

Bishops' Ideas Could Improve Many Lives

By WILLIAM C. NORRIS

In our complex American society it is extremely difficult to bring about the changes required to respond better to our major social and economic problems. Constructive change, of course, can be accomplished only through a lengthy process that includes plans, consensus building and implementing programs.

Along with its laudable moral and ethical perspectives, the pastoral letter on the economy by America's Roman Catholic bishops contains many recommendations that, if implemented, could profoundly improve the economic and social outlook for a large number of people.

Three of these recommendations are:

—An increase of local and regional cooperation focused on expanding economic development and job creation.

—A redirection of research resources toward improving the productivity of small and medium-sized family farms.

—U.S. participation in large-scale cooperative efforts between the public and private sectors that simultaneously increase food supplies and launch a long-term program to help develop food self-reliance in food-deficient developing countries.

Yet, in spite of the merit of these and

other recommendations in the bishops' letter, the odds are not high that implementation will occur without further advocacy and action by the bishops and other concerned parties.

Business has most of the resources for planning and implementing programs to meet such needs. However, companies are under enormous pressure to increase quarter-to-quarter earnings to avoid being taken over and dismantled by corporate raiders. At the same time, companies are facing unprecedented competition in the global marketplace. Consequently, that sector is not likely to provide leadership.

Universities have the intellectual resources for planning, but their propensity to look inward precludes significant leadership emerging from that sector.

Labor unions are preoccupied with finding a new mission.

The Reagan Administration has generally shied away from fostering specific programs for unmet needs. Instead, it adheres to a policy of trying to induce the free market to function more efficiently in order to stimulate growth in the economy and create more jobs. While President Reagan has encouraged public- and private-sector initiatives to address unmet

needs, his approach is through private-sector charitable contributions as opposed to for-profit business programs. Charitable giving helps, but it falls far, far short of the level of resources required. The bottom line on the federal government's current program is that the gap between the rich and the poor in this country continues to grow, high youth and minority unemployment persists and other serious problems are still with us.

In contrast to the federal government, many state governments have been encouraging and helping to fund public/private cooperation to expand economic development and job creation. This is commendable, but a state government is not in a position to provide national leadership for programs to help developing countries and to improve the productivity of family farms.

Thus there is no visible evidence that any other sector will soon provide national leadership to follow up on the bishops' recommendations. Therefore, we should urge the bishops to extend their leadership to bring about the establishment of cooperative efforts to develop plans and blueprints for implementation—in other words, to move beyond advocacy to action and focus on the three recommendations mentioned.

This should involve other religious organizations and other major sectors. One critically important feature should be the creation of profit-making cooperative programs that include the government and other sectors. This will require financial incentives in order for corporations to afford to make the high level of investment required. Such cooperation would assure that resources are used most efficiently. Furthermore, the private sector-driven approach should satisfy those concerned about government intervention and interference with the free market.

The selection of only three of the bishops' recommendations for immediate action would not imply that others are not important and should not ultimately be implemented.

The point is realism: By concentrating on these three recommendations, significant progress could be made sooner in improving the well-being of millions of people.

Otherwise we face the likelihood of becoming entangled in endless argument concerning the obligations in our society to implement a much larger program for providing a better life for the less fortunate.

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