development of our new lens:

The first is the link between love (or charity) and justice. Love of neighbor is an absolute demand for justice, because charity must enter the world in actions and structures which respect human dignity, protect human rights and facilitate human development. To promote justice is to transform structures that block love. This is justice in the world.

The second is related to the concept of liberation. Liberation from social, political and economic situations and structures that exclude some people is an important part of the Church's activity. This is part of the Missionary Activity of the Church.

The principles of subsidiarity and solidarity were also critical. It was no longer a matter of limiting our deliberations to whether we needed to feed someone a fish for today or teach them how to fish for tomorrow. The question was increasingly: What about people who already know how to fish and have a fishing pole but don't have access to the river?

To make these concepts a reality, we proceeded step by step.

The first step was to develop a common understanding of the definition of justice based on Catholic Social Teaching. It did not mean finding guilt or innocence in a courtroom, as many staff feared, but establishing relationships that would build peace and reconciliation which would form the basis for development.

The second step was to develop a tool that would help our staff to understand the context in which they lived through the perspective of relationships. This led to the exploration of ideas about operational and program responses to this situation. We would still do agriculture and health and such – and call on the expertise of our staff – but we would go about these with a perspective that called for greater partnership, social cohesion and inclusion among all involved. It also meant not just focusing on “rights” but linking “rights and responsibilities” together.

These steps were combined into a day-long reflection for staff and later on, included our partners. From the President in Baltimore, to the driver in Mali, all CRS staff – more than 4,000 worldwide - participated in a justice reflection, trying to understand what justice meant, using practical exercises to see its application.

This affected our own relationships. We sought to establish partnerships on the basis of a shared vision of justice and a desire to develop programs that would bring that vision into reality. Internally, CRS sought to incorporate justice into management and operations.

This process was not without its challenges. Justice was seen by many as threatening to the mission of the agency, particularly to the roles that relief had played historically. To others, the implications were fraught with danger, ranging from personal security to staff overseas, to a potential negative reaction from the existing CRS donor base, to personal ethical values which some of the issues represented.

As we faced these challenges began to look through the “justice lens”, we saw several important new directions:

- Peacebuilding, particularly in Africa but also in places such as the Philippines and Eastern Europe.
- HIV/AIDS, then a virtually hopeless cause in the developing world but such a huge pandemic that we knew we had a moral responsibility to confront.
- Integral human development.

Let me take a minute to talk about integral human development as it is so central of our mission at CRS. While this was a new concept for us, integral human development is very rooted in Catholic Social Teaching. In the 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI introduced the concept, writing:

“Development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic, it must be complete: integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man.”

The notion of Integral human development was further developed by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and more recently by Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate*. This later encyclical of his in so many ways speaks directly to our own experience at CRS. Even its name: “Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth” speaks to what we have learned during our journey. I’d like to highlight a few of its themes:

“... crisis becomes an opportunity for discernment in which to shape a new vision for the future.” (#21)

The first major test of our justice-focused approach came when Hurricane Mitch barreled into Central America, packing torrential rains and winds of 180 miles per hour. The storm killed more than 10,000 people and caused widespread devastation, particularly in Honduras. Even today, Mitch remains one of the most damaging hurricanes ever to hit Central America. CRS’ emergency response kicked into high gear, saving lives and addressing immediate needs of the people, and then rebuilding. What was different was a deliberate process to ensure that the affected societies would not simply rebuild the poverty that existed before the hurricane.

The principle of right relationships took center stage as we worked to fundamentally change relationships that had the most impact on poor communities – from the local and municipal levels to relationships between the United States and Central America, including the relationships within the Catholic Church.

The results read like a study in Catholic Social Teaching: Together with Church and local partners, we helped communities organize so they could work with local officials to advocate for their own needs. At home in the US, CRS engaged the US government to advocate for increased assistance to Central America, debt forgiveness from countries

most affected by Mitch, and a temporary stop to the deportation of people with expired visas to Central America. And we helped establish long-term relationships between diocese in the US and those in Central America, extending the role of the US Catholic community from “donor” to “brother and sister”.

The responses to Mitch shaped how the agency would respond to other emergencies – including the Haiti earthquake last year. In Haiti, now that the immediate humanitarian crisis has passed, perhaps the most important question we face is how to build from the many acts of good will to promote local structures and relationships that stimulate greater works of justice. The patterns of relationships which are all too often fragmented, with each doing his/her own thing, lead us to ask whether the current situation is big enough and important enough for all of us to put our current approaches aside - to consider how to build the Church in Haiti so that it may truly articulate and reflect the Gospel of Jesus Christ within its own borders for all Haitians. Particularly to those who are most vulnerable.

Our Haiti experience affirms the assertion from *Caritas in Veritate* that **“true development does not consist primarily in “doing” - too much attention is given to the “how” and not enough to the “why” questions. (#70)** We at CRS know how to build, run and do relief and development programs. Many US based parishes and student groups have asked us to create opportunities for them to do just that. They want to go to Haiti to “do” something. Yet we must be careful how we show solidarity. Otherwise, we run a tremendous risk that at the end of the day, our collective efforts were more about our own giving than truly promoting the authentic development of the Haitians. That in spite of our good will, Haiti remains as broken a society as it was before the earthquake with even more Haitians living in soul-grinding poverty.

Another truth is that **“development must include not just material growth but also spiritual growth.” (76)**. After the tsunami in Indonesia, Muslim communities who had lost everything were struggling to come together. As part of our emergency program, we provided prayer rugs so that they could garner their spiritual resources to push through their own suffering to be in solidarity with each other.

When Archbishop Dolan, then chairman of CRS’s board, visited Haiti shortly after the earthquake, in the midst of the rubble a woman approached him in tears. As he reached out to her to ask how he could help, her request was that he celebrate mass with them. From our experience, we find that through spiritual growth, encouraging others to grow in their own spiritual tradition, we find common ground that helps us to work together.

Another quote: **“The sharing of duties is a more powerful incentive to action than the assertion of rights.” (#43)**. Earlier this year, Southern Sudan teetered on the edge of violence and the collapse of a long standing peace agreement, as it set to hold national elections and a referendum for Southern Sudan secession. Overseas CRS

launched a major initiative to help promote peace across Southern Sudan during the final year of the peace agreement. This provided emergency assistance, agriculture, health and education, but also helped communities develop skills in peacebuilding, conflict resolution and reconciliation so that, together, we could tip the balance toward a sustainable peace.

What's more, we implemented an advocacy and communications plan to mobilize regional and international support for Sudan. That plan included awareness among Catholics in the US about Sudan's situation. We invited the Sudanese bishops to speak directly with members of the U.S. Administration. The bishops told their story, in their own words. We believe that their powerful witness of giving voice to the hopes and fears of the people helped to shift our foreign policy.

Pope Benedict added **“The causes of underdevelopment are not primarily material but the lack of brotherhood among people.” (19)** Justice and solidarity go hand-in-hand. We are all members of the human family. That belief is at the heart of our new vision: Solidarity will change the world. In order to put this into practice, CRS knew that it could no longer serve the poor and vulnerable overseas alone. If our purpose is to promote more just and peaceful societies in the world, our actions must be broadened to include how we as Americans, and how our actions and inactions, affect the larger world.

This gave birth to a new division within CRS: U.S. Operations. This division has created new programs and relationships geared at serving Catholics in the United States to live their faith in solidarity with those in need overseas. In each of its programs, CRS encourages Americans to pray, learn, act, advocate and give. CRS continues to work through parishes but also established new relationships to demonstrate that solidarity, through colleges and universities, religious congregations, seminaries and other organizations.

This was the birth of the relationship between CRS and Villanova which has taken shape and been nurtured by the passion and commitment of faculty, administrators and students here on campus including many of you here. I mentioned earlier our work on southern Sudan. There are others here who could speak more directly to what you yourselves did here at Villanova. You were actively engaged on many fronts. Through advocacy....you hired buses to take students to Washington to speak about Sudan. You organized a call-in campaign to the White house. You sponsored a prayer vigil with over 400 students – from what I'm told, this was a record. You provided learning opportunities throughout the university. You also communicated your concerns about Sudan both on campus and in the larger media. This is an inspiring testament to your own desires to live in solidarity through the mission of a Catholic university.

As our time this afternoon ends, I want to leave you with a final thought and a hope.

As Pope Benedict said, **“Church doctrine is a single teaching, consistent and at the same time ever new. Illuminating with an unchanging light the new problems constantly emerging.” (#12)**

In this quickly-changing world, we continue to struggle with how to alleviate poverty, to promote integral human development looking through the justice lens rooted in charity and truth. We don't have technical solutions to alleviating poverty, although we do have technical expertise. We don't focus on resource transfers to alleviate poverty, although in solidarity we do share our many gifts and talents with others, particularly those most poor and vulnerable. What we do know is that the journey of love for one's neighbor is the one that the gospel demands of us.

We also echo Pope Benedict's admonition to the special urgency of the journey (#20). There is an **“urgent need for reform in the face of great problems of injustice in the development of people, ...in the call for courageous action to be taken without delay. The urgency is inscribed not only in things, it is not derived solely from the rapid succession of events and problems, but also from the very matter that is at stake: the establishment of authentic fraternity. The importance of this goal is such as to demand our openness to understand it in depth and to mobilize ourselves at the level of the “heart” so as to ensure that current economic and social processes evolve towards fully human outcomes.”**

That is where our journey is headed. We hope that you will continue to join with us on it.

Considerations: What does Tucker expose regarding...

- CRS' understanding of Justice and the relationship of Justice to its *Catholic identity*, Catholic Social Teaching, and to its *mission* as an international relief and development agency?
- What of this understanding might be helpful to bring forward to Cabrini faculty's on-going understandings of the why, what and how of the Justice Matters curriculum?

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