



## **A Response that Penetrates and Unites the Catholic Community in the US**

*What lessons are available from successful movements in US Catholic history? What resources exist in today's American Catholic community and culture that can inform and strengthen our response to the world's poor?*

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Seventy years ago novelist Upton Sinclair led a powerful grass roots movement called "End Poverty in California". The movement swept this state and landed Sinclair the 1934 Democratic nomination for Governor. Frightened near to death, the California establishment circled the wagons and launched the first, modern negative political campaign complete with lies, smears, and fear of reds, all with the passive support of the Roosevelt administration, anxious at that point to head off a nationwide uprising of populist radicalism led by people like Floyd Olson, Huey Long, Father Charles E. Coughlin and John L. Lewis. Moderation won out, poverty survived, those FDR had called "economic royalists" bided their time until war brought excess profits and eventually more of less complete economic power. Lesson Number One: if you take on poverty seriously, expect opposition, serious opposition. [A Note: in 2002 the California Assembly established a joint committee whose purpose was, you guessed it, to end poverty in California.]

In 1961 Holy Cross graduate Michael Harrington won fame with his expose of invisible poverty, The Other America. Poverty in Appalachia had caught the attention of the campaigning John F Kennedy and his brother Robert. Harrington entered their circle and set in motion a process that brought Lyndon Baines Johnson before a joint session of Congress to declare "an unconditional war on poverty". Under the direction of the remarkable Sargent Shriver and with weapons like Medicare, Community Action and Vista, that war dented poverty, particular among the elderly. But another war divided the nation and our cities almost annually burst into flames, so the battle against poverty sputtered out under a not entirely unsympathetic Richard Nixon. He listened for awhile to Daniel P. Moynihan in the White House but he gave the anti-poverty job to an ambitious young Donald Rumsfeld, assisted by an up and coming Richard Cheney. The rest, as they say, is history. Lesson number Two, then: In campaigns against poverty, politics really matters.

The politics of that earlier war on poverty needed but never found a supportive political coalition in the country, one bridging the then still bridgeable gap between the post civil rights movements of African-Americans and uneasy working class brown and white Americans. Much could be done if that coalition could attract the energy and talent of awakening young people, politicians like Shriver and George McGovern, and imaginative radicals like Harrington, Bayard Rustin, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisolm and Tom Hayden. But the leaders who might have pulled that coalition off were murdered, Bobby Kennedy here in California and Martin Luther King in Memphis as he backed a strike of sanitation workers. We should recall that Dr. King was exhausted that day by travel but also by endless battles among planners of the upcoming poor peoples march on Washington. Dr King was altogether serious about launching that movement against poverty, maybe even a world wide movement as he made clear in his last book. There Dr King spoke of the challenge of poverty and powerlessness under the inspiration of the Christian gospel, but in a language of democratic idealism and shared responsibility that embraced everybody, everywhere. He was talking, as we must talk, about all of us, together, for all our sakes, ending poverty not just because poor people are people too but because that is what our common humanity, and our democracy, requires of all of us. So Lesson Number Three: In campaigns to end poverty, talk American, and mean it.

Where were we and our Catholic church in those days? In Upton Sinclair's time our families who were here were fighting their own war on poverty in CIO unions and Democratic party politics, a war many of those families would win with the help of war time prosperity and the GI Bill of Rights. By the time Johnson's poverty war came along, plenty of Catholics wanted to help, and many did help Dr. King and Cesar Chavez. Our bishops, at some risk, belatedly joined the civil rights struggle, and they followed its path from southern protest marches to struggles closer to home, where battles over housing and schools deeply divided their people, in Milwaukee and Chicago and Boston and many other places. They did not back off, standing with the poor, backed by nuns and lots of priests and more than a few lay people. The bishops reformed Catholic Relief Services, backed renewal in Catholic Charities, worked closely with the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Community Action Programs and launched their own war on domestic poverty, the Campaign for Human Development. Among the strongest backers of wars on poverty were our Jesuit friends who, in 1974, pledged themselves to renew all their ministries in the service of faith and promotion of justice, all in the context of a fundamental option for the poor. Contrary pressures emerged in the 1970s, but, at least for awhile, at the top, the Catholic community remarkably held firm, under the leadership of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, architect of the peace pastoral of 1983, the consistent ethic of life, and the economics pastoral of 1986, whose anniversary we mark today. Ecclesiastical politics and American Catholic culture have shifted since then, and social ministry finds itself a bit on the margins, but our record on poverty is strong.

A note on Catholic politics: Since the 1960s we Catholics have had a political problem. We support life and peace and we make an option for the poor and the most vulnerable, including the unborn. We sometimes say that this position leaves us politically homeless, for one party seems close to us on social issues, the other on issues related to issues at the beginning and end of life. Of course our church must always be nonpartisan. So too

must advocacy groups for life, or peace or child welfare. All welcome support from all parties and lobby for their cause in each party. But each of us, as responsible citizens, must make choices, choices among programs and policies but also among parties and persons. In politics and citizenship, political homelessness is not a virtue and refusal to choose—to say a plague on both your houses—is not a responsible option. There are no perfect political choices, but choices must be made. Voting for, or advising, George W. Bush or John F Kerry should not rule anyone out of the Catholic conversation. In politics we Catholics nourish conscience and encourage commitment and we try as best we can to be accountable for our choices. But in a Catholic campaign against poverty, politics, that is politics with a small p, with all its ambiguity and hard choices, such politics really matters. So Lesson Number Four: whatever our current Catholic culture wars might suggest, our American Catholic community has pretty consistently stood with the poor, many of whom, then and now, here and everywhere, were Catholics, all of whom, then and now, were cared for by at least some of our Catholic people. Options for the poor are nothing new. We pray we get better at it, with the help of friends like those who have spoken with us these last few days.

And American Catholic history is far from over. American Catholicism is a success story, whose key actors are families like so many of ours who have moved from poverty and outsidersness to economic security, respectability, and access to our country's central institutions. Those of us who have experienced that genuine liberation, or still aspire to it, must choose what to do with our hard won resources of faith and education and access, what we call social capital. The meaning of our history will be determined by the choices we make. Today many think that we paid too high a price for our success; they even suggest that we surrendered our Catholic integrity in order to gain a place in America, a society our bishops once came close to calling pagan. Ignoring the aspirations that shaped our history, these voices call for us to recover our Catholic identity by establishing our difference and distance from our fellow Americans and from this land which is now surely our own. This is not good advice. It is a formula for ecclesial isolation and pastoral disaster and suggests public choices that are simply irresponsible.

A Catholic campaign to make poverty history cannot rest on such foundations but must appeal instead to our historical experience of overcoming poverty by affirming the aspirations of so many poor people today to do the same. For us and for our children, as for those who went before us, Catholic communities and connections are hugely important---as seedbeds of genuine, hopeful faith, as networks of support and friendship, as schools of democratic practice. They never were nor should they ever be cocoons of self-righteous indignation but communities of conscience and commitment that draw us ever more deeply into history, to share responsibility with others for the good of the human family, including the American family to which we belong. So Lesson Number Five: The Point 7 logo is framed by the words "Keeping America's promise to make poverty history". We can help keep that promise if we accept as good news that America is now our country, its promises and its responsibilities our own. If we do that we will insure that family stories of movement from margins to mainstreams, as aspiration and achievement, were and still will be journeys of genuine liberation.

You in California know well that middle class freedom and vocational and political opportunity is only half the story. The other half of the story is of far too many Latinos and African-Americans, immigrants and native born outsiders still laboring under the burdens of poverty and powerlessness. I suspect that for them, as for those who went before them, community life in families, neighborhoods and religious congregations is shaped by “folk memories brought to bear on new aspirations”, and a campaign against poverty must build on those aspirations, for that is what shapes historical agency and gives historical form to the teaching that the poor must be the agents of their own liberations. For European immigrants the keys were jobs and education and bottom up organizing, so full employment, quality education, and space for organizing initiatives are part of the agenda of a campaign to make poverty history, anywhere.

We carry on that legacy in community organizations of the type supported by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. You know them here in California in the work of Ernesto Cortes and the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Pacific Institute for Community Organization. It is a great legacy, filled with lessons for a Catholic Campaign against Global Poverty. Wangari Muta Maathai, 2004 Noble Peace Prize winner, spoke this week at my college. She answered questions like those posed yesterday to Jeffrey Sachs with phrases like “creating and protecting democratic space”, “building civil society” and helping people empower one another to become “democratic subjects”. Our people did just that, and many still do, in religious congregations, trade unions, ethnic organizations, political machines and multiple forms of community organization. Embedded in that history and practice of bottom-up organizing is an anti-poverty strategy grounded in American Catholic experience, American in its democratic aspirations, Catholic in its emphasis on solidarity and shared responsibility. Twenty years ago our bishops called it “justice as participation”. So, Lesson Number Six: don’t mourn, organize! After analyzing poverty, as Sachs did yesterday, ask who benefits, who pays and most of all who decides? Catholic teaching, and Catholic realism grounded in hard experience, says that without the last question our talk about justice for the poor is, after all, just talk.

A Seventh Lesson: The launching of a Catholic Campaign Against Global Poverty by our bishops in partnership with Catholic Relief Services provides an important opportunity to think, really think, about Catholic social responsibility. It is a chance to renew our people’s acquaintance with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities and all our other institutions of social ministry. Where I come from in New England, in my judgment, the very existence of this rich heritage is in jeopardy. Important decisions are being made daily, often with little consultation or sharing of responsibility. Nowhere is our need for lay leadership and structures of shared responsibility more urgent. The new Campaign Against Global Poverty provides an opportunity to reconnect with the Catholic people, restore a sense that these institutions and campaigns belong to all of us, and renew our capacity to sustain and renew social ministry to meet the challenges of our globalized political economy.

A Catholic Campaign Against Global Poverty also requires a pastoral strategy. If the only way to make a contribution is to a) join a Catholic Worker House or b) make a trip to Haiti,

or c) turn your home into a counter-cultural haven in a heartless consumerist world, or d) send in a check, then we may get a few saints and a few dollars, but we will lose the campaign, in society and in the church. Just as we need to move from opposition to war to effective peacemaking, we have to replace opposition to poverty with economic reform to meet human needs. Christians need to get beyond the “ain’t it awful” strategy of social education (after a lecture with photos in the church basement on the suffering of the poor, one returns home feeling terrible, and writes a check) and develop strategies centered on vocation and citizenship whose pastoral foundation is the holiness of lay Catholic life. After all, we are called to be the Body of Christ all the time, not just when we are in church. To really dig into the life of our church and our people we need to avoid trivializing the challenge of poverty by confining our response to voluntary community service, non-partisan political moralizing or guilt-ridden denunciation of somebody else’s social sins. Instead we need to really think about how to persuade each other that the common good as understood is Catholic social teaching in a religiously diverse world is a genuine good, a good worthy of our complete dedication. We will change the world in economic and political action, or we will not change it. Good work is always God’s work, conscientious citizenship is discipleship. So Lesson Number Eight: in thinking through a Catholic Campaign Against Global Poverty, make a preferential but not exclusive option for the laity.

Lesson Number Nine: think about animating a movement. Movements embrace many organization in common work, they make room for militants and moderates, for full time activists and part time volunteers, and for people who think about movement goals at home, at work, in the store and in the community. Movements link the CRS staffer working with women in a village in Sudan to the third grade music teacher whose songs stir hearts to compassion and imaginations to solidarity, Many, many elements of such a Catholic movement are already in place. Let’s help the Bishops, their staffs, and CRS multiply those pieces and inspire a movement.

So there are a few thought: let’s affirm our American Catholic journey and help each other take the next steps---let’s love our Church, our faith and our people, who have helped our families over generations to become historical agents---let’s respect and embrace our fellow Americans and invite them to join us so that together we might fulfill that American promise of liberty and justice for all-----let’s regard counter-cultural, anti-American language with suspicion-----let’s bring to our shared American responsibilities Catholic ideas and practices of solidarity, Catholic connections to wonderful people fighting for justice across the globe, people like those we have met here in San Francisco, and let us help everyone we meet to recover a sense of historical hope, without which there will never be responsible American citizenship or responsible Christian discipleship.

The American Catholic story is not over; we have to write its next chapter. Let’s make the central theme of that chapter, the central theme of our unfinished American Catholic journey, make poverty history.