

G R I S T

Diocese of New Ulm Social Concerns Office January, 2009

from } **Fighting Poverty to Build Peace**

Pope Benedict XVI's

World Day of Peace Message

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/index_en.htm

January 1, 2009

Poverty is often a contributory factor or a compounding element in conflicts, including armed ones. In turn, these conflicts fuel further tragic situations of poverty.

In our dealings with the poor, [we are] to set out from the clear recognition that we all share in a single divine plan: we are called to form one family in which all – individuals, peoples and nations – model their behavior according to the principles of fraternity and responsibility.

When poverty strikes a family, the children prove to be the most vulnerable victims: almost half of those living in absolute poverty today are children. To take the side of children when considering poverty means giving priority to those objectives which concern them most directly, such as caring for mothers, commitment to education, access to vaccines, medical care and drinking water, safeguarding the environment, and above all, commitment to defense of the family and the stability of relations within it.

[There is a] relationship between disarmament and development. The current level of world military expenditure gives cause for concern. It can happen that immense military expenditure, involving material and human resources and arms, is in fact diverted from development projects for peoples, especially the poorest who are most in need of aid. This state of affairs does nothing to promote, and indeed seriously impedes, attainment of the ambitious development targets of the international community. What is more, an excessive increase in military expenditure risks accelerating the arms race, producing pockets of underdevelopment and desperation, so that it can paradoxically become a cause of instability, tension and conflict.

The current food crisis places in jeopardy the fulfillment of basic needs. This crisis is characterized not so much by a shortage of food, as by difficulty in gaining access to it and by different forms of speculation: in other words, by a structural lack of political and economic institutions capable of addressing needs and emergencies. Malnutrition can also cause grave mental and physical damage to the population, depriving many people of the energy necessary to escape from poverty unaided. This contributes to the widening gap of inequality, and can provoke violent reactions. All the indicators of relative poverty in recent years point to an increased disparity between rich and poor. No doubt the principal reasons for this are, on the one hand, advances in technology, which mainly benefit the more affluent, and on the other hand, changes in the prices of industrial products, which rise much faster than those of agricultural products and raw materials in the possession of poorer countries. In this way, the majority of the population in the poorest countries suffers a double marginalization, through the adverse effects of lower incomes and higher prices.

One of the most important ways of building peace is through a form of globalization directed towards the interests of the whole human family. In order to govern globalization, however, there needs to be a strong sense of global solidarity between rich and poor countries, as well as within individual countries, including affluent ones.

Globalization eliminates certain barriers, but is still able to build new ones; it brings peoples together, but spatial and temporal proximity does not of itself create the conditions for true communion and authentic peace. Effective means to redress the marginalization of the world's poor through globalization will only be found if people everywhere feel personally outraged by the injustices in the world and by the concomitant violations of human rights.

In the field of international commerce and finance, there are processes at work today which permit a positive integration of economies, leading to an overall improvement in conditions, but there

are also processes tending in the opposite direction, dividing and marginalizing peoples, and creating dangerous situations that can erupt into wars and conflicts.

Objectively, the most important function of finance is to sustain the possibility of long-term investment and hence of development. Today this appears extremely fragile: it is experiencing the negative repercussions of a system of financial dealings – both national and global – based upon very short-term thinking, which aims at increasing the value of financial operations and concentrates on the technical management of various forms of risk. The recent crisis demonstrates how financial activity can at times be completely turned in on itself, lacking any long-term consideration of the common good. This lowering of the objectives of global finance to the very short term reduces its capacity to function as a bridge between the present and the future, and as a stimulus to the creation of new opportunities for production and for work in the long term. Finance limited in this way to the short and very short term becomes dangerous for everyone, even for those who benefit when the markets perform well.

All of this would indicate that the fight against poverty requires cooperation both on the economic level and on the legal level, so as to allow the international community, and especially poorer countries, to identify and implement coordinated strategies to deal with problems. Incentives are needed for establishing efficient participatory institutions, and support is needed in fighting crime and fostering a culture of legality. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that policies which place too much emphasis on assistance underlie many of the failures in providing aid to poor countries. Investing in the formation of people and developing a specific and well-integrated culture of enterprise would seem at present to be the right approach in the medium and long term. If economic activities require a favorable context in order to develop, this must not distract attention from the need to generate revenue. While it has been rightly emphasized that increasing *per capita* income cannot be the ultimate goal of political and economic activity, it is still an important means of attaining the objective of the fight against hunger and absolute poverty. Hence, the illusion that a policy of mere redistribution of existing wealth can definitively resolve the problem must be set aside. In a modern economy, the value of assets is utterly dependent on the capacity to

generate revenue in the present and the future. Wealth creation therefore becomes an inescapable duty, which must be kept in mind if the fight against material poverty is to be effective in the long term.

Globalization “is notably ambivalent” and therefore needs to be managed with great prudence. This will include giving priority to the needs of the world’s poor, and overcoming the scandal of the imbalance between the problems of poverty and the measures which have been adopted in order to address them. The imbalance lies both in the cultural and political order and in the spiritual and moral order. In fact we often consider only the superficial and instrumental causes of poverty without attending to those harbored within the human heart, like greed and narrow vision. The problems of development, aid and international cooperation are sometimes addressed without any real attention to the human element, but as merely technical questions – limited, that is, to establishing structures, setting up trade agreements, and allocating funding impersonally. What the fight against poverty really needs are men and women who live in a profoundly fraternal way and are able to accompany individuals, families and communities on journeys of authentic human development.

In today’s globalized world, it is increasingly evident that peace can be built only if everyone is assured the possibility of reasonable growth: sooner or later, the distortions produced by unjust systems have to be paid for by everyone. It is utterly foolish to build a luxury home in the midst of desert or decay. Globalization on its own is incapable of building peace, and in many cases, it actually creates divisions and conflicts. If anything it points to a need: to be oriented towards a goal of profound solidarity that seeks the good of each and all. In this sense, globalization should be seen as a good opportunity to achieve something important in the fight against poverty, and to place at the disposal of justice and peace resources which were scarcely conceivable previously.



A related USCCB bulletin insert is available at <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/worlddayofpeacewebsite.shtml>. It contains facts and statistics about global and domestic poverty, and suggestions for action.