

A Response to Global Poverty

That Penetrates and Unites the Catholic Community in the United States

The following talk was delivered by **Margaret O'Brien Steinfels**, Co-Director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture, at the Point 7 Now Conference on Global Poverty co-sponsored by the Lane Center in October.



1 Remember where you come from.

I have been asked to speak about the resources available today in our Catholic culture that can inform our response to extreme global poverty. What I really want to do is remind you of those resources because most of what I have to say, we know. It's just that we don't always remember it.

There are five things...these are what I want to remind you about.

- 1 Remember where you came from.
- 2 Remember American Catholics have brains, all of us; great brains when we use them.
- 3 Remember to see, listen, read, think.
- 4 Remember to judge, compare, contrast, discuss, debate.
- 5 Remember to act for the long-term, prudently with forethought, with courage, and where need be with imagination, even audacity.

All of us, or our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents... even the first peoples came from somewhere else. Many came because they were hungry, because they were a despised minority, because they had no jobs, no land, no chance, no future. Many came from extreme poverty, and lived in extreme poverty after they arrived in this country. They lived in urban tenements, in sod houses on the prairie, and yes, also on the streets. The Irish, Italians, Poles, Germans, Slovaks, Slovenes, Czechs, Portuguese, Spanish, Greeks, Hungarians, Turks, Latvians, Finns, Swedes....Who have I left out? — most of us came because some form of deprivation drove us from our native land. Many of today's immigrants from Mexico, the Philippines, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Ecuador, El Salvador, are here for the same reasons — they have seized the chance to have a better life for themselves and their children.

Remembering where we came from recalls for us our travails, or the travails of parents, grandparents, our families' struggles to make their way. When we consider these, it helps to put us in the shoes, the sandals, the boots, the bare feet of others. And that's important because we need to see and feel what extreme poverty means. A very strong dose of empathy is needed to break through the things we can't see and don't

know. There are obstacles to seeing and feeling extreme poverty — obstacles thrown up by our culture, by our place in the world, our prejudices, other people's prejudices, by "official" and "bureaucratic" decisions about what is to be done and what is to be denied. We are all of us in danger of living in a giant gated community.

Empathy — if we can exercise it — doesn't just put us in someone's place, shoes, circumstances, sometimes it even helps us to see things from their point of view. If the goal here is to help people who live in extreme poverty, we need to know what they say and how they feel; what they think and what they do.

It's the brains part of this I'd like us to focus on. Those brains could assess the need and focus carefully on how to meet those needs with the many people and limited resources at hand. Those brains could choose among many possibilities and chose wisely. Even in recent decades, assessment, focus, adaptability has been the mark of many local churches, for example: the new suburban parishes in the 1950s and '60s that built a school before it built the church; the religious community in the '80s that sold its hospitals to build neighborhood health clinics; the new Catholic schools dedicated to the idea and practice that the poorest children in our country can learn and deserve a good education.

We are all beneficiaries of this thinking, deciding, and doing. Certainly there were heroic individuals with brains and empathy that did this. But what I want to emphasize here is that most of this was done with institutional brains and empathy — Catholic had a communal, collective, institutionalized ability to help the despised and oppressed (to comfort the afflicted) and when we became the comfortable that institutional brain and empathy turned on us in order to afflict the comfortable (isn't that what Catholic Social Justice teaching is all about?) This is not only to rouse our consciences, but to help us become more thoughtful and effective empathetic brains ourselves.

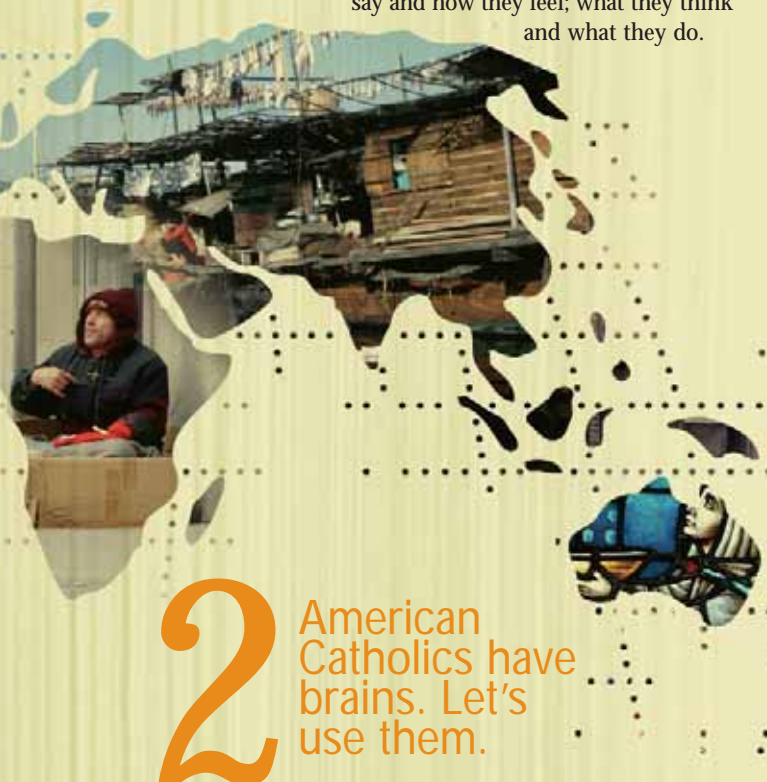
One way I learned to do this — in college — was to see, judge, and act. The Young Christian Students, YCS, was part of a movement started in Belgium after World War II. It was planted in the United States by Louis Putz, C.S.C., and a Chicago monsignor, Reinhold Hillenbrand. There were two other parts to this movement: YCW and CFM. See, judge, act; what could be easier? Back then the issues were racial prejudice and segregation, the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam.

There is nothing novel in see, judge, act.

But mind you, it is not, "Don't just sit there! Do something, do anything."

It is not, "Ready, Fire, Aim."

Both of these are powerful impulses in our action-oriented American culture. That action orientation, those impulses to do good need some solid Catholic correctives, some Catholic brains and empathy to get things right, to look before you leap, to think before you act.



2 American Catholics have brains. Let's use them.

American Catholics were once a despised minority in the United States; now we are just a disliked majority for our critical and questioning attitude toward abortion, the death penalty, immigration reform, and tax cuts. When we were only a despised minority we had to do many things for ourselves — we had to think about how to get along without help from our fellow Americans. Women religious, clergy, and bishops, and some number of lay people did think about what to do for Hispanics in the 18th century and for the rest of us in the 19th and early part of the 20th century. One of the most important things sisters wanted to do was to teach children to read...so they could read the catechism. One thing led to another and when I was growing up in the last century, the 1950s and '60s, Catholics were still teaching people to read, to add, subtract, multiply and divide, to diagram sentences, to recite poetry, to speechify, to memorize, to think, to learn to speak French, Spanish, German, and to read Latin and Greek. Catholic institutions, the great idea of nuns, priests, and bishops were steady, stable, presences in many communities that educated, healed, cared for orphans, the elderly, the destitute. They cared for the sick, visited prisoners, buried the dead. They cared for the poor; they were the poor.

3 What does it mean to see? Listen, read, think.

The subject of foreign aid, of extreme poverty is complex and confusing. Extreme poverty in Malawi, is not extreme poverty in Nigeria or North Korea. What is the right thing to do? The effective thing? We are bombarded, often through junk mail, with ambitious, ambiguous, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory proposals. Junk TV likewise plies us with images of starving mothers and babies, begging us to stop sitting there. Do something. Do anything. Send food to Ethiopia; send troops to Darfur.

Relief and aid workers talk at times about compassion fatigue

from these constant efforts to draw attention to famine, to refugee camps, to murderous regimes. It turns people off. Instead of compassion fatigue, maybe we should call it compassion confusion. Publicity about poverty creates guilt and the desire to do something, to do anything. Then the pictures move onto more starving babies. And people begin to ask: doesn't anything work? That's when we grow dizzy with compassion confusion.

Compassion confusion shows why it is so important when thinking about what you, your parish, school, gang, bridge club or chat room...might do. Even so, whatever you do, someone is likely to come along and say it's the wrong thing to do. That's why it's so important to know what you are doing and why you are doing it.

How to see? Listen to poor people or those who truly represent them. See what life is like in their communities — if you can't go there talk to people who have been there, read about them — google them. Seeing has many aspects; it is multi-dimensional. Listening, learning, and thinking help us to see more clearly.

Many Americans — not just our president — can be uninformed, even abysmally ignorant of the rest of the world. The result in some places is chaos; in others gross neglect. Why this ignorance and inattention? Because we left all of that behind — and all of that is looked down upon. We hear people say, we've worked hard for what we have, let them over there, work hard, too. Let them get their act together. Americans have relatively little deep interest or knowledge of the world beyond our borders — the gated community mentality. Are we so big? Are they so far away that we can't imagine the others? So big, that we can't even see them? Are we so insular? We are no longer required in high school and college to learn a second or even a third language. How can we speak with those who don't speak our language? When we travel, we travel as tourists, sometimes in little bubbles that blot out our ability to see where we are and to encounter the people whose land we visit. Most newspapers, if we read them, stuff foreign news in the back of the paper; most TV news is more interested in the weather, the stock market, a suicide-murder in your neighborhood. Sometimes you only get news and information from — well, maybe your neighbor.

For example, my neighbor Dee Wulf recently sent me this email:

“When I was in Kampala, Uganda in August,” she wrote, “I spent a morning with Hugo Kanya and his mother. [He teaches at Simmons in Boston.] In Kampala, his mother (over 70) runs a fantastic little program for 50 HIV-positive children or those from HIV-infected families. They get a nutritious breakfast and have their schooling paid for. She raises pigs and chickens to feed the children. Most walk a mile from their villages to get the breakfast at 6 in the morning before getting to school. Breakfast is important because the children cannot pay attention to school on an empty stomach. Schooling is crucial because it is the only hope for these children to eventually get out of the direst poverty imaginable. Now Immaculata has identified 40 more children in need. If you would be interested in sponsoring a child, please let me or Hugo know.”

And Dee concludes, “This is a truly worthwhile project,

small-scale though it is.”

I've been thinking about this e-mail since August. What should our family do? We, the Steinfelses? Information and knowledge are essential, but what are we to do with that information, opinion, knowledge? We have to judge it.

4 Remember to judge, compare, contrast, discuss, debate.

Assess your resources. What if you have a twinning parish in Mexico or Ghana? What if your diocese has sent missionaries to Peru?

What if you get a pretty compelling appeal letter from Doctors without Borders or your neighbor? What if someone in your university has worked for USAID? Or the World Bank? Or CRS? Is a returned Peace Corps volunteer. There are many ways to spend your foreign aid dollars. Perhaps some of your students have done Global Outreach. What did they see? What debriefing has gone on to help them and you better understand what they are doing in Thailand — or El Salvador? What about a place like the Congo whose mineral wealth makes it one of the richest countries in the world, but which has some of the poorest people in the world? And what aid, trade, agricultural policies affect people they worked with? What have your students, your friends, the returned Peace Corps volunteer heard poor people say about what they need?

As taxpayers, a lot of your foreign aid goes to military aid and a very small amount goes to development aid. What's that money doing?

There are books and articles that tell you. We heard Jeffrey Sachs yesterday. He said: “Point 7 Now! Bed nets, bed nets, bed nets!”

Jeffrey Sachs is pretty compelling, but he has critics. That doesn't mean he's wrong. But maybe it's worth considering some of the criticisms — many of which are about accountability. That is the issue William Easterly, raises in his book, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. Do our foreign aid dollars really get to poor people? Are large foreign aid projects the best way to help poor people? Large road construction projects help poor people actually able to use them. So do good hospitals. Those can take a considerable amount of money. Keeping children in school helps poor people (as my neighbor's letter implied). Providing good prenatal and postnatal care to mothers and children helps poor people. That may not take so much money as a highway. Digging deep wells reduces intestinal diseases. You've heard the stories. The range of things that will help extremely poor people are many; some may take just the amount of money that you, your parish, your diocese, etc., are able to give. Some may have to come from Bill and Melinda Gates or the U.S. government.

When I was a child, I heard about extreme poverty — in China and India. There are still millions of extremely poor people in both countries, but on multiple levels China and India are becoming economic powerhouses. How did this happen? According to William Easterly, foreign aid played a small part. According to Jeffrey Sachs, the green revolution played a part.

Educational opportunities were important to Indians, to Koreans, to Chinese able to attend colleges and universities in Europe, East and West, and in the United States. Those graduates who return are able to help poor people often by the most obvious means possible — creating jobs. Such graduates may be able to advise you about what to do. Such graduates can also jump-start the kinds of projects that will provide jobs and teachers, schools, nurses in their native lands.

We were recently reminded of another mechanism with the award to Muhammad Yunus of the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in developing a microcredit system in Bangladesh. A subject that in itself has an amazing life of its own. This week's *New Yorker's* article, *Millions for Millions* (October 30) looks at a whole range of microcredit, microfinance, profit/nonprofit schemes to extend Yunus's idea. They too are controversial and not necessarily in harmony.

When the factors are duly considered, it's time to act. We cannot be caught up in the paralysis of analysis as Martin Luther King, Jr. said.

5 What does it mean to act, prudently with forethought, courage, imagination, and where need be with audacity.

Act for the long-term; expect to stay with it. When a decision is made on seeing what the situation is, when you know what you will do, a plan of action is needed. Maybe it's to badger your congressional representative until he/she listens to what you have to say about aid, trade, debt forgiveness, and agriculture subsidies.

Maybe it's to calculate how much is needed to support a particular project you think is important. I enter in here the issue of tithing. Islam says, 2.7...some Christians set aside 10 percent. Perhaps the rate is not as important as the decision to do it, to budget it, and to maintain it. Parishes can tithe and so can dioceses. We can all decide that a certain percent of our income will be our foreign aid.

The Steinfels' family tithes and each year we give to our parish, the high schools and university that educated us, to community projects. We too have our foreign aid fund: it goes to CRS (we know no one is overpaid) and Doctors without Borders. To CRS because we like Catholic projects, and because we know a young man — not so young anymore — who has worked in Rwanda, the Philippines, and Brazil. We see him when he's back in the United States. He talks about what he's doing. After a couple of dinners with him, we decided that CRS was doing the kind of basic development work that did seem to help poor people. Though our contribution, modest enough, doesn't go directly to him, I think it goes to someone like him. Doctors without Borders, whose work I had read about for many years, is a French-based group of medical professionals who put their special skills to work in emergencies and in some refugee camps. If memory serves, they worked in Pakistan after the earthquake last year. They are

staunch defenders of human rights; they show great courage in the midst of conflict and disasters. They garnered our contribution when a senior UN relief official spoke admiringly of their flexibility, their willingness to take on dire cases, and the good use they made of their funds. Maybe this year we will take on our neighbor Dee Wulf's proposal, but we will not act before we discuss, debate, contrast, and compare. Even so as you see, the happenstance of the personal test has weighted in our decisions. All of this you should take into account.

So let me conclude with my beginning:

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Congratulations

Urbi et Orbi received the 2006 Bronze Award in Design from Admission Marketing Report, a worldwide admission consulting agency. Congratulations to the USF publications department and Kellie McCool, designer.

