

Providing help during a tumultuous two years

December 5, 2003
Father J. Bryan Hehir
The Tidings

The end of the year is often a time for reflection. This is surely the case for me as I prepare to leave the presidency of Catholic Charities USA after two years in order to return to Boston at the request of Archbishop Sean O'Malley. There, I will serve the archdiocese as cabinet secretary for social services and president of the local Catholic Charities.

During these eventful two years of my tenure, the people of Catholic Charities have worked to fulfill their ministry in the face of historic, sometimes tragic, events. The searing catastrophe of Sept. 11, 2001, gave the Catholic Charities network a challenging role to play as disaster response agencies. To that end, local agencies have offered responsible stewardship of the funds entrusted to us while assisting the short-term and extended needs of thousands of individuals and families.

The sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic Church had a multi-faceted impact on our ministry. Many Catholics, angered by the actions or inactions of dioceses, turned to Catholic Charities as a place to offer funds so that the work among the poor could continue. And as the work of recovery from the scandal continues, our network continues to be a bulwark of support for the wider church.

The government's responsibility to confront poverty is not limited to what it can do working in partnership with religious or private organizations. The state has clear and independent duties to the welfare of individuals in our society.

Finally, in the midst of national and ecclesial trauma, Catholic Charities has had to cope with the effects of the recession and in particular with the grim fiscal condition of states across the country as more and more people are turning to Catholic Charities agencies for help. In fact, a new survey by Catholic Charities USA of 71 local agencies across the country found that nearly 85 percent reported an increase in the number of families coming to them for assistance.

As Roman Catholics, we need to remind ourselves that a basic premise of Catholic teaching is that society as a whole is responsible for the common good and that the major sectors of society have obligations in the face of people suffering in poverty.

We must remember that the government's responsibility to confront poverty is not limited to what it can do working in partnership with religious or private organizations. The state has clear and independent duties to the welfare of individuals in our society.

The drastic cuts in state budgets have produced daunting challenges for local agencies, in part because Catholic Charities is committed to the principle that church and state should work collaboratively to meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable in society.

During this slow and uneven economic recovery, the holiday season offers a vivid reminder that many of our fellow citizens are still lacking the most basic needs, notably food and affordable housing.

According to our survey, nearly three out of four agencies report an increase in the requests for assistance for rent, mortgage payments and utility bills; 66 percent report an increase in the need for food; and 54 percent of the agencies cited an increase in the need for temporary housing.

Furthermore, more than half of the agencies believe it will be more difficult to meet the needs of the people they serve because of growing requests and cuts in funding as 62 percent of the local agencies reported a decrease in government funding in 2003. Slightly more than half of local Catholic Charities agencies (54 percent) reported a decline in United Way support. One third saw a downturn in corporate funding.

A separate survey conducted for Catholic Charities USA indicates that a large majority of Catholics (87 percent) are willing to dig deeper this Christmas season and give more to charity. We hope they do. The need is great.

Our clients come to us from diverse backgrounds, faiths and ethnicities. And as people in need they are served without regard to faith.

What unites those we serve is that the challenges in their lives far exceed their resources. They include low-income mothers who lack skills for the workplace, hard-working men who cannot afford a decent place to live, and countless others.

But charity is only part of the solution. The other half of our mission addresses justice. We must speak to the institutional injustices that trap so many in cycles of poverty. We must speak to the policy decisions that are affected by the tax code, the budget deficit, and the role of the free market.

If public policy moves strongly in the direction of ceding responsibility for social services to the states and to charitable organizations, that is a subject for lively and important discussion by all the relevant parties.

These are extraordinary times, filled with exceptional challenges. And the needs of the poor among us remain, as do the essential themes of our work --- service, advocacy, and convening the church around social issues and economic justice.

That reality must carry us forward through this holiday season and all the ones to come.