



Issues

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The apocalypse now...and when The other pro-life issues

The day after Christmas the world awakened to the power of nature, a disaster so immense it was difficult to wrap one's mind around the destruction and loss of life in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and India. The lives lost were not only citizens of those nations but scores of visitors and tourists from Europe, Australia, the Americas, and other parts of Asia. The death toll continues to rise as more bodies are discovered and recovered. Families are broken, children are orphaned and parents are childless. Very many of the victims were children. Whole villages are empty. The majority of the dead were poor, living on coasts and shores, eking out a living from the sea, small businesses or service jobs in beach-front hotels. Now, hunger and disease, the task of rebuilding lives, infrastructures, and parts of whole countries faces those nations and the world.

The international community, both governmental and private, religious and secular, has responded generously. The test, especially for governments, will be to keep their promises of aid pledged but not yet delivered. Honduras and Iran are witnesses to pledges made in the face of a disaster but not kept.

There are larger questions: Can we come together as a world, not simply to respond to a disaster, but to examine the structures—economic, social, political, etc.—that divide us and separate us increasingly into a rich and poor world? This was not a page from *the Left Behind Series* in which everyone except “born-again Christians” perish in Christ’s wrath. But what was it? Simply a shifting of tectonic plates that had a horrible outcome? Nature renewing itself with a costly cleansing? An opportunity for the world, and some parts of the world, particularly Sri Lanka, to reconcile? A mystery of God’s providence, captured by Job 42:2, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”? It is a mystery and an opportunity to stay the course, keep the pledges, and, even more to look at the gap between the rich and poor seriously.

The head of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ office of Social Development and World Peace, John Carr, identified the gap between the rich and poor as one issue that needed to be addressed no matter who won the White House last November. It is a pro-life issue. Poor children have not simply the right to life, but to food, housing, health care, parents whose wages enable them to care for them. Three other issues, also pro-life issues, need priority attention—

- Abolishing the death penalty
Those on death row have a right to life, especially in the face of a system that too often gives death sentences without exploring DNA evidence or providing adequate legal counsel. Pope John Paul II and the *New Catechism of the Catholic Church* questions whether there is any justification for the death penalty.
- Accessible and affordable health care
Pope John XXIII wrote in *Mater et Magistra* that health care was everyone’s right, yet in the United States, the richest nation, thousands have no health care. Their access

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is an emergency room visit or the sacrifice of food for a prescription. What a scandal!

- Peace and reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians

Those people, like us, are “People of the Book” and their conflict is wrapped in injustice, washed in blood, fed by fear and hate. Peace between them would drain much of that not only for them but for the entire Middle East and the whole world.

These are all pro-life issues that we need to give the same support we give to other pro-life issues. I would add two more pro-life issues to John Carr’s four—

- The war in Iraq

Our government went to war in Iraq, using the doctrine of the preemptive use of force, justifying that force because Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. There was also a suggestion of a connection between Iraq and September 11th. That connection proved to be false, though many Americans still believed it, even into the Presidential election. On January 12, 2005, the White House announced that it had ended its two year search for weapons of mass destruction—the justification for the war—without finding any such weapons. At the time we went to war, the Holy Father, the bishops of the United States, and many religious leaders opposed the war, declaring that it did not meet the criteria for a just war, *jus ad bellum*, the why and when of recourse to war. It would seem then it does not meet the criterion for a just war, *jus in bello*, the conduct of the war either. Iraqi civilian casualties are estimated to be as high as 100,000, not counting those wounded and displaced. Military casualties for the Coalition Forces (the bulk of which are United States troops) are about 1500 killed and 11,000 wounded. In addition, there is the destruction of parts of many cities, and much of Iraq’s infrastructure.

There is also the matter of Abu Ghraib and the torture and treatment of prisoners, conduct that certainly does not meet the *jus in bello* standard for just war conduct. Besides military and civilian

casualties, destruction of infrastructure and homes, there is the mounting economic cost of the war. Many billions of dollars spent on Iraq limits the government’s ability to fund other things. Our armed forces are dangerously stretched, using National Guard personnel and extending tours of duty in the war zone.

We are in Iraq—we have sons and daughters, relatives and friends there in the armed forces. Without denying the reality of our presence there, or being disloyal or non-supportive of our troops, the time has come to question whether we can continue to support this war. What does that mean? Begin by contacting our elected officials in Congress and the White House through e-mail, letter, phone calls or fax and express our concerns, questions, and non-support. Linking up with Pax Christi and Voices in the Wilderness groups give the opportunity to explore what other actions can be taken.

Dissent in war is not disloyalty and there is an honored Catholic tradition that stretches from early Christian soldiers to Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton who called wars into question. Dissent in war is not disloyalty and there is an honored American tradition that stretches from David Thoreau to Martin Luther King Jr. in our day.

- The environment

The Bishops identified “Caring for God’s Creation” as one of the seven major themes of Catholic Social Teaching. We have been entrusted with stewardship of all created life and living things and all creation, that is rooted in Scripture’s first book and its account of creation. Air, water, forests, fields, seas, lakes and rivers, plants and animals and fish, sources of energy and fuel—in all of these we are called to be stewards for the seventh generation. We must also to look at issues of climate change, the national consumption of the world’s resources, protection of wildlife and wilderness areas, global citizenship and how we relate to developing nations.

The recent earthquake and tsunami in Southeast Asia was not simply a call to see how we are all linked, but also a reminder of nature’s power and our need to respect that power, to honor nature and learn to live with it for all our benefit. What



does this mean practically? Being informed, contacting our elected officials as stewards and urging them to be the same. Connecting with INRIRG (Indiana Student Public Interest Research Group), the Sierra Club, the Enviro Health Action Network, or NCRLC (National Catholic Rural Life Conference) would provide education, information and the opportunity for action.

While neither the U.S. Congress, the White House, or the Indiana State Assembly will completely address the four life issues that John Carr identified, there will be bills before the Assembly that touch some parts of those concerns. For example, HB 1083, Earned Income Tax Credit Extension, is good for low-income families, and for the state in making provision to match funds for some federal programs. This bill is making its way through the Assembly. Legislation will also be introduced to help poor families with heating assistance and to encourage the poor to install efficiency measures in their houses.

Legislation will also be introduced that would restrict the death penalty, prohibiting it from being imposed on a mentally ill person no matter how they were involved in a crime. There is also a recommendation to restrict judges' option to life imprisonment if a jury does not return a unanimous recommendation for the death penalty.

There will be a range of other life issues before the Indiana Assembly including education and taxation bills. The state, like its neighbor Illinois, faces considerable debt and some serious revenue/taxation questions. How much those concerns will control what the Assembly can and cannot do is unclear at this time.

There is an effort in Northwest Indiana by members of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities to link with the nationwide interreligious initiative for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. That local effort has had contact with Senator Lugar's Office and there is hope that this "peoples initiative" might help move the process forward. There seems to be an effort in Washington, DC to be more active in this process.

Dealing with affordable, accessible health care for all is still a very elusive goal. Perhaps our contribution of earthquake and tsunami aid will lead

us to look again at global poverty. There are housing issues, some of which Heartland Center is pursuing, that hopefully will help the poor locally, and by establishing a network, help the poor nationally. However, the stated economic focus of the White House and Congress do not carry much help for the poor nationally or globally.

The ICC (Indiana Catholic Conference) Network provides a way to have our concerns for life issues and the common good put before legislators both in Indianapolis and Washington, DC. As we begin 2005, I invite new members to join ICC.*

Pope John Paul II has declared 2005 to be the year of Eucharist. In the beginning of the liturgical movement in this country, the liturgy and justice were connected through two interlocking visions: we are the mystical body of Christ and as such, we are all related. The liturgy, especially the Eucharist that we celebrate, is hollow unless it expresses itself in love of neighbor and doing the works of justice. As we go into the year of Eucharist, can we recover those two interlocking visions?

✠Rev. James M. Dixon, S.J.

* To join ICC contact Heartland Center—
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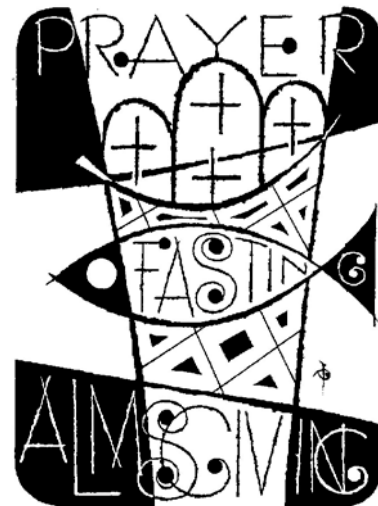


Lent will soon begin. It is the Church's time for retreat, a time for renewal and re-commitment, a time when we are called to pray, fast, and give alms/do works of mercy with greater intensity. Listen to Isaiah:

This is the fast that pleases me:
to break unjust fetters,
to let the oppressed go free,
to share your bread with the hungry
and shelter the homeless poor.

If you do away with the yoke,
the clenched fist, the wicked word,
if you give your bread to the hungry
and relief to the oppressed,
your light will rise in the darkness.

Isaiah 58: 6-7, 10



Fasting is one of the works of Lent which Isaiah makes a work of justice. And justice, in the words of Pedro Arrupe, S.J., former General of the Society of Jesus, is the sacrament of love. It is what makes love possible and present. Doing justice is the first step toward peace according to Pope Paul VI. When you think about what praying, alms, and fasting you will do this Lent, think justice and peace. †

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