

Reclaiming the Soul of Our Nation

A. The "soul" of America - its vision and compassion

"...with liberty and justice for all" (Pledge of Allegiance)

**"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"** (Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty, 1883)

"Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of it as a final resting place for those who died here that the nation might live. This we may, in all propriety do. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have hallowed it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is rather for us the living, we here to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion - **that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."**

(President Abraham Lincoln, the Gettysburg Address, Nov. 19, 1863)

**"O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me;
and yet I swear this oath - America will be!"**

(from "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes, 1902-1967)

"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country..."

(President John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 1961)

I was a college freshman when I watched the inauguration of President Kennedy and I've never forgotten those words. It was the rallying cry for my generation, the calling that rekindled our vision of America and shaped our sense of patriotism and service. It did not replace the "vocation" that God was calling me to, but expanded it. To serve God's people included compassionate service to the people and ideals of this country. It was the beginning of a decade when many would say America's soul was becoming its healthy best, when our vision was clearer and our compassion deeper and broader than ever before, when the "Peace Corps" began replacing the "ugly American" as the image of America overseas. But then those leaders who most embodied America's soul were assassinated - John and Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. How we "60-somethings" long for a recovery of this sense of vision and compassion, for a rebirth of the principle of "the common good." But "longing" isn't enough.

And so, bereft of such visionary and compassionate leaders, we are left with some troubling and challenging questions. In the words of African American poet Langston Hughes, will America be? Will America become America for all? Will we respond to President Lincoln's plea to keep this "nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all [men] are created equal" from perishing? Is "America" in danger of perishing?

B. Our soul is sick - the analysis of Christian prophets & leaders

1. Martin Luther King, Jr. Even in the midst of a decade of rebirth, this vision of a truly compassionate America was blurred by the Vietnam war, by the expansion of US economic exploitation overseas and consumerism at home, and the undoing of the gains in dealing with racial injustice and poverty in the US partly because of the vast redirection of resources to the war and escalating arms race. It was in this context that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, risked his life and political gains on civil rights to challenge us to break the silence on the war and poverty and reclaim the soul of our nation.

- "...We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered..."
- "A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, 'This way of settling differences is not just.' **A nation that continues year and year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.**" ("When Silence Is Betrayal," April 4, 1967)
- These words reflected his deep concern for the priorities and "soul of America" expressed in the motto of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) - "**We have come to redeem the soul of America.**" And elsewhere - "Never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam." (Martin Luther King, Jr, "Road to Redemption," p. 14)

2. The Catholic Bishops of Appalachia. Dr. King and the SCLC weren't the only people of faith recognizing this crisis in vision and values. The Catholic Bishops of Appalachia in their 1975 pastoral letter, *THIS LAND IS HOME TO ME*, saw clearly and proclaimed prophetically that America had forsaken the principles of justice and the common good for the idol of greed and power - "the maximization of profit" for the privileged few in corporate America. In their analysis -

- It is corporate America that shapes our values. "This power overwhelms the good intentions of noble people. It forces them to compete brutally with one another. It pushes people into 'conspicuous consumption' and 'planned obsolescence.' It delivers up control to a tiny minority whose values then shape our social structures."

- Their main value is consumption. "Many times before, outside forces have attacked the mountain's dream. But never before was the attack so strong. Now it comes with cable TV, satellite communications, giant ribbons of highway driving into the guts of the land. The attack wants to teach people that happiness is what you buy - in soaps and drinks, in gimmicks and gadgets, and that all of life is one big commodity market. It would be bad enough if the attack only tried to take the land, **but it wants the soul too.**"
- They push power while God exalts the lowly. "There's an even bigger consumption problem among the rich - consumption not just of luxuries, but of power- the power to shape economic structures, political structures, cultural structures, all in the service of more waste, more profit, more power."
- Whose side are we on? What do we choose? "Thus, there must be no doubt that we who must speak the message of the One who summoned Moses and who spoke through Jesus of Nazareth and who keeps the Spirit alive on behalf of justice for so many centuries, can only become advocates for the poor... . In a profound sense the choices are simple and stark: death or life, injustice or justice, idolatry or the Living God."

3. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops. A decade later, the US Catholic Bishops challenged war, the arms race, and economic injustice with the same basic concern - the soul of our nation, recalling the words of Jesus - "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but suffer the loss of their soul?" (Mark 8: 36)

- "To teach the ways of peace is not to weaken the nation's will but **to be concerned for the nation's soul...**" (THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE, 1983, # 304)
- "The example of Jesus poses a number of challenges to the contemporary church. It imposes a prophetic mandate to speak for those who have no one to speak for them, to be a defender of the defenseless, who in biblical terms are the poor. It also demands a compassionate vision that enables the church to see things from the side of the poor and powerless, and to assess lifestyle, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor... Finally, and most radically, it calls for an emptying of self, both individually and corporately, that allows the church to experience the power of God in the midst of poverty and powerlessness" (U.S. Catholic Bishops, ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, 1986, #52)
- Eighteen years later, we have strayed so far from this vision and these values - "to assess lifestyle, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor" - that our bishops had to remind us about what is most important when we vote - not our own interests but the common good. "Politics in this election year and beyond should be about an old idea with new power - the common good. The central question should not be, 'Are you better off than you were four years ago?' It should be, 'How can we - all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable - be better off in the years ahead?'" (U.S. Catholic Bishops, "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility," 2004).

C. Reflection on this analysis

1. On the passages by Dr. King -

Is our nation "approaching spiritual death"? If so, in what ways and why? If not, why not?

When I think of all the generous individuals I know and how caringly we as a people respond to tragedies in our midst, it's hard to believe that we may be losing our soul. But then I am overwhelmed by all the political decisions being made at state and national levels that promote the interests of wealth and power at the expense of the working class and poor in the US and of other peoples and nations. There are three life-threatening and soul-threatening areas that concern me the most -

- cutting health care even further while cutting taxes even further for the rich;
- sacrificing the environment and the well-being of future generations for the sake of immediate corporate profit;
- sacrificing so many lives and resources in a seemingly endless war in Iraq for the sake of asserting our national power to control politics and resources in the region, in the face of opposition by most of the world, and a willingness to continue to act unilaterally, whether the issue is war, the environment (the Kyoto Agreement), or crimes against humanity (the International Criminal Court).

But that's my reflection. What do you think? Are we "approaching spiritual death"? How so or why not?

2. On the passages from the Appalachian bishops -

• Do you feel "pushed into conspicuous consumption"? How so? Who is this "tiny minority" pushing us? What are their values? Do you think they "shape our social structures"? Why or why not?

• What do the bishops mean by "all of life is one big commodity market"? Is that the message you hear on TV? How is this an "attack on the soul"? How has it attacked your own soul?

• Is there a fundamental contradiction here between affluent North American values and our religious traditions?

• Why do so few people really stand with the poor in our society? What does it mean to choose life? To choose justice? To choose the Living God? How does this make us different from others? What are they choosing? Is it hard to be different? What can you do about that?

D. What can and must we do?

1. Extend the common good - break down barriers of race and class

If we are to make the ideal of "liberty and justice for all" a reality, we have to do all that we can to break down racial and class barriers and include everyone at the table. In other words, live the "Eucharist" and embrace the whole Body of Christ, especially the poor and the marginalized in our communities, nation, and world. There are many ways to do this, which I have spelled out in several worksheets, excerpted here. You are free to copy and distribute them as helpful. First, from "Solidarity with the Victims of Domination"

<http://www.ipj-ppj.org/Solidarity%20Worksheet.htm>

We need to provide learning experiences for ourselves and others where we can listen to the stories of the poor and other marginalized people and learn their realities. This can include

- going to their meetings, inviting them to speak to our churches and other groups we are part of;
- watching videos about their struggles (e.g. LONG WALK HOME, DEAD MAN WALKING, CRY FREEDOM, ROMERO, MALCOLM X, PHILADELPHIA);
- reading their stories (e. g. Maryknoll Magazine and News Notes - www.maryknoll.org; Christian Peacemaker Teams - www.cpt.org; biographies of Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez);
- reading stories of advocates for these victims for inspiration (e.g., Jim Forest's biography of Dorothy Day, LOVE IS THE MEASURE; and Ana Carrigan's biography of Jean Donovan, SALVADOR WITNESS)

We need to stand with them in their struggles and develop personal and mutual relationships ("doing with" vs "doing for"). This can include

- joining their worship community, community organization, project, or events/actions as "allies"
- participating in direct service opportunities where relationships can develop (e.g. Meals on Wheels, mentoring at-risk students or ex-offenders, Habitat for Humanity, including others in our holiday events)

We need to economically support/empower groups struggling against their domination, even if we pay a little more for what we buy. This can include

- buying directly from small local producers and local service providers
- shopping through Fair Trade groups; buy "Third World" handicrafts
- supporting consumer boycotts (www.boycott.org for descriptions of current boycotts)
- twinning with a faith community, school, village or self-help project (e.g. Haiti Parish Twinning Program - www.parishtwin.org; or Heifer International - www.heifer.org)

We need to engage in political action on their behalf. In our local communities, we can promote "free days" at our public places of fun and learning - e.g., museums, botanical gardens, zoo, summer concerts, so that all have access to these enrichment opportunities. In terms of national legislation, there are several helpful groups, in addition to our own Church agencies

- Bread for the World (re poverty/hunger in US and overseas - www.bread.org)
- NETWORK, a lobbying effort coordinated by women religious - www.networklobby.org

- Children's Defense Fund (re children's needs in the US - www.childrensdefense.org)
- Amnesty International (re prisoners of conscience worldwide - www.amnestyusa.org)
- Pax Christi USA (peace initiatives from a Catholic perspective - www.paxchristiusa.org)
- Voices in the Wilderness (re peace/justice in Iraq - www.vitw.org)

We who have more need to live more simply and share the savings. We need to live more in solidarity with those who have less. This can include

- eating more simply and occasionally fasting;
- using the public library for books and videos and recycle shops for some of our clothes and household items;
- participating in neighborhood/church coops;
- donating a similar older item for each new item you buy (e.g. clothes, books, computer);
- observing a regular "Solidarity Day" - one day a week or month where we focus on a specific group, fast & pray for them, read about them, write letters on their behalf, make an economic sacrifice on their behalf, do some helpful service work, and invite others to join us in responding to their needs.

We need to open our homes to others, so that we experience solidarity as a matter of daily living. How we use our home shapes our sense of the common good at least as much as how we use our talents. In contrast to the mentality of "my home is my castle" with gates and other barriers to keep others out, our home provides unique opportunities for inviting others into our lives and hearts. In addition to the poor, hospitality at home can include welcoming new neighbors, inviting school friends to dinner who are having a rough time at home, reaching out to relatives or neighbors living alone, offering a place to stay for teens needing temporary shelter or respite, and including international students who can't go home for holidays. For other specific suggestions for how whole families can participate in some these activities, see "How Families/Communities Can Challenge Materialism & Promote Stewardship"

<http://www.ipj-ppj.org/Newsletters/Winter 2004 Newsletter - Art. 2 Families Challenging Materialism.htm>

For additional suggestions for how to break down racial barriers, see "What to Do About Racism" - "What Can Individuals and Families Do?" and "What Can Schools and Congregations Do?"

http://www.ipj-ppj.org/Reflections - Advocacy Suggestions - Lesson Plans/what_to_do_about_racism.htm

2. Extend the common good - promote environmental care and solidarity with the earth

As the Catholic bishops of Appalachia so dramatically pointed out, the soul of America is being sold for higher corporate profits and more affluent lifestyles. "Many times before, outside forces have attacked the mountain's dream. But never before was the attack so strong. Now it comes with cable TV, satellite communications, giant ribbons of highway driving into the guts of the land. The attack wants to teach people that happiness is what you buy - in soaps and drinks, in gimmicks and gadgets, and that all of life is one big commodity market. It would be bad enough if the attack only tried to take the land, but it wants the soul too." What is happening to us as a nation, to our land, and to our own souls as agribusiness increasingly replaces family farming; as energy and logging companies increasingly take our forests, coastlines, and wilderness areas? What is

happening to us when we can't find the political will to require significant gas-saving standards for our cars?

We desperately need to return to the environmental ethic of those who first inhabited these lands we now call America. We need to evaluate personal as well as national decisions about resource consumption on the basis of their impact on the 7th generation. We need to treat the earth as our mother and rivers as our brothers. There are many ways to integrate this vision into our daily living as well as public policy advocacy and they are all family-friendly.

- **Enkindle a sense of the sacredness of creation.** We need to make time for ourselves to be still in the presence of God's abundant creation and just savor the beauty. Providing these opportunities for others in our lives is a natural extension of our concern. Some families have special sacred places - one for the whole family, one for each child. Enjoying these places, especially at significant moments in our family's journey and in the faith development of our children, deepens our connectedness with creation and our sense of the common good.
- **Use public facilities.** Instead of always buying new books, use the public library where children learn to care for resources not because they own them, but because others need them too. Public parks and playgrounds provide many enriching opportunities that backyard play equipment cannot.
- **Recreate outdoors.** Young people who grow up learning the delights of natural beauty are less interested in having lots of stuff in order to be happy. From walks in the park to hiking in mountains, from sleep-outs in the backyard to camping or canoeing, from local botanical gardens and arboretums to state and national parks, the beauty of creation delights far more than computer games and video arcades.
- **Participate in and promote community recycling efforts.** This is as important as is it obvious. It's how the next generation learns by daily doing that the earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth.
- **"Become friends with the earth."** Based on naturalist John Muir's understanding of environmental care - that care for creation is rooted in a love relationship with creation, I have developed a process entitled "12 Steps for Becoming Friends with the Earth" http://ipj-ppj.org/12_steps_for_becoming_friends_wi.htm. These involve all our senses - seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, and touching the earth with openness and love. They include celebrating creation and the Creator in prayer and song, eating with the earth, giving gifts to the earth (e.g., planting trees), as well as standing in defense of creation through educational and political action, and sharing our earth friendship with others. For more, see **"Stewards of God's Gifts"** <http://www.ipj-ppj.org/Stewards%20of%20God's%20Gifts.htm>.

3. **Break the silence and reclaim our "soul" from those who are threatening it.**

Returning to the words and witness of Dr. King, who gave his life in reclaiming the soul of our nation, he challenges us to go beyond a narrow national allegiance and speak out for who are the victims of our nation's policies.

"A time comes when silence is betrayal. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men [and women] do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty. But we must move on.

"Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

"We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers. I think of them, too, because it is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries... This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all humankind..." ("When Silence Is Betrayal")

This further challenge from Dr. King raises several questions for each of us to answer.

- At what point does "silence become betrayal"? Betrayal of what?
- Is it "unpatriotic" to challenge our national values and policies, to speak out personally and call our churches and other institutions we are part of to add their voice in opposition to current vision, values, and policies? Dr. King concluded his "When Silence Is Betrayal" speech with these words - "May our country, on the brink of war, take to heart the final refrain of "America, the Beautiful": 'America! America! God mend thine ev'ry flaw. Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law.'" Is it unpatriotic to sing the final refrain of "America the Beautiful"? Why or why not?
- Is there one national "flaw" - some value or policy that you think needs to be changed - that you could do something about? If so, what is it and what could you do to help mend it?

E. Concluding prayers

- Ruth Youngdall Nelson, national "Mother of Year" in 1974, who proclaimed in a speech she gave at age 80 - "How I pray for my beloved America that somehow the light will break through!" (quoted in a wonderful video celebrating her life, MOTHER OF THE YEAR, available as a \$15 rental from IPJ).
- "God bless America, land that I love. Stand beside her and guide her through the night with the light from above..." May those who have a sense of God's "light from above" and who have opportunities to share that light with others find the humility, courage, and love of our nation and the whole of God's creation to share that light as best we see and understand it.
- May this celebration of our nation's independence be a time for such prayer and a rededication to the kinds of action - from lifestyle changes and parenting practices to public policy on behalf of "liberty and justice for all" - that are desperately needed if this nation is not to perish, if America is to be and be for all.

