

The Relationship of the Faith Community to Society

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I often hear two questions that reflect very different viewpoints:

“Why doesn’t the church stick to religion and stay out of politics and economics?”

Has the faith community become too comfortable and middle class, tailored to individualistic lifestyles, with little concern for the common good?”

Both of these questions are worthy of reflection and thoughtful answers as we Move into 2008.

The prophets of old, Jesus, and leaders like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Bishop Oscar Romero, to name just a few, freely crossed the lines between the haves and the have-nots, the excluded and the broken, and helped them find their rightful place in society. They also challenged systems and structures that dehumanized and kept people down. In our Catholic Church in 1965, Pope John Paul VI wrote:

“The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially the poor and afflicted, are to be the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of faith.”

Many other denominations adopt a similar stance. Albert Camus, author and Nobel Peace Prize Winner said: “God-fearing people should speak out loud and clear in such a way that there is never any doubt in the hearts of human beings, and then act on even the simplest values they espouse.”

It is not healthy to separate politics, economics and jobs from the rest of life. They are all parts of the whole and are to be treated as such. Because we have not seen them as a whole, many people today are very confused about the meaning of life, their role in the local and global community, and their overall purpose in life.

What can faith communities do?

- ❖ Get to know people beyond the walls of the church and congregational membership, especially the impoverished, and find ways to assist them out of bondage. Listen to what they see as solutions and avoid a paternalistic attitude. Offer mutual learning and support and allow the poor to evangelize the congregation. Activities such as tutoring, mentoring, addressing values and attitudes that are life-giving are just a few of the ways that congregations can be productively involved.
- ❖ Name some of the justice issues globally, nationally, and locally and find concrete ways to be involved. Issues crying out for our response are care for the environment, fair wages, the death-penalty, health care, housing,

widespread violence and ongoing wars. We have a moral responsibility to address them.

- ❖ Address racial justice issues in the lives of congregational members, in the programs and services under the congregation's jurisdiction or partnership.
- ❖ Groups of professional members could be convened to discuss ways to integrate spirituality and ethics into the world of development and make it more whole.
Fr. Prakash Lohale, O.P., reminds us that authentic human development is social, cultural, and political as well as economic. It involves developing one's skills and gifts in the service of the common good.
- ❖ While non-profit organizations (501(c)(3)), are not permitted to engage in partisan politics, there are endless opportunities to be a voice for the kind of nation/world we want to create with new paradigms beyond materialism, militarism and exploitation and to be a passionate voice for ecological and sustainable development for all.

A one-time Assistant Secretary of Defense, Dr. Gloria Duffy, in speaking to an interfaith church group, said that "The social context today requires social teaching and direction from the faith community. Ethics is greatly lacking in public life today - in politics, economics and in the media. The pulpit is one of the few areas from which such discussion can come, but it need not be limited to the pulpit." Such conversations can take place in small gatherings, in educational forums and in other areas where people share their concerns and hopes. Other institutions of civil society also play an important role in forming the moral culture in which we live. Together we can learn to put feet on our faith and demonstrate that a just and peaceful community and world are possible.

It takes courage to proclaim the full meaning of the Gospel message. Our daily reflection on the Word of God will disturb any sense of self-importance, as well as our comfort and convenience. Some years ago, Fr. Joseph Driscoll, then head of the National Chaplains Assn., posed this question: "Can we be advocates with voice, vigor and valor through the power of the Spirit of God, who advocates with us and through us to renew the face of the earth?" It is possible. Through our efforts in the power of that same Spirit, a new culture will replace the current culture of domination, competition and greed. What an awesome challenge is ours. Now is the acceptable time to work diligently toward that accomplishment.