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The struggle against corruption

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 11, 2006 All Things Catholic

By no means is corruption uniquely, or even primarily, a problem of the Third World, as the recent scandals surrounding Enron and Jack Abramoff remind us. Yet it has its most devastating consequences in places already struggling with chronic under-development and fragile social systems.

This by way of introduction to a conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in early June on the struggle against corruption.

Bishop Giampaolo Crepaldi, the council's secretary, told the conference that there is a strong negative correlation between corruption and economic growth, levels of human development, the functionality of democratic institutions and the struggle against social injustices.

Crepaldi said that while corruption is in part a problem for police, law enforcement and the judicial system, its roots must also be tackled. In that sense, he said, there's also an urgent need for anti-corruption instruction in schools, formation of consciences by churches and other social institutions, and a general sense of solidarity across the various divisions in society.

Speaking to roughly 80 experts who attended the Vatican conference, Cardinal Renato Martino, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said that his office will prepare a document on the best way to fight corruption, drawing upon the social doctrine of the Catholic church.

In the first place, Martino said, the phenomenon of corruption challenges our intelligence, because it must be studied carefully and understood properly before any plan of action will be effective. Second, he said, it challenges our will, because every layer of society has to make its contribution. Third, he said, it challenges the church, and the church must commit itself to the struggle.

"Winning the battle against corruption does not depend solely upon the church, which realistically recognizes that, given the way the 'mystery of evil' works in our history, [this battle] will always be with us," Martino said. "But the church will not give in to resignation; instead, it must continue to increase its commitment."

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The phenomenon of corruption, especially in the developing world, is indeed often more complex than it seems. I recently spoke with Archbishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, president of both the Nigerian bishops' conference and the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, on the subject.

Here was our exchange:

> **Let me play Devil's advocate for a moment. You've criticized American imperialism. Skeptics, however, might say that the United States could vanish from the world stage tomorrow, and until Africans can generate a better class of leaders -- people who aren't corrupt, with a sense of the common good -- your problems will continue.**

Those who speak like this clearly don't understand the situation on the ground in these so-called "corrupt countries." The kind of corruption we have now was never possible when everything depended upon the tribe. It simply couldn't happen that a king could steal the money of his tribe and send it thousands of miles away to keep it for his family. African corruption would not have been possible without the cooperation of the very people who are now complaining about it!

Further, the West could help stop the corruption if it was a real concern. It's not possible that a young man from Nigeria can transfer a half-million dollars to deposit in a bank in any European country, and the regulatory authorities in that country aren't aware of it. They must know where this money came from. They track suspect transactions all the time, so why do they make an exception for stolen money from Africa? In the past the United States would tell us that banks are free, but with the War on Terror, they now track every cent coming into the country.

If the West stops doing business with corrupt governments, they will fall. Africans try to bring these governments down, but often they fail because the governments are sustained and upheld by foreign businesses who believe they can do better business with the corrupt leaders. Very often, those leaders are not interested in doing hard bargaining for the good of their people, but simply in lining their own pockets.

The fight against corruption is hindered from the outside. The reality is, we are not free. It's a myth to say that a poor, weak country is completely free to do whatever it likes. There are potentates who do whatever they like to their own people, and who follow instructions from the rich forces who sustain them. These powers from the outside world could have been deployed to help us get better governments, but it's not happening.

I'll give you an example. In 2003, we had elections in Nigeria. It was well done in some places, but a sham in others. ?Yet less then a week later, the EU sent letters of congratulation to the people who had won these fraudulent elections. That was very disappointing. If the EU or the United States had insisted that we can't accept this election, we probably would have gotten something better. But the outside powers calculated that they were doing good business with these people. Often this sort of thing doesn't depend just on the ambassador. The major corporations, such as the oil companies, play a big role.

One positive element is that more and more people are alert about what's happening. The average young man and woman know this, and they're angry. I keep alerting the people in power that it's in our interest to sort this out, quickly and even painfully if needed, to avoid building up anger beyond remedy. Sadly, we're not seeing much of it.

In this situation, the church can't just keep quiet and wait for *caritas* to start cleaning the wounds, when we have a chance to prevent the wounds from being inflicted in the first place.

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