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Joseph Foley C.M.

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Notes on the Social Agenda of the CM at the UN 2004-2005

by Joseph Foley, C.M.

*CM NGO Representative at the UN
Province of USA-East*

Introduction

When news commentators speak the words “United Nations,” the words are often identified with the Security Council or the General Assembly. This is especially true in the past three or four years. In reality, the United Nations is a complex global organization made up of multiple agencies that has brought about remarkable changes for persons around the world. The United Nations has a record that speaks for itself:

- **Peace** – at the present time, the United Nations is involved in 14 peacekeeping missions around the world; it has negotiated more than 175 peace settlements, and averted 82 conflicts through diplomacy.
- **Democracy-building** – the UN has enabled development of 80 new, independent countries; it has enabled the establishment of a body of international law; and the UN’s international court has been instituted to settle disputes such as border clashes and economic quarrels.
- **Development** – the UN Development Program (UNDP) disperses \$ 6.5 billion annually in 130 poor countries; UNICEF promotes children’s rights, health, labor conditions, education; the World Health Organization (WHO) has wiped out smallpox and almost eradicated polio and is a major organization targeting HIV/AIDS and SARS. The World Food Program (WFP) feeds more than 83 million people a year.
- **Human Rights** – The UN has created, promulgated, and monitored the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and it has implemented and monitored more than 80 Human Rights agreements on political, cultural, economic, social issues (e.g., women, children, prisoners, indigenous people); through the International Labor Organization

(ILO), the UN has established labor standards; and through the International Criminal Court it can prosecute “crimes against humanity.”

The record is equally impressive when one goes on to consider the environmental accomplishments of the UN; its efforts to secure women’s rights and eliminate all forms of violence against women; the awareness raised and the agreements achieved by the UN Global Conferences of the 1990s.

Playing one’s role in the United Nations (as a member of civil society and as a representative of a non-governmental organization) need not blind one to the glaring weaknesses of the organization. While a great strength of the UN is that it is the only international institution in which the most powerful nations are held accountable to the least powerful ones, a perennial problem of the UN is that it is too weak, not that it is too strong. The great danger lies in the self-interest of its member states, which allow only what suits their national agenda. As supporters of the UN, NGOs advocate alternatives to domination and self-interest as the basis of world order.

As a religious Community working in 79 countries around the world, the Congregation of the Mission has its own impressive record of promoting better standards of living for people, especially those who live in conditions of poverty. From the earliest days of our Institute, our members, too, ministered to victims of war in various European countries. And, our record shows that we have a long history of protecting and defending human dignity and the integral human development of those we serve. It is only logical, then, that Vincentians partner, and at times challenge, another global institution committed to: saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war, promoting fundamental human rights, ending poverty and establishing the conditions under which justice can be maintained. Each of these is fully consistent with what we believe to be God’s will for this world.

In 2004-2005, the NGO Office of the Congregation has selected the following areas as its primary focus:

1. The Issue of War and Peace

From a humanitarian point of view, once the guns are silent, the troop strength reduced and the promises are forgotten, the brutal consequences of war remain. Whether war is conducted in the spotlight of world attention or in some place away from center stage, it is, finally, the people who are left to grieve and to mourn. They have to begin nearly impossible tasks: overcoming poverty after towns and villages have been plundered and after schools, roads,

businesses, places of worship and hospitals have been bombed and fields and orchards land mined.

One has only to think of the media images of the war in Afghanistan, or the Sudan, or the conflict between Israel and Palestine, or Iraq or Angola.

- **Afghanistan:** Even before the events of 11 September 2001, Afghanistan suffered the effects of more than two decades of conflict under an oppressive regime. The international community responded with food and medicine, home schooling, and funding for small development programs, the reconstruction of homes, roads, irrigation and water systems. In the post-Taliban era, the NGO peace community has continued its humanitarian assistance; it also advocates on behalf of the country's poor and helps Afghan families obtain the resources they need to rebuild their communities and their lives.
- **Iraq:** Ever since the Gulf War, living conditions in Iraq deteriorated drastically. Under the current occupation, most citizens continue to lack the most basic needs: safety, food, water, sanitation and healthcare. Today, unemployment, electricity cuts, medicine shortages and water quality are still the most pressing problems facing the people of Iraq. The NGO peace community continues to look for ways to bring needed assistance to those who suffer the most, while advocating for a timely end to this war.

By such activities and, sometimes, in the face of surprisingly blunt opposition, the NGO working groups with which we labor try to be a beacon of hope to those who have seen their families, their communities and livelihoods destroyed by the violence of war.

2. Children and HIV/AIDS

Addressing the opening session of the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in May 2002, Secretary General, Kofi A. Annan told the participants: "This is not just a Special Session on children. It is a gathering about the future of humanity.... We must do more than talk about the future.... We must begin to create it, now." Earlier (May 2000), as part of a build-up to the Special Session, UNICEF launched the *Global Movement for Children*. This campaign included ten imperatives: 1) leave no child out; 2) put children first; 3) care for every child; 4) fight HIV/AIDS; 5) stop harming and exploiting children; 6) listen to children; 7) educate every child; 8) protect children from war; 9) protect the earth for children; and 10) fight poverty: invest in children.

Children and HIV/AIDS - What everyone needs to know: Since the early 1980s, HIV/AIDS has taken the lives of more than 22 million people. Today, 42 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. In the most severely affected countries, life expectancy has fallen by as much as 23 years. The impact of this pandemic is most severely reflected in children.

- HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming a disease of youth. More than half of all new infections occur in young people (15-24 years). Nearly 12 million young people are currently infected with HIV/AIDS and 6,000 are newly infected each day.
- Decades of progress in child survival are being reversed. To date, five sub-Saharan countries have experienced increases in child mortality due to AIDS. In 2002, over 600,000 children under 15 died of AIDS, while 800,000 were newly infected.
- AIDS has already orphaned more than 13 million children. At the current infection rates, that number will be 25 million by 2010.

For its part, UNICEF has adopted a set of medium range strategic priorities to address the issue of HIV/AIDS. The Congregation supports this effort by its participation in the *NGO Working Group on Children and HIV/AIDS*. The Working Group, which was formed this year, labors within UNICEF's strategic priorities: 1) to prevent HIV infection among young people (aged 10-24); 2) to prevent parent-to-child transmission of HIV; 3) to provide care for children living with HIV and AIDS; 4) to insure the protection, care and support for orphans and for children in families made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS.

The Children and HIV/AIDS Working Group has created a Plan of Action. The Plan calls for a survey of local experts, academics and HIV/AIDS practitioners in the various regions of the world. It will serve as a tool to establish three or four top advocacy priorities. The Working Group believes that after all the talking and writing is done, the needs of children with HIV/AIDS fall through the cracks. We would like to think that it is possible to reverse this and to attract more attention and money to the issue of children and AIDS.

3. Social Development

It is an uncontested fact that the ultimate goal of social development is the creation of a society in which each and every person, regardless of circumstances, can live a healthy and active life for as long as possible. And, it is the responsibility of governments to

do what is possible to create a social system in which younger and older generations support each other, with the aim of realizing a society in which people can live with peace of mind. In many countries, this requires making changes in such things as health care and pension systems.

From the point of view of the United Nations, a first step in this process is the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The MDG, adopted as a common global agenda by the world's heads of state in the year 2000, commit countries to:

1. halve extreme poverty and hunger by 2015;
2. achieve universal primary education;
3. empower women and promote equality among women and men;
4. reduce under-five mortality by two-thirds;
5. reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters;
6. reduce the spread of diseases, especially HIV/AIDS and malaria;
7. ensure environmental sustainability; and
8. create global partnerships for development, with targets for aid, trade and debt relief... all this by 2015.

The particular focus of the *2004 Commission for Social Development (CSW)* is the "Effectiveness of the Public Sector." By selecting this theme the Commission was inviting reflection, debate and resolutions around the issues of the state's responsibility (directly or indirectly) to provide for the essential needs of its residents. Public Sector effectiveness is measured by how well the state discharges its responsibilities under the major international Human Rights' instruments, the Copenhagen Commitments and the Millennium Declaration; or put simply, by how well the state

- creates the economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that will allow people to achieve social development;
- commits to the eradication of absolute poverty;
- strives for equality and equity among women, the elderly, people with disabilities, children and men;
- provides access to quality education, primary healthcare (e.g., access to such things as anti-retroviral drugs), adequate nutrition, safe water and sanitation.

While recognizing the incremental nature of any substantial change, that part of the NGO community that is committed to poverty eradication and social development offered expertise and

constructive recommendations in several important areas: the rights of migrants, the treatment of people with disabilities, strategies for strengthening family, public sector effectiveness and good governance and privatization.

At the same time the NGO community offered some significant challenges, saying for example, that despite the commitments made by governments in Copenhagen (1995) and again at the Millennium Summit (2000), it should be considered morally dishonest for the world's richest countries to give rhetorical support to the achievement of social development while refusing to implement the means by which financial resources could be mobilized to achieve social development. It is equally morally dishonest to refuse to change global trade rules that discriminate against poor countries and impoverish communities.

I offer these three areas as practical examples — practical in the sense that the vast majority of our membership has experience and expertise in these areas; and the work at the UN would be immeasurably enriched by sharing that experience or expertise, or by completing the HIV/AIDS survey.

4. Value Added

Recently I listened to some remarks on the spiritual dimensions of the Millennium Development Goals. The speaker, Alfredo Sfeir-Younis, a long-time employee of the UN and currently a Senior Advisor in the Managing Director's Office of the World Bank, talked about how puzzled he was by how many significant decisions are made in what appears to be a total moral and ethical vacuum. He observed that, in his experience, many who do speak out of their human values and spirituality do not seem convinced that issues such as war and peace, human insecurity, the violation of human rights, the destruction of the environment and discrimination in many forms can be resolved by using a spiritual paradigm.

So what is one left with? "Today, the horizon that is linked to the ethos of our lives seems to be based very much on the elements of our *material existence* and, therefore, are very bounded and limited. The sky is not the limit any longer; the limit is much closer to where we are standing at this moment." And so, says Sfeir-Younis, "we continue to be dominated by materialistic and individualistic values. We repeat the same mistakes time and time again, until they look like they are not mistakes any longer. We accept that life can be lived at higher and higher levels of toxicity and, then, behave like the drunk driver that always insists that he/she can drive. We adapt ourselves to pain, to suffering, to the sub-optimal, to the incomplete and unhappy reality we live in."

“We reject root causes and treat symptoms instead. While we know that pollution causes many headaches, instead of getting rid of pollution we buy more expensive and stronger pills. And pharmaceuticals thrive as a result of this phenomenon. The same applies to security, now a trillion dollar business. The question is: to whose advantage is it to have a world at war, to have as many sick people as possible, and to create a lot of insecurity at every level of our lives? The simple answer is: those whose business and, therefore, whose profits depend on war, ill health and insecurity.”

“Today, we approach the **Millennium Development Goals** (MDG) in a defective manner and so we hear a great deal about the reasons why these MDG will not be attained. We hear lots of blame and political play rather than positive ways to attain them.”

“Going to the other extreme, have you ever thought how the world would look if these MDG were attained? Do you have a feeling for what this may mean for millions of people?”

“I would like to make some categorical statements at this moment of my presentation:

- **The first** is that the material solutions we are seeking for the attainment of the MDG are only a minimal portion of what needs to be done. In addition, most material solutions will be transitory palliatives and will not create the foundations for sustainable solutions. Think for a moment that if the first MDG were attained, we might take nearly a billion people out of poverty. However, another billion people will become poor in the same period of time.
- **The second** is that we must create a decision-making system, a governance structure, and a process founded on human and spiritual values. It will be the strength of these spiritual values, and the self-realization of these values, that will change the direction we have wrongly taken on the road towards fulfilling the aims of the Millennium Declaration. And, it is this group of NGOs more than any other in the UN that must be fully convinced that this is the case. I am talking about the values of universality, inclusion, identity, love, caring, sharing, fraternity, compassion, and many more. These are the values that will breakdown existing power structures, fossil forms of governance, etc.
- **The third** is that implementation of these MDG must not be conceived as a mechanical process. It is a process of complex human interaction, anchored in institutional arrangements, cultural aspects, manmade assets, financial

considerations, human and social values, and spiritual dimensions of our human reality.

- **The fourth** is that these MDG, as new expressions of human betterment, will demand new and higher levels of human consciousness. Otherwise, societies will end up doing more of the same. But, more of the same will yield more of the same. It is essential that we focus on the role that individual and social awareness and consciousness play in the attainment of the MDG. It is important to unleash our infinite human potential and put it at the service of these MDG and more!
- **The fifth** is that there are two ways in which we may actually make progress in human betterment. One is through action of the type we see everyday. Work more, earn more, spend more, work more, and so on. We may follow this material routine with the view to attaining some material progress. Yes, it is possible to advance like this. However, there is another way: to use the power of our wisdom and free will. And, through that power generate the type of energy that is needed to mobilize each and every citizen in the world. Without this energy the MDG will continue to be the residual of 'other things' and the outcomes of 'other processes.' Processes with plenty of rules but without wisdom, will simply not do.
- **The sixth** is that we (yes, you and I), will have to make some fundamental and irreversible decision, and I wonder whether we have the valor and the courage to make it. In particular, to embrace, adopt, and live fully the spiritual paradigm in its entirety, and stop being on the sidelines. The other option is living bits and pieces of this way of life, these principles, and those fundamental dimensions of our non-material life."

A Community such as ours might well be challenged by these considerations. Given our particular charism and history, there is a great deal that we have to contribute to this kind of conversation.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented a very brief sketch of the accomplishments of the UN; I have named three areas of Vincentian NGO involvement this year; and I have indicated an area in which religious in general, and Vincentians in particular, have a unique contribution to make on issues such as poverty eradication and development since we embody the charism of Vincent and the social justice tradition of the Catholic Church.