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“The Vision Still Has Its Time”

(Habakkuk: 2:2-4)

The United Nations, The State of our World and Catholic Social Teaching

What a privilege it is for me to be with you today at College of Saint Mary in this wonderful state of Nebraska.

My name is Deirdre Mullan and I am currently the representative of the worldwide Sisters of Mercy at the United Nations in New York. I was born in the city of Derry in the north of Ireland. I am a teacher by profession, a Roman Catholic by tradition and a Sister of Mercy by life-choice.

The part of the world I come from is well known for all the wrong reasons. I grew up during what were known as the ‘Troubles’ in Ireland and I witnessed hatred and death far too often. As a teacher in one of the schools run by the Sisters of Mercy, I often saw firsthand what can happen to young minds and hearts when they are colonized by an ideology which demonizes the one who is different and “other”.

In my own lifetime, I have been lucky to have several *metanoia* experiences which changed my life views forever. The first was when I was fifteen years old: one day, while we were at supper in my family home, we heard shots ring out very nearby. My mother went to the front door and saw a young soldier lying in our gateway, who had obviously been shot. With no thought for her own safety, my mother immediately went to his aid. **I remember her words – “He’s somebody’s son” – and at that moment, the perceived enemy in my mind became just a boy of nineteen.** Other experiences and opportunities have convinced me that despite what the news media conveys, most people are really good at heart.

Over the past eight years, I have spent my life working as the main representative of the Sisters of Mercy at the UN. I have had the opportunity to travel and see firsthand what is happening in many parts of our world. Without a doubt, we live in a time of uncertainty: **a time of poverty, global insecurity, severe climate change and the economic collapse of monetary systems.**

But while many situations remain dire and progress is slow, what I have seen and experienced personally makes me believe that *another world* is possible. I am moved by the sentiments expressed by the poet Adrienne Rich, who wrote:

**“My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary
power, reconstitute the world.”¹**

My presentation this evening will be in three parts:

1. The UN, where the heartbeat of the world is monitored
.....
2. Catholic Social Teaching – The Church’s best kept secret.....
3. Another world is possible: Why do we stay locked into a spirituality that looks for God in the heavens? Why not turn instead to a spirituality that focuses on God within and among us, urging and prompting us to claim our sacred identity – and to live it in the belief that the Vision of Jesus Christ still has its time?

Before I proceed with the main body of my presentation this evening, I will outline what I mean and understand by the title of my presentation – *The Vision Still Has Its Time*. The philosopher John Hicks argues that “incarnation” should be understood as a metaphor for human life rather than the term applied uniquely to Jesus. All human beings have the potential to “incarnate” or “live out” truths, values and love that reflect a divine reality at work within us. Jesus offers us extraordinary insights into the nature of God. He offers life-giving insights about the manner of our relationships with God, with all of creation and with each other. **We who profess to be Christian would do well to listen to and promote Jesus’ message of salvation in ways that link it primarily with this world, not the world to come.”²**

1. The United Nations

The UN is a unique organization of independent countries that have come together to work for world peace and social progress. **The organization formally came into existence on October 24, 1945**, with 51 countries considered founding members. By the end of 2008, the membership of the UN had grown to 192 countries. The UN has four main purposes:

1. To keep peace throughout the world;
2. To develop collaborative relationships among nations;

¹ Adrienne Rich, “Natural Resources,” *The Dream of the Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), p.60.

² John Hicks, *The Metaphor of God: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1993).

3. To work together to improve the lives of poor people; to conquer hunger, disease and illiteracy and to encourage respect for each other's rights and freedoms;
4. To be a centre for helping nations achieve these goals.

There are two sectors at the UN: the government sector and the non-governmental sector.

In 1948, the UN General Assembly ratified the Declaration of Human Rights. The thirty Articles of the Declaration proper state that **all people have a right to freedom and liberty; that no one shall be enslaved or held in servitude, or subjected to torture or cruel and degrading punishment.**

By definition, human rights apply to everyone who belongs to our species, wherever they are found in our world. Concern for human rights, while not a recent phenomenon, has been grossly uneven throughout its history. Along with gross violations of human rights, there are also the endless indignities that billions endure.

What human beings all over the world want is universal: **security, the ability to support their families, educational opportunities, affordable food, clean water, sanitation and access to health care.**

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, the UN Member States agreed on eight goals – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – that call for national action and international cooperation to provide access to food, education, healthcare and economic opportunities for children, women and men everywhere. In the Millennium Declaration, world leaders resolved to halve, by 2015, the number of people living on less than \$1 a day and also to set targets in the fight against poverty and disease. The eight goals set out by world leaders are:

1. **Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**
2. **Achieve universal primary education**
3. **Promote gender equality and empower women**
4. **Reduce child mortality**
5. **Improve maternal health**
6. **Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.**
7. **Ensure environmental sustainability**
8. **Develop global partnerships for development.**

For many people the Millennium Development Goals represent a major landmark in public policy-making because these eight goals:

- Set international targets for reducing global poverty
- Set the target to lift 500 million people out of poverty by 2015
- Are specific, measurable and time-bound
- Represent a synthesis of many of the most important commitments made separately at international conferences and summits during the 1990s.

However, the implementation of these MDGs is dependent on all those of us who believe that another world is possible. Healing the wounds of the earth and its people does not require saintliness or a political party – only gumption and persistence. At a time when people feel powerless, an altruistic approach can be a balm because it reveals the power of helpful and humble acts. It is a reminder that constructive changes in human affairs arise from intention, not coercion.

Speaking at the UN, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said:

“...**People of faith** are on the front lines of efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest and bridge chasms of ignorance and misunderstanding. Religious groups can also be powerful advocates in mobilizing political leaders and the public at large... I look to religious leaders and scholars everywhere to work hand in hand with us in that mission.”³

People of faith are key to achieving the MDGs. They know that malnutrition, ill health, lack of education and lack of economic power violate human dignity, and every day they turn conviction into action by caring for the neediest and most vulnerable. Religious communities have done more than any others to make us aware of the sheer scale of human suffering in our world, and of our duty to end it. **People in the pews must help to create the political will needed to translate this rhetoric into reality. /// How might we do this?**

2. Catholic Social Teaching

I think it is fair to say that far too many Catholics are unfamiliar with the basic content of Catholic Social Teaching. More fundamentally, many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social mission of the Church is an essential part of the Catholic faith. What, then, is the key message of Catholic Identity? “**The central message is simple: our faith is profoundly social. We cannot be called truly ‘Catholic’ unless we hear and heed the call to serve those in need and work for justice and peace.**”⁴

As I look at the ideas enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals and the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching, I often ask myself: **What if** we really lived by and tried to embody these teachings? Catholic Social Teaching – often described as the Church’s best kept secret – underscores many of the principles outlined in the Millennium Declaration. For example,

Pope John Paul II in *The Social Concern of the Church (Sollicitudo Rei Sociales)*, 1987, wrote

³ Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the UN speaking to the General Assembly, September 2008.

⁴ *Communities of Salt and Light*, U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1993.

“One of the great challenges to authentic human development is the reality of the miseries of poverty or economic underdevelopment existing side-by-side with the inadmissible super-development which involves consumerism and waste.”

In that same document we are told:

“Solidarity... is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. **On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good;** that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are really responsible for all.”

This message is repeated again and again. For example, Pope John XXIII in *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)*, 1963, wrote:

- Basic Human Rights are food, clothing and shelter
- Healthcare and education
- Work or employment with a just sufficient wage and leisure
- Civil and political rights
- Social good of freedom of speech, religion, association, migration and participation in society.

Pope John Paul II in *One Hundred Years (Centessimus Annus)*, 1991, said:

“At the national level, promoting community and the common good requires creating employment for all, caring for the less privileged, and providing for the future.

At the global level, it increasingly requires analogous interventions on behalf of the whole human family. The social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but a motivation for action.”

In *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, the US Bishops issued a similar message when they said:

“No one may claim the name Christian and be **comfortable in the face of hunger, homelessness, insecurity and injustice found in this country and in the world.”**

Pope John Paul II in the *Social Concern of the Church (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)*, 1987, stated very clearly that:

“If development is the new name for peace, **war and preparations for war are the major enemy of the healthy development of peoples.** If we take the common good of all humanity as our norm, instead of individual greed, peace would be possible.”

And in a *Call to Action (Octogesima Adveniens)*, 1971, Pope Paul VI said:

“Let every person examine themselves, to see what they have done up to now, and what they ought to do. It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustice and utter prophetic denunciations; these words lack real weight unless they are accompanied by effective action.”

Finally, in *Called to Global Solidarity*, 1997, the US Catholic Conference said:

“Cain’s question, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ has global implications and is a special challenge for our time, touching not one brother but all sisters and brothers. Are we responsible for the fate of the world’s poor? Do we have duties to suffering people in far-off-places? Must we respond to the needs of suffering refugees in distant nations? Are we keepers of the creation for future generations?

For the followers of Jesus, the answer is an unequivocal YES.”

3. The Vision Still Has Its Time

The principles of Catholic Social Teaching and the United Nations Millennium Declaration both read well. Indeed, an extra-terrestrial beaming in and reading either document would surely wonder: **If the leaders are so full of good intentions, and express them collectively, why does Planet Earth continue to be the way it is?**

A year after the Millennium Declaration was signed, **New York was in turmoil**. But this was not the beginning. The previous twenty odd years had been little short of disaster for world development, and the decade before the dawn of the new millennium had been remarkably unsettled. The 1990s started with the first Iraq war. The decade was punctuated at regular intervals with major economic and financial crises. **Europe experienced a financial crisis in 1992; Mexico in 1994; Thailand, Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia in 1997 and 1998; Brazil in 1999**. Each crisis cost billions of dollars in bail-outs, which usually went disproportionately to the rich, while workers and small-time savers suffered. The Soviet Union disintegrated and the subsequent ‘transition’ was marked by some of the most spectacular economic social declines. **In the mid-1990s, there was a crisis of a different kind in Rwanda**. Natural disasters seemed to occur with increasing frequency – floods, hurricanes, earthquakes. The implications of HIV were now registered with a dire prognosis for Africa and Asia. And all the time, the open wounds of Palestine went untended. **Alongside this, there was an air of market triumphalism and fundamentalism: capitalism was the only game in town.**

In the light of this quick analysis of the situation on Planet Earth, we might well ask:

“**How is one to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in life, when one finds darkness not only in one’s culture but within oneself?** If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes

truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox. One must live in the middle of contradiction, because if all contradictions were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of **leaning into the light.**⁵

At the beginning of this lecture, I posed the question:

Why do we stay locked into a spirituality that looks for God in the heavens? Why not turn instead to a spirituality that focuses on God within and among us, urging and prompting us to claim our sacred identity – and to live it in the belief that the Vision of Jesus Christ still has its time?

This, my friends is the crux of the matter. If more of us, both in the pews and out of the pews, believed that **Christian living is inescapably connected with concern for the poor, the Vision of God might yet become a reality.** The prophets of old made it clear that God is not interested in ritual or sacrifice as such. In Amos we read:

“I hate, I despise your festivals... Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them... Take away from me the noise of your songs... **But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream**” (5:21-24)

If we believe that the sacred and the secular are not distinct realms, and that faith and decent living are linked, a troubling question for me – for us – is whether our lives are distinguishable from the general attitudes of society toward the really poor in our midst. In a public address at Boston College, the theologian Bernard Cooke asked whether **Catholicism has “lost its soul.”**⁶ His point was that as Catholics have moved up the social ladder of economic success, they have, in general, accepted uncritically today’s social attitudes toward the disadvantaged. Yes, we respond generously to charitable appeals, but the effective power and compassion of Jesus **has to be seen working against and challenging the political, social, economic, and even religious powers that disadvantage people in systemic ways.**

Perhaps too much of our moral focus as Catholics has been on individuality morality. I believe that today, more than ever, we are being called upon to challenge social and economic systems which exploit and dehumanize. **If Eucharist does not lead to another world where all people are included, then Eucharist is a sham.**

This truth is beautifully captured in a passage by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, in his book *Wind, Sand and Stars (Terre des Hommes)*. The author is on a train journey before the start of the Second World War. The first-class carriages

⁵ Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, Prayer Service, CCUN, UN September 2007.

⁶ Bernard Cooke, *Eucharist and the Call to Justice*, Public address at Boston College, July 23, 1996.

were empty, but the third-class carriages were crowded with Polish workmen being sent home from France:

“Looking at them I said to myself that they had lost half of their human quality. These people had been knocked about from one end of Europe to the other by economic currents...

A baby lay at the breast of a mother so weary that she seemed asleep. Life was being transmitted in the shabbiness and the disorder of this journey. I looked at the father. A powerful skull as naked as a stone. A body hunched over in uncomfortable sleep, imprisoned in working clothes, all humps and hollows. The man looked like a lump of clay, like one of those sluggish and shapeless derelicts that crumple into sleep in our public markets.

And I thought: **The problem does not reside in this poverty, in this filth, in this ugliness. But this same man and this same woman met one day. This man must have smiled at this woman.////**

He may, after his work was done, have brought her flowers. Timid and awkward, perhaps he trembled lest she disdain him. And this woman, sure of her charms, perhaps took pleasure in teasing him. And this man, this man who is now no more than a machine for swinging a pick or a sledgehammer, must have felt in his heart a delightful anguish. The mystery is that they should have become these lumps of clay. **Into what terrible mould were they forced? What is it that corrupts this wonderful clay of which the human is kneaded?**

I sat down face to face with the couple. **Between the man and the woman a child had hollowed himself out a place and fallen asleep.** He turned in his slumber, and in the dim lamplight I saw his face. What an adorable face! A golden fruit had been born of these two peasants... a miracle of delight and grace.

I bent over the smooth brow, over those mildly pouting lips, and I said to myself: This is a musician's face. **This is the child Mozart. This is a life full of beautiful promise.** Little princes in legends are not different from this; protected, sheltered, cultivated what could this child become?

When by mutation a new rose is born in a garden, all the gardeners rejoice. They isolate the rose, tend it, and foster it. **But alas there is no gardener for humanity.** This little Mozart will be shaped like the rest by the common stamping machine. This little Mozart will love shoddy music in the stench of night dives. This little Mozart is condemned. I went back to the sleeping car. I said to myself: Their fate causes these people no suffering. It is not an impulse to charity that has upset me like this. I am not weeping over an eternally open wound. Those who carry the wound do not feel it. It is the human race and not the individual that is wounded here, is outraged here. I do not believe in pity. **What torments me tonight is the gardener's point of view.** What torments is not this poverty to which after all a man can accustom himself as easily as sloth... What torments me is not the humps nor the hollows, nor the ugliness. It is the sight, a little bit in

all these people of Mozart murdered. **What torments me tonight is the sight of little Mozart...**"⁷

And I am sure that Antoine de Saint-Exupéry would not mind my adding these thoughts to his story:

- **What might happen if this little Mozart were to encounter the best of Catholic Social Teaching and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals?**
- Perhaps what we need is the gardener's point of view – and to network with other gardeners who offer ways of disentangling what appear to be insoluble dilemmas; poverty, global climate change, terrorism, ecological degradation and many more. **Our world seems to be looking for the big solution, which is itself part of the problem since the most effective solutions are both local and systemic.**

In conclusion to this paper, I want to state very clearly: Yes, I do believe that another world is possible and that the Vision still has its time. **Yes we can** has been heard and heard again in this country. Let us seize this moment when it seems as though ***"Hope" has stopped by for a visit.***

Finally, I would like to share with you a story told by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, the great moral voice of our time.

"One of the Just Men of Sodom determined to save its inhabitants from sin and punishment. Night and day he walked the streets and markets preaching (and teaching) against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning, people listened and smiled ironically. Then they stopped listening: he no longer even amused them. The killers went on killing, the wise kept silent...
One day a child, moved by compassion for the unfortunate preacher, approached him with these words: 'Poor stranger. You shout, you extend yourself body and soul; don't you see that it is hopeless?'
'Yes, I see,' answered the Just Man.
'Then why do you go on?'
'I'll tell you why. In the beginning I thought I could change (men and women). Today, I know that I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent (the politicians and the pundits, the movie stars and 'image makers', the indecent and the indifferent), from ultimately changing me.'

That is why I speak – not so much to change them, but so they do not change me.
**The essence of being a HUMAN being is never to give into despair. Never to give up. Never to stop shouting.
And never to let them change me.**⁸

⁷ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, (Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer Books, 1992), pp. 226-229.

I offer this story because I believe that we need to ask – and continue asking – who is influencing and changing whom in our world today?

I also believe that too many of us are notoriously naïve and ignorant about the systemic/institutional nature of sin and suffering in our world. **The root cause of much of the injustice is not unjust deeds done by individual people, but oppressive social and institutional forces that compel people into acting immorally, and even oppressively, towards each other.** In many parts of the world, governments themselves are the most corrupt and corrupting of influences. And the mainstream religions are not without their internalized oppressions, often fostering the values and strategies of war, sexism, exclusion and patriarchal domination.

Extreme poverty is an abuse of human rights. As the BBC correspondent Fergal Keane said:

“After the Iraq war and with the terrible abandonment of Darfur, it is easy to think that international law is bunkum. The powerful or the most ruthless decide how things will work. I disagree. The infrastructure of international justice is small; the pressure not to investigate or call to account is great. But there is a community of conscience – organized, passionate but also practical – which will not go away.

In matters of human rights abuse, the destruction of the planet or world hunger there is not the option for despair. You recognize the contradictions, the hypocrisies, the defeats, but you go on. There is no other civilized choice.”⁹

In a globalised world of trans-national corporations, where so much exploitation takes place, and where governments often collude with trans-national forces, it is easy for people to feel helpless. But with utter defiance we cannot capitulate to such an erosion of hope. **We need, therefore, to be very vigilant about the quality of our thinking, even in small things, and we need to ensure that we regularly feed our minds and nurture our spirit with constructive and creative ideas.**

We know that Action follows thought and ideas, and that if enough people begin to think differently and imagine more laterally, in time we will create the conditions for transformative change. In this way, we can contribute to building up a new envelope of consciousness in the human community. Yes, we believe that another world is possible.

We also know that networking is an essential organizational survival skill for the future. As major institutions break, networks are likely to emerge as the creative alternative. So, too, for living in a more just way. **Beyond the paltry efforts of some governments to engage with the questions of our time, a great deal is being achieved by creative networks**

⁸ Elie Wiesel in an address to the UN on International Peace Day, September 21, 2007.

⁹ Fergal Keane, BBC Correspondent, speaking at the UN, April 2007.

of NGOs, who name and engage with the crucial issues of our time with a clarity that can put governments to shame. Yes, again, these NGOs believe another world is possible.

We may work locally, but it is always with our eyes on the global, because we know that the human spirit was never meant to live with so much fear and helplessness. We work, believing firmly that another world is possible. Ours is a call to access the incarnation moment in every human encounter.

More than anything else, our call is to be global witnesses to the reign of God and it should never be subjugated to the norm and laws of any one political or religious system. **Our accountability is to the entire people of the earth.** Confining ourselves to religious enclaves is an act of blasphemy; it flies in the face of the God of compassion. Who is the God of All.

“Let us break out of the narrow confines of that spirituality that focused on individual salvation and allow our hearts to be touched by the God of unconditional love who sends us to our brothers and sisters who are hurting. The whole world is held in the deep embrace of the God of unconditional love. Only by engaging with a vision as large and as deep as this can we help heal the scars of our violent destructibility.”¹⁰

We are being called to be liberators; the emphasis is on connectedness; the corrective is suffering; the power is imagination and the vocation is *compassion to repair our broken world*.

Yes I do believe: The Vision Still Has Its Time and Yes we in our Time can make a difference!

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¹⁰ Maria, Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee - Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century*, 1994.