

Church offers lessons for post-conflict development

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Feb. 17, 2011

WASHINGTON -- With countries around the world undergoing reorganization after wars, nonviolent revolutions and in one case, a vote to split apart, the Catholic Church's example for development holds valuable lessons, according to economist Paul Collier.

"The cry for justice runs from top to bottom" among the world's poor people, said Collier in a plenary address Feb. 15 to the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering. And the church, with its long experience in aid and development at the grass-roots level can provide an example and the capacity for helping address issues faced by developing countries, he said.

Collier, author of "The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It," is professor of economics and director of the Center for the Study of African Economics at the University of Oxford.

His talk was followed by half a dozen workshops on international policy issues, including peace-building, the realities facing Sudan, and the soon-to-be-independent South Sudan, and the transitions facing Afghanistan, Pakistan, Haiti, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

For countries coming out of conflict, such as post-earthquake Haiti, post-war Afghanistan, what will be known as South Sudan July 9, and Tunisia and Egypt after their peaceful revolutions, the model they should look to, Collier stressed, should not be taken from Europe's reconstruction after World War II.

Across Europe in the 1950s, governments established welfare states that cared for their people from cradle to grave, an effort made possible by strong nationalist feelings, he explained. That meant people of those countries supported the high taxes and multilayered government structures necessary for such services to be provided.

Today, "the best-run economy in Europe is Germany's," he said. "Why? Because it used to be the worst."

Germans came out of the economic failures of previous generations, "said 'never again' then built the institutions to ensure it would never happen again," said Collier.

Today, across Africa, in particular, there is a similar sense of "never again," he said. "These people know they've been looted." But at the moment that doesn't translate to a strong passion to building the kind of institutions it takes to protect people from corruption and manage a country's resources well.

"There's a long decision chain," to be followed before such countries replace their failed institutions with effective ones, he said.

But the path followed by Europe in the 1950s would be a recipe for failure across Africa, he believes, because too few people feel the same strong sense of nationalism that enabled Europe's governments to provide such all-encompassing care.

He gave examples such as the lack of commitment shown by teachers in Tanzania, whose average workday is one and a quarter hours, because "they don't show up," or medical systems in other countries where rampant theft by employees means medicines aren't available.

Experiments during the 1990s in financial-incentive-based governing prompted by the model of big business also haven't worked, said Collier, because pay tied to performance isn't effective in fields such as teaching, where success depends upon teamwork. As to other fields, he pointed to the collapse of banking institutions in the United States and Europe, where financial incentives overwhelmed employees' commitment to running fiscally secure companies.

What the Catholic Church has known for at least a century, however, is that what makes people committed to their work is not primarily financial incentives, it's internalizing the objectives of the organization." He said a successful private firm routinely tries to get its workers to buy into the goals of the company.

The church's mission schools, hospitals and other institutions in the developing world are a successful model of delivering services cost-effectively and with high rates of success, with employees who adopt the goals of the efforts, Collier said. In a World Bank paper on the cost-effectiveness of the church's delivery of social services titled "Working for God," he added, "you come out looking rather good."

He said he has been advocating that developing countries follow the example of providing basic services to the poor through organizations "that have solved the problem of motivating their workers."

Sometimes that's the church, sometimes it's another type of nongovernmental organization, sometimes it's just the local community. "Whatever works, build on it," he said.

Collier said the church's principles also can be a helpful guide for managing natural resources in developing countries, balancing the risk of exploitation with calls to preserve the environment by way of radical restrictions on the use of resources.

The underground resources in Africa are only beginning to be understood and extracted, he said. "The money that will be coming out dwarfs all other sources of income."

In Afghanistan, a recent aerial study of natural resources led to a prediction "of something like \$2 trillion worth of resources," said Collier.

Such richness raises important ethical issues, he said. "Many more people care about trees than care about poverty," he said. "To an extent that's just fine, but there's a danger of naive environmentalism that opposes the kind of development that's needed to fight poverty.

"The poor cannot afford to put nature in a museum in a glass case and just be the curators. We are custodians, not curators."

The Christian perspective on using natural resources is more than naive environmentalism, he continued. It calls for harnessing resources to improve the lot of the poor, using them to be able to educate a country's children while also preserving creation for future generations, he said.

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