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# Center works toward transformation

Patricia Lefevere | Dec. 27, 2011

Dominican Sr. Maria Riley (Photos by Patricia Lefevere)

WASHINGTON -- On any given day the Center of Concern wrestles with a number of the world?s most pressing problems. Desperate poverty, depletion of the Earth?s resources, inadequate distribution of food, discrimination and curtailment of human rights occupy its staff of scholars and researchers.

As if to illustrate the toll that such cascading crises can take, a tiny ball containing an image of the blue dot of the Earth -- an image taken from the Voyager space craft in 1990 -- bounded off the coffee table and onto the floor during *NCR*?s recent interviews with center staff here. The day was already propitious: The 7 billionth person had been born on the tiny blue dot of Earth that day.

Would he or she have enough to eat, and what about the 10 billion souls predicted to arrive by 2050, wondered Dominican Sr. Maria Riley, senior advisor for the center?s Global Women?s Project.

The center?s staff does not sit around wringing its collective hands over the fate of the endangered planet and its citizens. Rather it attempts to be a prophetic presence uncovering the seminal causes of hunger, economic and social injustice, and human rights infringements while simultaneously working to transform these predicaments.

The center makes its social and economic analysis known through prodigious papers, books, the occasional workshop and seminar, and a spirited website that has attracted several thousand users. In 2001 it launched its Education for Justice website (see sidebar [1]), which accounts for some 3,500 total visitors, who in turn use the site?s materials to educate a quarter to half a million Catholics.

A precursor to its database was the center?s *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, by Edward DeBerri and Jesuit Fr. James Hug. First published in 1986, it has sold nearly 37,000 copies. Now in its fourth edition, it is a staple in Catholic universities, high schools, parishes and small faith communities. Thanks to the book, Riley reckoned Catholics are ?closer to Catholic social teaching,? but not yet to its ?implementation.?

The center does not do its work alone. For more than two decades it has been linked to a number of nongovernmental organizations and has been an associate member of CIDSE, the umbrella group providing information and coordinating services for Catholic aid and human development worldwide.

The tiny, independent, faith-based Center of Concern, rooted in Catholic social tradition, has been exposing and challenging the national and global systems behind economic and social injustice for 40 years. Begun in 1971 in the office of United Nations Secretary-General U Thant in New York, the center was the joint venture idea of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, when he headed the U.S. Catholic Bishops? Conference, and the late Fr. Pedro Arrupe, then superior general of the Society of Jesus.

The bishops? conference and the Jesuits served as the center?s sponsors, providing $110,000 in startup capital. Forty years on, fundraising is still a vital necessity as it continues to look to individuals, religious orders, foundations, book sales and memberships to meet its $660,000 annual budget.

The graying and downsizing of religious congregations in a time of economic recession has also impacted the center, which once had a $1.2 million budget. Despite the fact that ?we?re hurting, we can point to a number of successes? over four decades, said Hug, its president since 1989.

Chief among them were its critiques of the pastoral letters of the U.S. bishops on peace and on the economy. Someone in the bishops? conference credited the Center of Concern as the single greatest influence on the 1986 letter, ?Economic Justice for All,? Hug noted.

The document invited U.S. Catholics to use the resources of their faith, the strength of their economy and the opportunities of their democracy to shape a society that better protects the dignity and human rights of their sisters and brothers in America and abroad. That goal -- a quarter of a century later -- still broadly proclaims the center?s mission: to work collaboratively to create a world where all economic structures, systems and policies guarantee the dignity and basic rights of all members of the human family, Hug said.

?Our focus has been on those in poverty and those discriminated against due to gender, race, class or nationality,? he said. ?We?re trying to break through subconscious assumptions,? most prominently the one that says that ?we can continue our materialism and consumerism without creating greater stress on the planet.?

Hug said he is saddened when he hears politicians say that ?we can grow our way out of the economic crisis.? What?s needed, he offered, is not necessarily a diminishment in lifestyle, but a lifestyle change. He says a less hectic, less ?driving? life could improve everyone?s life.

Hug, a modest Nebraskan with double master?s degrees and a doctorate in Christian ethics from the University of Chicago, brings expertise to the center?s thinking on economic justice, peace, globalization and Catholic social thought. The former Woodstock theologian has lectured on these topics on five continents and is editor of the center?s best seller.

His double desks, bookshelves and the floor space around them abound in papers, giving the visitor a hint of being at the nerve center of a Catholic think tank. But that would be misguided, Hug said, quickly pivoting in his swivel chair. ?That would miss our focus on advocacy; it doesn?t cover our work toward social transformation,? he insisted.

That focus is rife in Riley?s 45-page paper, ?Seeing the World Anew.? The document, the result of eight months of research and writing, sketches elements and directions toward a more sustainable and just globalization. It looks to a world enhanced by greater justice, well-being and ecological health.

The paper calls for weighing the quality of life beyond the standard gross domestic product. A number of economists, social scientists, public policy advocates and political leaders already see GDP as an inadequate instrument for measuring human and societal well-being, Riley said. She cited efforts underway in France, Canada, the state of Maryland and at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to measure economic performance along with social progress.

Riley also stressed the need to measure ?the care economy,? which she saw as the invisible, uncounted work done largely by women who care for children, the aged and infirm. Such labor is the social and economic bedrock of all societies, she told *NCR*, yet it remains undervalued and unrecorded.

When reviewing her 32 years at the center, Riley noted ?how changed we are? in the church and the world. While the Center of Concern is ?ambitious in the political and moral arena,? she said; ?we can never claim victory for the changes achieved.?

She pointed to the founding of the Global Women?s Project as an example of reading the signs of the time. The signs call for a redirection of the economy from solely a compilation of economic output to one that weighs people?s well-being, builds human solidarity and is ecologically sustainable, she said. ?Our success depends on how accurately we read these signs.?

An instance where she believes the Center of Concern ?was ahead of the curve? was in its launching of an International Gender and Trade Network in 1999. This followed the 1995 U.N. International Women?s Conference in Beijing, at which the World Trade Organization ?was the new kid on the block,? Riley said.

The International Gender and Trade Network?s secretariat -- based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil -- advocates on behalf of women and their development. It does this by building strategic partnerships with local and regional community-based groups working on local issues that impact women, she said.

After three decades on ?the cutting edge,? Riley has become a senior advisor to

the Global Women?s Project, now headed by Julia Wartenberg, who, at 28, is the youngest scholar at the center. In her office by 8 a.m. most days, Wartenberg visits at least 10 websites daily and posts articles on Facebook and other social media sites. She indicated the center?s large international following on Facebook and its growing audience on Twitter.

Every Friday, Wartenberg emails links to a number of articles from the world media that are related to issues prominent at the center. In addition she and Riley take turns writing monthly four-page papers on topics close to the heart of the center?s concerns. Hunger, climate change, human well-being and the new economy are among papers she has posted recently to an email list of some 500 subscribers.

When she?s not in the office, Wartenberg, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Virginia, attends weekly networking events around Washington. Her hope is to connect with young professionals and bring them into the sphere of the center?s interests. ?We need to be able to host more events and to build relationships with our constituents,? she said.

Back in Hug?s office, the ball of the blue dot again hovers dizzily near the edge of the table. But soon capable hands approach, steady its slide and set it secure once more.

[Patricia Lefevere is a longtime *NCR* contributor.]

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