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A parish turns to manufacturing

Tom Gallagher | Sep. 30, 2011

Maria Elena Ramirez weaves indigo cotton yarn for Goods of Conscience in Chicacao, Guatemala, in August 2008. (Greg Lord)

The epic economic crisis in the United States has prompted dioceses and parishes to help its parishioners find work. Networking events, resumé-writing seminars, and career coaching are common activities. Unemployment remains highest among minority groups. But what if parishes actually created manufacturing jobs and produced goods in a sustainable, local manner? Can this actually be done?

One priest thinks so.

In 2005, Fr. Andrew O?Connor of Holy Family Church in Bronx, N.Y., founded Goods of Conscience [1], a parish-based workshop that employs members of the local community to produce garments from fabric woven in Guatemala.

?The soul of a parish is making,? O?Connor said. ?This follows the medieval tradition of the parish benefice, or one in which a parish produces a good to support the parish.?

O?Connor points out that St. Paul made tents (Acts 18:1-3) and the Rule of St. Benedict is modeled on monks earning their own living by producing goods such as cheese, bread, cloth, wine and now even ink-jet print cartridges.

He also sees a parish benefice as being directly tied to the Eucharist. ?The community that makes bread and wine that is to be transformed and consumed is also the community that is more appreciative and awed by the mystery of the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ,? O?Connor said.

O?Connor?s benefice model is based on the example of Msgr. Gregory Schaffer, a priest of the New Ulm, Minn. diocese, who created a benefice at his parish in San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala [2]. Families in that parish benefice produce coffee and honey, which are sold directly to customers in the United States through a mission based in New Ulm. Its success has financed, among other things, the construction of a parish clinic.

Back in the Bronx, Goods of Conscience buys bolts of cotton fabric from two towns in Guatemala, Chicacao and Solola. Woven into the cloth are strands of highly reflective fiber that come from a single factory in the United States. The reflective fiber is a counterfeit safeguard, letting the buyer know that the fabric is authentic and ensuring the Guatemalan weavers a fair and livable wage. Goods of Conscience markets the cloth under the trademark Social Fabric.

Social Fabric is also a metaphor for the kind of mutually supportive relationship-building O?Connor hopes to develop among artisans and U.S. consumers.

Goods of Conscience, a separately incorporated not-for-profit organization, operates out of four basement rooms on church property for preparation, dying, sewing and storage. It employs two sewers, who work two to four days a week and earn $8-$14 per hour. The dyer, working on a contract basis, earns $32.50 per dye lot. It has begun collections for men and women, accessories, and goods for the home.

O?Connor spends about five hours a week overseeing the designs and the quality of the production.

Sales are made through word of mouth in the parish, mission visits to other parishes, and online. Monthly sales average $6,000 to $8,000, revenues that are augmented by fundraising and by O?Connor himself from a stipend he earns as a chaplain to a high school.

The benefice sends back to Guatemala a shipment of first Communion uniforms, school supplies, food, and funds for medical assistance. This shipment is facilitated through Immaculate Conception Parish in Chicacao, Guatemala.

?Fr. Andrew?s endeavor and skills are a true inspiration for many of us who are involved,? said board member Richard Gengenbach, an executive at Morgan Stanley. ?His vision and constant pursuit of our goals are relentless.?

A parish benefice, however, is hard work.

?It?s a tough road to get things off the ground,? said board member Paul Quinn, who manages Beckerle Lumber Supply in Rockland County, N.Y. ?I try to help Fr. Andrew with solving small-business issues and with common sense.?

The benefice has the same challenges as any other business. It needs to manage costs, market its products, find a distribution partner and diversify. Its cotton is now being used to make reusable tote bags.

It helps to get lucky, too.

Devon Schuster, then fashion director for Vogue magazine, was aware of Goods of Conscience, since O?Connor was working with her on her marriage preparation. Later, actress Cameron Diaz was featured in the June 2009 issue of Vogue in a pair of shorts made by Goods of Conscience. This prompted Anna Wintour, Vogue?s legendary editor in chief, to write in her column, ?My personal favorite is a neat pair of checkered shorts? made by Goods of Conscience.

Veteran fashion industry professional Victoria Cantrell, former chief operating officer and chief information officer of New York City-based Tory Burch, a luxury women?s lifestyle brand, joined the Goods of Conscience board of directors.

?The idea of providing employment opportunities to people in Guatemala while resurrecting the ancient art of weaving cotton and providing employment opportunities for people in the Bronx, both supporting families, creates an entire circle that begins to change poverty,? Cantrell said.

?For my part, I?ve tried to help Fr. Andrew work through supply chain and other technical business issues,? she said. ?Fr. Andrew, however, is connected to this work in many ways and on many levels.?

O?Connor, who is the fifth of nine children from New Haven, Conn., is a painter, sculptor and multimedia artist who also holds a master?s degree in literature. He writes and speaks around the country about the nature of work and living sustainably, often referencing scripture, Jonathan Swift, Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, Milan Kundera and Wendell Berry.

In a recent essay, O?Connor wrote: ?My theory is that creating local benefices with global support to engage the natural creative life of a small community shifts the cultural emphasis away from nomadic tendencies of the technological culture and toward a more generative and sustainable local culture. By forming bonds of friendship and direct trade, the ?cycle of charity,? with communities in more needy countries makes the dialogue of social and cultural identity an immediate work.?

Cantrell agrees.

?We live in a time when people are tuned in to being more responsible, whether it?s living green or buying local or organic products,? she said. ?With Goods of Conscience, buyers need to know that this is an excellent way to give back and to contribute in a meaningful way to a greater circle, helping people in a bigger way.?

O?Connor envisions a network of parish-based benefices throughout the U.S. that will create a national Catholic consciousness by supporting an economy within these parishes.

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[1] http://www.goodsofconscience.com
[2] http://www.dnu.org/service/sanlucas.html