

Humble service and full nets

As Catholic Relief Services' 75th anniversary year comes to a close, I realize that for our work with the poor around the world, this year is no more or less important than any other, than the 74th was or that the 76th will be. But it is still a great occasion, both to look back and to look forward.

I certainly hope that the Catholic community in the United States is pleased with what their generosity created in 1943 and has supported in the years since, how what started out as an effort to help refugees during World War II became a dedication to alleviate the suffering of all those who experience such devastation, whether from war or drought, hurricane or earthquake, or from systemic poverty.

I can report to the multitudes who have supported CRS that "their agency" has been doing the work it was created to do for these 75 years. CRS has grown in size and recognition, and it is now known from the halls of our nation's capital to the sorghum fields of Burkina Faso, from the headquarters of the United Nations to the flood-prone neighborhoods of Bangladesh. In many cases it is more well-known overseas than it is in the United States.

Leading with humility

The credit for this recognition and growth goes to our supporters and to the thousands of people who work around the world, now and for the past 75 years, people of all creeds and colors, ages and sexes, united by a common desire to help those in need.

As I contemplate our 75 years, I think of the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John. Peter, Thomas and some other disciples went fishing in the Sea of Tiberias.

The Gospel reads: "When it was already dawn, Jesus was

standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Children, have you caught anything to eat?’ They answered him, ‘No.’

“So he said to them ‘Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something.’ So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish” (Jn 21:4-6).

To me, that explains the success we have achieved over the last 75 years – because we have cast our net as Jesus has told us. When those disciples did that, their hands became the hands of Jesus. And that is what we try to be, the hands of God, sharing our love with his creation. How do we share our love? By living the Gospel: helping the poor, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and welcoming the stranger.

But the way we do our work is as important as what we do, and Mother – now Saint – Teresa gave me the best advice when I had the privilege of working with her in India. She said to be humble and bold.

At first, this might sound contradictory, but if we are not bold, we will not confront the persistent problems that need solving. And, if we are not humble, we will never solve them.

Think of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5).

Too often we think of meek as being timid or shy. But think of it as meaning humble. It is only with humility that we can accomplish our mission. Humility helps us realize that we are servants to the poor, and we must learn from them.

A world of challenges

The successes of these 75 years are not from programs developed in Baltimore and imposed on communities. They are from efforts initiated locally and nurtured by the very communities we are seeking to serve. Our experience, technology and resources are important, but we must retain humility.

Our faith tells us that all things are possible. We must be bold enough to take on the difficult tasks. We did that when we confronted the spread of HIV and AIDS through our AIDSRelief program. We did not run in fear from the Ebola epidemic; instead we joined with local communities and stopped its spread. With humility and boldness we can do great things. We can eradicate malaria, we can generate jobs and bring about peace. But we can only be successful if we do it together and with humility.

Our original name was War Relief Services, and we must now dedicate ourselves more than ever to relieving the world of the burden of war. So many of the problems we confront have their roots in conflict. Violence produces refugees. It destroys homes. It leaves children with no food. It devastates economies. We must be bold enough to become peacemakers, and humble enough to know that we will never end conflict unless we listen and come to understand its roots.

In another 75 years, when we take our nets from this sea, we will not be able to pull them out because they will be so full.

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