

U.S. 'Obstacle' To Aid for Poor Nations

Fourth in a five-part series
By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) -- The United States has shifted from "a leading supporter of the poorest countries" to being an "obstacle," says the first draft of a national pastoral letter by the U.S. bishops on the economy.

"We know from our pastoral work that Americans are a generous, compassionate people. Our (foreign aid) policies should reflect our best instincts; currently they do not," the document says.

It deplores major shifts in U.S. international development policy since 1980 as "a gross distortion" of what ought to be done.

Its chapter on the United States and the world economy, one of its major sections, seeks to spell out the implications of Catholic social teachings for the United States, which it says is "still the economic giant" in an increasingly interdependent world.

Addressing ethical principles that should guide international economic activity, the document says that "three key themes emerge from recent papal teaching: the need for reform of the international system, the need to refashion national policies, and the acceptance of a 'preferential option for the poor' as an overall policy imperative."

The draft makes no attempt to evaluate specific proposals for reform of the international economic order, but it strongly urges "renewal of the dialogue...between North and South" as a "basic and overriding" prerequisite for any reform.

It attacks recent policy directions of the United States on that score, however. Lately, it says, U.S. obstructionism has made it "increasingly difficult to initiate or improve the quality of the dialogue for which Pope John Paul II has said 'there can be no substitute.'"

Even without basic reforms in the international economic structure, the document says that it is necessary and possible for "individual states to act wisely and generously in promoting the international common good."

It urges as the primary principle in U.S. relations with the developing world "a concern for the basic human needs of the poor."

But ideological shifts governing U.S. aid policy since 1980 have gone counter to that primary concern, according to the draft.

"U.S. policy toward the developing world," it says, "has shifted from its earlier emphasis on basic human needs and social and economic development to a selective assistance based on an East-West assessment of a North-South set of problems.... The result is that issues of (Third World) political and economic development take second place to the (U.S.-Soviet) political-strategic argument. We deplore this change."

The document goes on to cite specifics in that policy shift:

- A significant shift in funding from multilateral aid to politicized bilateral aid. "Multilateral programs (in 1984) account for only about one-tenth of U.S. development assistance outlays -- down from one-quarter in 1981."

- A shift in emphasis from humanitarian aid to military aid. "From 1981 to 1984 congressional appropriations for security-related aid programs increased nearly two-thirds, while development assistance appropriations remained almost unchanged."

- The single-handed U.S. decision in 1983 that forced donor nations to reduce from \$12 billion to \$9 billion their 1984-86 funding of the International Development Association, the World Bank agency that loans money exclusively to the world's poorest nations.

- U.S. backoffs from hard-won international agreements, and U.S. stances in North-South negotiations. "We have now reached the point where the rest of the world expects the United States to take a reluctant, damage-limiting, adversarial posture" in North-South discussions, the draft says.

Looking at a long-term decline in U.S. development aid efforts, the draft says, "We are also shocked and ashamed that the United States, the 'inventor' of foreign aid, is now

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almost at the bottom of the list" of the 17 major industrialized donor nations in the percentage of gross national product that it devotes to concessional aid.

At the peak of the Marshall plan in the 1950s, the United States devoted from 2.0 percent to 2.5 percent of its GNP to such aid. In recent years that figure has fluctuated from about 0.20 percent to 0.27 percent, or one-tenth the level of 30 years ago. Several donor countries give more each year than the 0.7 percent of GNP that the United Nations recommends as a goal, and only Italy and Austria rank as low as the United States. The pastoral draft urges or suggests a number of specific changes in U.S. policy, among them:

- Returning to a multilateral focus in foreign aid programs, and especially restoring IDA funding "at least up to the level the rest of the world has been willing to accept."

- Forgiving debts owed by some of the poorest countries with the fewest resources to repay them. A footnote to the draft comments that the total indebtedness to the United States of 34 poor Sub-Saharan countries of Africa last year was under \$2 billion, "slightly less than the cost of one Trident nuclear submarine."

The chapter on U.S. economic relations abroad also deals with issues of trade policy, private investment and arms sales to the Third World.

On trade relations, it admits that ethical norms do not produce a trade policy as such, but it says that "it is possible to make a strong case for open and fair trade as an engine of development."

While opposing protectionist barriers to free trade, it adds that developed countries such as the United States should "adopt adequate (domestic) programs to cushion the possible adverse impact of freer trade on their own workers and families."

It also stresses that "trade policy alone, however enlightened, is not a sufficient approach toward the developing countries. It must be joined with finance, aid and investment policies."

NEXT: Catholic economic ethics.

Austrian Catholics Leaving Church Over Enforced Tax

Innsbruck, Austria (NC) -- Tens of thousands of Austrian Catholics are leaving the church each year rather than pay a state-enforced compulsory church tax, according to diocesan finance directors.

In 1983, more than 33,000 Catholics left the church to avoid paying the "kirchensteuer," according to a 1984 pamphlet published by the Austrian church's Conference of Finance Directors. In 1982, more than 32,000 Catholics left.

Church officials refer to the tax as a "subscription." The revenue can be used for any church purpose.

The two-year exodus represents 1 percent of Austria's nearly 6.4 million Catholics. Church officials generally have been unwilling to press for a change in the law, fearing their revenues would diminish drastically.

"It's a problem, but it's necessary," said Herman Gaeck, director of the church tax office for the Diocese of Innsbruck. Gaeck said that after World War II, the church conducted a survey to discover how many Catholics would pay their church tax voluntarily, and the answer was 20 percent.

"Since people were more religious then than they are now, the figure would probably be lower today," he said.

Austrian law stipulates that every Austrian church member above the age of 20 who is not a student or on welfare must pay a 1 percent to 1.7 percent tax on his taxable income, said Gaeck. The tax is collected in four payments each year. A person earning the equivalent of \$50,000 per year pays \$850.

The system recognizes as legitimate religions the Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox, Calvinist and Mormon churches, as well as Judaism and Islam. Catholics represent approximately 85 percent of Austria's 7.5 million people.

The only way to become exempt from the payments is to officially declare that one is no longer a member of the church, Gaeck said. Even then, back taxes must be paid in full, or the state will condemn the property of the person who owes taxes and sell it to meet the payments, Gaeck added.

"About 92 percent of the people pay without any problem," said Gaeck, a former banker. "As for the others, when they don't pay, they are sent three written warnings from this office. Then we turn the case over to a lawyer. If the person still doesn't respond, we proceed to court."

For Gaeck, the person who leaves the church is "instantly excommunicated."

"The person is not allowed to receive the sacraments," he said, "but many continue to go to church anyway, by going to a parish where they are not known."

Those persons are discovered, however, when they attempt to participate in the sacraments which involve church records: baptism for their children, marriage and burial, Gaeck said.

A pamphlet on the church tax situation, published by the Archdiocese of Salzburg, Austria, reads: "The harsh consequences of a declaration that one is leaving the church are based on the view that a declaration that one is leaving the church is equivalent to apostasy, that

is, to a rejection of the faith."

Official church brochures defend the tax on the basis of Scripture and on the history of the early church, which they say was supported by "collections." Lay people

speak of the tax as something imposed from above, against their will.

Gaeck said even devout Catholics are seeking a change from the compulsory system to one of voluntary

offerings. In Innsbruck, 300 members of the Cursillo movement recently petitioned to be exempt from the payment as a reward for their active participation in parish life. Gaeck said group

members wanted the right to pay what they thought was proper.

"We turned them down," he said. "If we make an exception here, everyone else would want an exception."

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