

Introduction to the Examination of “Responding to Immediate Emergencies”

Theodore Cardinal McCarrick¹

Address at the CAPP/Fordham University Conference *Poverty and Development: a Catholic Perspective* on 26 September 2014 in New York City

I cannot, in any way, follow the deep thinking and the universal aspect of the wisdom just expressed by Archbishop Tomasi (The Most Reverend Silvano Maria Tomasi, C.S., Nuncio to UN Organizations in Geneva), in his talkⁱ so I am going to tell some stories which I think will take the very important points the Archbishop has given us and put them into the context of where we are in today’s world.

Catholic social teaching (CST), and the whole, wonderful context given it in Saint John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus*ⁱⁱ, has been a great blessing for the Church and the world. At its heart, CST is basically about the question of the *common good*, which is based on the inherent dignity of the human person. If we do not accept that, then Catholic social teaching holds little value as a prescription for much of what ‘ails us’. And, if we do accept that, the ramifications of CST can make all the difference -- in everything our society does.

My topic is “Examination of *Responding to immediate emergencies*” and I will talk about that in the sense of the dignity of the human person.

We in the church have always been fascinated by the picture of the Blessed Mother after she had received the extraordinary information that she is to be the mother of God. She accepts it and, then, responds by going away; she responds by leaving Nazareth, rushing to do so! I say “rushing” because this is the key point I want to stress in the few things I will share with you.

The Latin word “festina” means hurry, going rapidly, and this is the way we have to respond to immediate emergencies. Our Lady took on this great charitable work of helping her cousin, Elizabeth, who was pregnant in her old age by not just ‘going’ to her. No, she goes “festina”; she goes hurriedly.

* Archbishop Emeritus of Washington

In a certain sense we cannot understand the obligation we have as Catholics without accepting this need to do things hurriedly, to move quickly. We do not have the luxury of holding back and waiting to decide. This is especially true in the case of immediate emergencies.

We all have had this experience: there's an emergency on the block, there's emergency in the family, there's emergency in the school. There are emergencies everywhere in the world. Our responsibility is not just to 'take care of it', but to take care of it quickly. I see this aspect (of responding to immediate emergencies "festina") as a platform for considering our response to immediate emergencies.

The dignity of the human person demands that we help each other. The dignity of the human person demands that part of our life must be spent looking out for the person who has difficulties - who has needs. Doing this (and we must do it) involves not only the theory and practice of our social teaching, of our economy, of our lives but, even more, is a necessary requirement of our being Christian - of our being Catholic.

We have to take care of these things "festina": quickly.

I want to tell you some stories because I was, for a long time, a member of the board of Catholic Relief Services and also a member of the U.S.A. Catholic Bishops Conference Committees on Migration and Refugees. When problems came up (triggered by men or nature) the response of these two agencies were inspired by the brilliant understanding of Bishop Murphy (The Most Reverend William Francis Murphy, Bishop of Rockville Centre and past Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice, Peace and Human Development) who knew we had to move quickly to help.

The first story is about the typhoon which hit Philippines last year (2013). The need to help was obviously there. The dignity of the human person was at risk: the dignity of these thousands of people who suddenly lost their homes, lost their families, lost everything they had. How do you 'look' at that?

I think you look at it as needing to respond to the *common good*; you have to help your neighbor. You look at it as a Christian: you are responsible for your neighbor, for your neighbor's health and welfare. You look at it from the point of view of expediency: if we do not help, the world will become worse - it will never have the Philippines back again. The dignity of the human person demands that we do things quickly. It demands we put a high priority on responding to the difficulties that these people are facing.

Catholic social teaching tells us we cannot just walk away from problems, from disasters. Indeed, it teaches us that unless we help when there is an emergency, and help quickly, situations will get worse. There is an insistence, a demand, to work quickly.

That is why I flew within 3 days into Leyte, in the central Philippine Islands, to see what the situation was. And all the issues Archbishop Tomasi so very brilliantly spoke of were there before us on this island: How do you take care of the people? Do you build a house right away? Do you plant a garden right away? You can't because the roads were all covered with debris; you can't even get through on these roads. So, as we look at responding to immediate emergencies there has to be a certain amount of careful planning.

Catholic Relief Services received \$7 million - sent in great part by the extraordinary Filipino families in the USA, who were so worried about their neighbors that they gave not just from their profit, they gave them their substance. So, now we have all this money and people say: "Use it, use it!" Well, you can't, because if you try spending money before there is a coherent plan - it will be wasted.

So, there is a need, as we do our work, to examine carefully what *subsidiarity*ⁱⁱⁱ entails in these issues. Does subsidiarity mean rushing right in and spreading money all around? Obviously not. Subsidiarity means that you plan, you organize and then - you work. You try to find a way in which relief can be provided as quickly as possible, but always with an eye to the long term. The dignity of the human person demands that we treat our brothers and sisters as wise, and good and intelligent people. We must talk to them and discover what they think. Now, they are not always going to think the 'right things' because they just passed through a trauma of terrible destruction, but they must be consulted.

Then there is the press, which always seems to try to denigrate the faith. I remember offering mass in the cathedral. It was a great cathedral and had just been finished. It lost ¾ of its roof so we all gathered under the ¼ that was covered, with the archbishop who built it along with his predecessor, to celebrate the faith of the people. But the press asked me: "The people must be so furious at God, right?" I said: "No. They are so grateful to God that they still gathered for Mass. Even though they regret with all their hearts that people were suffering they say, 'look, we still have this and we still have that and, perhaps most importantly, we still have each other.' "

The dignity of the human person manifests itself in crisis. It manifests itself in the way people work with each other - understanding who they are and what they must do - aligned with God and their fellow man.

A similar thing happened after the Christmas day tsunami in Sri Lanka (2004). I went there and found many people trying to discern how we could help. The story I want to share demonstrates the real, deep understanding we must bring to the good deeds we do: it is one thing to help and another thing to help intelligently.

In Sri Lanka we found it was the children who were most hurt by the tsunami. They did not know how to handle it. They saw that their parents were not able to handle it. Many had even lost their parents and seen their brothers and sisters washed away in these extraordinary, rapid and huge waters.

We had to bring in a psychologist who had the children draw 4 cartoons or pictures. The first one was of what they remembered their house looking like. The second was what they remember about the waves coming in and destroying it. The third was what they saw today, in the terrible destruction they are facing. And the fourth one was what they hoped it would look like the tomorrow. This exercise gave us a chance to *see* the children where they were and their amazing understanding of God's goodness -- of the fact that He had saved them and saved them for a reason -- to rebuild; to rebuild their country, to rebuild their houses and to rebuild themselves. All of this is so extraordinarily important.

I also want to make the point that the dignity of a human person is not just a Catholic idea. I had the privilege of giving a three day retreat in Kuala Lumpur to the graduate faculty in Theology of the International Muslim University of Malaysia. I had the entire faculty there: 25 professors who were very, very bright men.

The 1st day we talked about: what is "success"; what is "truth"; what is "responsibility"; what is "authority"; etc., and we came to some common understanding of these important points.

The 2nd day I presented *Centesimus Annus* and *Laborem Exercens*^{iv} in the way these documents were understood by us; the important CST points they deliver. There were many, many questions and we went back and forth for about 12 hours.

The 3rd day, they came back to me and shared how all these major points are also found in the Koran. I was amazed at their ability to see all these extraordinary Christian doctrines present in their own religion; in the fundamental teachings of Islam. If we go back to the dignity of a human person we find it is not just the Christians who have dignity, everyone does. And, in dealing with others, we have to be aware of that. In this understanding Catholic social doctrine is a way in which we can dialogue with people of other religions.

There is an indescribable sorrow we feel when some people forget their humanity. This obviously happened in the Islamic State (ISIS): they have forgotten that in Islam (and, I think, in any of the major religions) there is always this dignity of the human person.

The unfortunate taking of the title, "khalīfah" (caliph in English) by the head of ISIS is so unfortunate because "khalīfah" in Arabic stands for someone who has the duty of succeeding -- not in authority -- but succeeding in wisdom and succeeding in understanding of the teaching of Mohammed. Obviously this gentleman, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has no understanding of the teaching because he is violating it constantly.

I had the privilege of being among those bringing back to the USA the hikers who were imprisoned by Iran when they had crossed over its border: 3 Americans - 1 girl (who got sick and was released sooner) and 2 boys who were convicted of "illegal entry" and "espionage"^v. I was sent to Iran to see what we could do about it.

The conversations that I had for about a week with the Ayatollahs were very interesting and they basically surrounded the whole notion of the dignity of a human person; that these kids had to be respected and given the chance to make their own lives. When we talked, we talked about the same thing: Human Dignity.

Now, I was anxious to apply this principle to these 2 these young men and the Ayatollahs were accepting -- but were replying in a different, their own, way. However not one ever said, "They have no dignity"; that "they were worthless". No one said they are not made by Allah and, in that creation, given certain extraordinary rights.

The dignity of the human person is there: it is in Buddhism in its own way; it is in Taoism; it is in the great Chinese religions. Human Dignity is like a plane that we can use to move between faith traditions as we strive for a better world. We can use the concept of human dignity as an opportunity to develop a new understanding and a new solidarity^{vi}; a new solidarity which cannot exist unless we accept the dignity of the human person (and which cannot exist for us Catholics unless we are able to appreciate what we have in the spectacular magisterial body of work that is Catholic social teaching).

I recommend you read the forward that Cardinal Sudano (Angelo Cardinal Sodano, then Secretary of State for the Holy See) wrote when he presented the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (which I am sure you are all familiar with) because he puts CST into a proper context with human dignity, which I believe is the context that we must deal with today.

This past year I had a lot of conversations in China. China is thinking of relocating 250 million people from farms to cities. Now, we might suggest that's the wrong way; they should be provided for 'in place' rather than disrupt the way of life they have enjoyed for millennia. (I certainly think that. I think the answer is to invite Catholic Charities, or something like that, to work out the possibilities.) The Chinese government feels they cannot serve the people in the countryside. They cannot provide for their education, plumbing or even clean water. So they bring them to the city. They are motivated by the need to ensure these people have the ability to "grow". They recognize their dignity.

However, there are also in China 300 million people over the age of 60. The government is terrified that since they do not have children to take care of them (due to their unfortunate one child policy – a policy which, at its base, violates human dignity) the social toll may be devastating to their society.

There are so many, many trials and difficulties in the world. While this is a challenge, if we face them with the understanding of human dignity, of each person's inherent worth, we also get, in a certain sense, a remarkable opportunity; an opportunity to work with each other sharing the same vision, the same terminology and even the same basic ideas of what we believe, what we stand for – who we are.

ⁱ Exposition of the Catholic view: “Issues of immediate relief, lasting development and the need for solidarity”

ⁱⁱ Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 1 May 1991.

ⁱⁱⁱ Subsidiarity means that decisions in society need to be taken at the lowest competent level. In other words, problems are best solved at the level where they arise or, if this is not possible, at the lowest competent level. Any activity that can be performed by a more decentralized entity – should be. Pope Pius XI best defined Subsidiarity when he said: “It is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by the lesser and subordinate bodies”. (Encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (15 May 1931), 79.

^{iv} Saint John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens*, 14 September 1981.

^v On 31 July 2009, three Americans were taken into custody for crossing into Iran while hiking near the Iranian border in Iraqi Kurdistan. One was released 14 months later on "humanitarian grounds". Two were convicted of "illegal entry" and "espionage" and sentenced to eight years in prison. They were released on 21 September 2011.

^{vi} Each person is connected to and dependent on all humanity, collectively and individually: “all men and women are called to live as one, each taking care of the other”. (Pope Francis, *World Day of Peace Message*, 1 January 2014, 2)