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How can we pursue a ministry of solidarity?

The Life of the Human Community

- BY DAVID HOLLENBACH -

How are we to envision the mission of the church in the aftermath of the horrifying events of Sept. 11? Equally challenging, how can we conceive of the church’s ministry in the midst of the clergy sexual abuse scandal that is tearing the fabric of church life in the United States?

Responding to Sept. 11 will call for careful attention to the phenomena of globalization—the growing patterns of interdependence across national and cultural boundaries. New linkages are occurring on multiple levels of life—the political, the economic (including trade, finance, investment, production and consumption), the social-cultural (through mass media and the Internet) and the environmental.

Some aspects of this thickening web of interdependence are harshly negative, others quite positive. The negative face of globalization is evident in the effects of the structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank during the 1980’s and early 1990’s. These policies contributed to inequality and poverty in many parts of the developing world, especially Africa, through the condi-

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tions they laid down for loans and debt relief.

More positively, the evolving international human rights regime is a form of political globalization that can be strongly endorsed by Christians. This human rights ethos conceives of human beings as, first, members of the worldwide human community with rights that derive from their humanity as such and, second, as members of the communities of existing nation states. The globalization of citizenship grants membership in the human community a higher value than citizenship in a particular nation state, at least in extreme situations where humanity itself is threatened.

In the face of these differing aspects of globalization, how do we move from patterns of global interdependence marked by inequality, domination and oppression to patterns based on equality and reciprocity? Helping to move our response to Sept. 11 in this direction could be one of the chief contributions of the church's ministry today. I have several suggestions on how we can pursue this ministry of solidarity.

First, the ministry of social solidarity must challenge all forms of globalization that reinforce inequality and existing patterns of exclusion, whether they be economic, political or cultural. This ministry seeks what Pope John Paul II calls "globalization without marginalization." This is interdependence, shaped by what the U.S. Catholic bishops, in *Economic Justice for All* (1986), called "basic justice—the establishment of at least minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons" (No. 77). Inclusion and participation based on equality are the fundamental marks that should be shaping the social, economic and political institutions of our globalizing world.

Second, our ministry should be marked by intellectual solidarity. The Catholic Church possesses distinctive intellectual resources for responding to the cultural challenge of globalization. This challenge is evident in the way the strains of globalization are accompanied by self-defensive religious fundamentalisms and reassertions of ethnic identity.

Intellectual solidarity does not project a single vision of the good life on others in imperialistic fashion, but it calls for more than a tolerance that simply leaves alone others who are different. In a globalizing world we are fated to interact across cultural and religious boundaries. Today the question is whether such interaction will be peaceful or violent, mutual or hegemonic. If it is to be peaceful and mutual, it requires both listening and speaking in a genuine conversation across the boundaries that have traditionally divided the world. This listening and speaking is a form of solidarity—intellectual solidarity.

The Catholic tradition has often in the past confronted the challenge of interaction with those who are different. When the church has been at its best, this interaction has led both to a widened understanding of what it means to be human and to a deeper understanding of what it means to be Christian. In the fourth century, for example, Augustine profoundly transformed both Christian and Greco-Roman thought and practice by bringing biblical faith into dialogue with Stoic and Neoplatonic thought. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas again transformed Western Christianity by appropriating ideas of Aristotle he had learned from Arab Muslims and from Jews. The Catholic community has sometimes been sorely lacking in this spirit of intellectual solidarity. One need only recall the 18th-century debacle concerning the Chinese rites, which undercut genuine encounter between China and Christianity, with effects that last to this day.

But overall, this history has given the Catholic intellectual tradition a conviction that cultures holding different visions of the good life can get somewhere if they are willing to risk serious engagement with one another. Such a conviction should shape the ministry of all in the church today, marking it with a readiness to listen to those with views different from our own while being unafraid to speak our convictions with due humility. Injecting hope in the possibility of this kind of intellectual solidarity into the interaction of cultures today would be a signal achievement. Hope that such solidarity is possible is deeply needed in our post-Sept. 11 world.

Third, this vision also calls for what might be called institutional solidarity—the development of institutions that will enable marginalized people to have greater voice in the decisions that affect them. Today the venues where decisions are made about trade, indebtedness and other global economic issues look like clubs. The membership of the I.M.F. and the World Trade Organization is limited to political and economic elites. Joseph S. Nye Jr., professor of public policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, has called this "globalization's democratic deficit." Influence in these international organizations is at best attenuated and at worst missing entirely for many people whose well-being they affect.

On the other hand, transnational nongovernmental organizations like Human Rights Watch and Jubilee 2000 are playing important roles in overcoming this deficit. The church can be one of the key actors on this front. The Catholic community has institutional resources to address these matters that few other bodies possess. The Catholic Church is present in virtually every local cultural, political and economic situation in the world. At the same time, the church is the largest single transnational body on the globe today. By linking the knowledge gained from its local engagement with its transnational capacity for communication and action, the church can influence global discourse and policymaking as few other institutions even aspire to do. The well-worn slogan "Think globally, act locally" has implications for church ministries in parishes, schools, universities and social agencies. It is not only Islamic fundamentalists who possess the resources to influence world politics and culture today. The ministries in the
Catholic Church can do so—and, one hopes, in a more positive direction.

The ministry of solidarity thus has social, intellectual and institutional dimensions. It calls for a social struggle to move the patterns of global interdependence away from domination and toward reciprocity based on equality. It requires intellectual commitment to a genuine dialogue with those who are different. And it calls for transformation of the institutional centers of decision-making in our increasingly interconnected globe.

This ministry of solidarity will also be crucial in addressing the aftermath of the scandal of sexual abuse by priests. The violation of hundreds of children in my own city of Boston is, of course, horrible in itself. But in the long term it also threatens to make talk of the church’s mission of solidarity sound like gross hypocrisy. The issue goes beyond the abuse of individual young people to the question of coverup. Indeed, it raises questions about the justice of the institutions by which the entire Catholic Church is governed. There are good reasons to believe that we would never have fallen into the current crisis if laypeople—mothers and fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers—had been directly involved in shaping the church’s response to individual cases of abuse. The Second Vatican Council stressed that all the laity are God’s priestly people. The council affirmed the importance of ordained deacons, priests and bishops. But the church, most fundamentally, is the whole people of God. As that great theologian of the 19th century Cardinal John Henry Newman once said of the laity, “The church would look foolish without them.”

As we consider the crisis facing the church today, we need to look at the role of laypersons in its leadership structures. If international institutions like the I.M.F. and the W.T.O. are facing a democratic deficit, so is the Catholic Church. We need a new form of social solidarity at the basis of the governance of the church, a solidarity that makes authentic lay participation in church leadership a reality. If we are to imagine the new forms of governance we need, we will also need the intellectual solidarity that leads to mutual listening and speaking within the church itself.

In other words, the same social, intellectual and institutional solidarity must exist within the church that the church seeks to build up in the world at large. We must finally get beyond the idea that the church can propose democracy and participation in secular society, while practicing rule from on high in its own internal life. If it is to propose solidarity to our globalizing world, it must be prepared to accept that the values of reciprocity and equality should govern its own life as well. Only in this way will the goal of solidarity and the manner of seeking it become compatible. In my view, these are the challenges and the opportunities of a ministry of solidarity today.