Three Harsh New Realities

BY FR. MICHAEL D. PLACE, STD

This column is being written in later July as we prepare for our historic joint meeting with Catholic Charities USA, Celebration 275. Even as we celebrate so much that has been accomplished, we cannot separate ourselves from the realities that surround us. What follows will be some reflections on some of those realities.

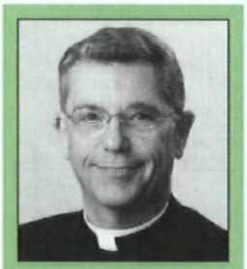
September 11

As you know, my service to the "ministry gathered" that is CHA involves a great deal of air travel. Consequently I am reminded several times a week, as I experience airport security, of how life has changed because of the tragic events that unfolded on that fateful day, September 11, 2001.

Clearly one result has been a resurgence of a sense of patriotism. The *New York Times* editorialized about this on July 4 when it said, in part:

> The burst of patriotism that followed September 11 was more than a mere articulation of the obvious, that this country and its principals had been attacked. For many Americans it was also an acknowledgement of the willingness to sacrifice some part of their time—that space between day-to-day duties that feels so much like freedom itself—to protect the real thing. We imagined, in the intensity of the moment, that the sacrifice would entail some grand new patriotic adventure. Over the long run of the normal days that followed, we have come to realize that for most of us it will be as mundane as standing without complaint in long lines at the airport.

The *New York Times* went on to reflect on the freedom that our patriotism is called to serve. The newspaper observed that "feeling one's freedom is a little like trying to feel the rotation of the earth. It taxes imagination . . ." to encounter it. How true that is. There is no simple rulebook to describe freedom or the patriotism that serves it. In a sense, freedom and patriotism are abstractions that must be enfleshed continuously. Our founding ancestors knew this, which is why they had the boldness to proclaim that both concepts were to be ordered or directed by two other overarching realities. The first reality is the conviction that there exist some fundamental truths that provide both foundation and context for how we imagine or give flesh to abstract notions such as patriotism and freedom. It is these "first principles," if you will, that should differentiate our patriotism from Nazi militarism, our sense of freedom from the so-called freedom that communism afforded the proletariat.



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The second reality is the commitment to the democratic process. As messy and uneven as it is, the great American experiment is driven by an almost naive belief that in the long run it is better to trust the common sense of the majority than to cede control to any elite. But, because patriotism and freedom are more evocative than substantive, we need a way with which we can explain to each other and come to a shared understanding of what they entail—what they require of us as individuals and as a society.

It is in times of crisis such as September 11 that, as individuals and as a nation, we test, reappropriate, or refine this understanding. Crises such as these become something akin to the "crisis of limitations" that, as individuals, we face periodically during our own life journeys.

As we reflect on this current moment, I would suggest, we are confronting two critical issues that will define our understanding of patriotism and freedom for the near future.

Vulnerability Many commentators have observed that September 11 has left us with a collective sense of uncertainty and vulnerability about our personal and collective security within our national boundaries. The confidence that, because of our unchallenged global military superiority, our national ego had developed since the embarrassment that was Pearl Harbor has been shattered.

We, like the citizens of Belfast or Tel Aviv, know that the tranquility of social order and even the breath of life can be extinguished in a moment of what, to us, seems to be senseless violence. Similarly, our image of ourselves as the global "good guy" or "white hat" is challenged by the reality that, for the perpetrators of the violence, their actions are an expression of calculated purposefulness, destroying what they perceive to be the arrogance of the Western, liberal, postmodern, post-Christian hegemony of the world order.

At issue, then, is how do we respond to this very real threat? Clearly our national and Catholic heritage support a robust understanding of a just self-defense. Nations and individuals have a right to secure borders and safe homes. Just as there is legitimacy in the active pursuit of domestic criminals so, too, there is a legitimate pursuit by the *community of nations* of those who would threaten legitimate national boundaries or bring violence to individuals or groups on the basis of race, gender, religion, or national heritage. The pursuit of either is an expression of patriotism that calls for the extraordinary and *mundane* self-sacrifice about which the *New York Times* wrote.

But such pursuit must be given the order or direction that is provided by the inalienable truths contained in our national charter documents and in those international covenants that are so congruent with our Catholic vision of the common good, international solidarity, and the constraints of a just war. Without those restraints, our patriotism can be accused of being as misguided or even, God forbid, as evil as the militarism of the then-president and now jailed Slobodan Milosevic. Dialogue on such matters never comes easy for a nation. The Vietnam War debate that divided our country is a poignant reminder of that fact. To avoid that dialogue or to stifle it with accusations of a lack of patriotism is, ironically, to be quite "un-American," because in so doing, we deny that which makes us who we are—a democracy born of trust in the common folk setting national direction.

As Catholics, we have an obligation to bring to that dialogue, first, a trust in divine providence that can allow us to make good choices even in the midst of profound vulnerability, and, second, a humility that comes from knowing that human sinfulness is real, the awareness of which tempers our moral analysis. We know that the line between patriotic self-defense and militaristic imperialism is razor thin, and that the temptation to cross it as inviting as a luscious apple.

The "Other" Understandably associated with the vulnerability of which we have been speaking is a desire to mitigate that fear and powerlessness by searching out the enemy—the "other" in our midst—and ensuring that the enemy cannot do us harm. In pursuit of this goal, it is not uncommon for nations to limit or curtail customary freedoms. Because the concept of freedom is so abstract, the limitation of those freedoms must be guided by or informed by a moral discourse that is much more robust than the simple goal of "finding the enemy."

As a nation we need to remind ourselves that, at best, we do not have the most noble of track records in this regard. For reasons that we now question or regret, we have in the past identified as "witches" a variety of people—Native Americans; foreign-born Irish, German, and Polish Catholics; and citizens of Japanese descent—in such a way that some or most of their freedoms could be constrained permanently or temporarily. Clearly there is a profound price to be paid by a nation founded as the "land of the free" when it indulges in an unrestrained pursuit of security that finds solace in declaring a few not to be worthy of freedom. Clearly our commitment to those who are poor or marginalized compels us, as a Catholic community, to be a voice of moral concern in our neighborhoods and communities for our sisters and brothers of Middle Eastern (or other) descent or the Muslim faith, lest they become ostracized or their freedoms inappropriately restrained.

Crisis in the Church

In June I was, as is customary, an official guest at the annual spring meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. I was present to hear Bishop Gregory's courageous opening address, in which he candidly outlined the depth and breadth of the issues facing the church in the United States because of clerical misconduct and apolo-

gized to all who have been and are being injured. I also listened to the riveting reflections by those who have been victims of that abuse. I also saw and felt the impact of their powerful testimony to trust betrayed and lives shattered on the bishops, many of whom were experiencing such personal witnessing with its pain and anger for the first time. This was followed by two loving but incredibly forthright, if not confrontative, reflections on the current moment by two leading Catholic lay persons. When that portion of the meeting ended, one knew that in one way or another the future would be changed because of the events of that day. The only question concerned the parameters of that change.

Clearly much has been written and spoken about what is an evolving reality. I especially commend the reflections of Fr. Bryan Hehir that appeared in the last issue of this journal ("Credibility, Competency, and Care," *Health Progress*, July-August 2002, pp. 35-36). We will engage this reality again during Celebration 275. As I reflect on all that we are experiencing, it seems helpful to distinguish the various ways in which we experience this moment. Let me mention two.

In one way or another, we experience this crisis as a *believer in the family of faith* that is the church, and as believers, our perspective on this moment is impacted by our other experiences as believers. If one is already unsettled or alienated or angry, the current events will only make matters worse. No matter what those individual "pre-existing ecclesial conditions" are, there is some similarity between this ecclesial crisis and September 11. As with September 11, for many the breadth and depth of this situation has challenged, and for some shattered, the trust they had placed in those who are called to serve as leaders in the community of faith. Though in absolute terms the numbers involved are small, the significance of those actions of child abuse or episcopal failure has taken on symbolic importance far beyond the individual impact. It is not surprising that a community that is nurtured and sustained by a symbolic, sacramental imagination should also have an encounter with finitude, failure, sinfulness, and evil that would come to have a symbolic significance that is difficult to fully appreciate.

However, a failure to appreciate this symbolic significance will guarantee a worsening of the situation. As important as new rules and protocols are, they will not themselves restore peace in the family of faith. The far deeper issues for all baptized believers, who by virtue of their baptism share equally in the mission of Jesus Christ, must be named and addressed if we are to be able to believe in and trust those who pastor as priest or bishop. As believers, we trust that relations that have been injured can be restored, but this requires that contrition be expressed, that *forgiveness be sought and given,* and that a firm intention of amendment be enshrined in effective structures and systems of inclusive accountability. All this may require an extraordinary openness to God's grace. We also know that a restored or healed relationship will never be as it was before the injury. It is important that all of us be open to a different future that, with God's grace, ultimately could be a better future.

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We also experience *the crisis as leaders,* in one way or another, *of a ministry of the church.* We know we do not act in our own names but, rather, by virtue of being commissioned by the church. Consequently, although not responsible for the crisis, we should assume that it is possible that in some way or other our ability to lead will be affected. Of particular concern is our ability to be an effective witness in the arena of public policy to our ethical and social justice commitments. As unfortunate as such a negative impact would be, it would be far worse if this time of crisis were to occasion a failure of nerve that would result in our withdrawing from or reducing our activism on behalf of our deeply held convictions. That would be a real crisis for the voiceless for whom we speak so often.

Scandal in the Business World

As I write this, the stock market is in disarray. The business, financial, and accounting professions have been found wanting and we are experiencing a yet-to-be-measured crisis of confidence by the public and the investors. Commentators who describe the resulting erosion of the savings of the retired and others do not mention that erosion in the investments of the health care ministry (which have helped us in recent years to continue the ministry) is also significant. It is too soon to know the long-term significance of all this for the business and public policy aspects of the ministry. We also do not know if or how the "business culture" that nurtured the root causes of this crisis has impacted the ministry. "Being in the world (though not of the world)" would suggest at least the possibility of some impact. This would suggest that it might do us well to review our own business and accounting practices to make sure they reflect our ethical commitments. After all, one of the lessons of the recent events is that one can be both legally correct and ethically wrong. □