Reflections on "Being Catholic in a Time of Economic Crisis"
A Call of Faith, Solidarity, Outreach and Pastoral Action

Introduction:

It seems that we are being bombarded on a daily basis with news of economic disaster. The experts and news commentators tell us that: the recession is severe and persistent; more than 500,000 people are losing their jobs every month and 2.6 million have lost their jobs since the outset of the recession; manufacturing has hit a 28 year low; our country is projected to experience a $1.2 trillion deficit for 2008; the current recession is the worst since the Great Depression; monetary policy alone can't lift the country out of the recession; millions have lost 38% or more of the value of their 401(k) retirement plans; one of four households have mortgages that surpass the value of their homes; the Congress is poised to pass an $800 billion stimulus; at least 38 states are facing shortfalls in their budgets for this and/or next year and food pantries and shelters cannot keep up with demand.

Such human suffering and economic hardship is outside the experience of most Americans. Quite frankly, it is causing widespread despair, anxiety and depression among the people of our nation, state and diocese. The economic uncertainty that surrounds us impacts our self esteem, our sense of security, and our confidence about providing for our children and those we love. No one is immune from the effects of the economic downturn. Families who have never had to make any sacrifice are now wondering how they are going to pay the mortgage, the energy bill, rising health care costs, school tuition, and put food on the table. People, who at one time envisioned a long and care free retirement, are wondering if they will ever be able to retire. If this crisis has taught us anything it is that we are all more interdependent and vulnerable than we had previously thought. Most of us are wondering how our country got into this mess and if we can ever rise above it. It has become evident to many that our country faces significant structural problems that cannot be resolved overnight.

A Time for Vision, Innovation and Leadership:

In remarks at George Mason University on January 8, 2009, President elect Barack Obama said: "We arrived at this point due to an era of profound irresponsibility that stretched from corporate board rooms to the halls of power in Washington, D.C. For years, too many Wall Street executives made imprudent and dangerous decisions, seeking profits with too little regard for risk, too little regulatory scrutiny, and too little accountability. Banks made loans without concern for whether borrowers could repay them, and some borrowers took advantage of cheap credit to take on debt they couldn't afford. Politicians spent taxpayer money without wisdom or discipline and too often focused on scoring political points instead of problems they were sent here to resolve." Obama indicated his belief that lost confidence and trust can be rebuilt and that prosperity and opportunity can be restored. He warned, however, that "dramatic action" was needed immediately. Clearly, there is not a silver bullet that will change the course.

The Voice of the Church:

In his 2008 Christmas Day message, Pope Benedict XV1 warned that the world was headed toward ruin if selfishness prevails over solidarity during tough economic times for rich and poor nations. In urging a spirit of solidarity, the Holy Father said: "If people look only to their own interests, our world will certainly fall apart." Our United States Bishops also issued a short statement on the economic crisis during their November 11th meeting. They said, "This disturbing and complicated situation brings home a universal truth: we are all children of God. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We are all in this together. Hard times can isolate us or they can bring us together. The Catholic community will continue to reach out to those in need, stand with those who are hurt, and work for policies that bring greater compassion, accountability and justice to economic life." On December 22, 2008, the Ohio Bishops added their voice to the current economic realities. The bishops stated, "Ultimately, the economy is not just about money; it is about people-about us-fellow human beings made in the image and likeness of God. Any economic recovery plan should seek to help all people, especially the poor and vulnerable, survive these difficult times."

Being Catholic in a Time of Economic Crisis:

The pastoral statement of the U.S. Bishops, "Economic Justice for All," has much to offer about our current situation. Published 22 years ago, this pastoral statement provides some guidance on the growing interdependence among the peoples and nations of the world. "The preeminent role of the United States in an increasingly interdependent global economy is the centerpiece of our times. The United States is still the world's economic giant. Decisions made here have immediate effects in other countries. (EJFA, paragraph 10). It follows that as Catholics we are to understand that we have responsibilities for our neighbors who are experiencing hardship in the United States and to our sisters and brothers in far off places throughout the world, half of whom are living on less than $2 per day.

According to Economic Justice for All: "The virtues of citizenship are an expression of Christian love more crucial in today's interdependent world than ever before. These virtues grow out of a lively sense of one's dependence on the commonweal and obligations to it. This civic commitment must also guide the economic institutions of society. In the absence of a vital sense of citizenship among businesses, corporations, labor unions, and the groups that shape economic life, society as a whole is endangered. Solidarity is another name for this social friendship and civic commitment that make human moral and economic life possible." (EJFA, par. 66).

The current crisis presents an opportunity for Catholic Christians to be instruments of hope and agents of change within our parishes and the broader society. Such hope is derived from our unwavering faith and trust in Jesus Christ who has not and will not abandon his people in times of uncertainty. A fundamental question for all of us is: What is God asking of me in this time of crisis? We all need the assurance that we are in this together. We are sisters and brothers who share the same humanity and have the same aspirations and needs. This is not a time to place limits on our compassion. It is, however, a time for deeper reflection, prayer, community building, and innovation. More than ever, we are called to open our hearts and minds to those in need; to provide pastoral support and counseling

whenever it is required; to provide practical advice to those who have lost their jobs or their homes; to walk with our fellow parishioners and manifest solidarity with those who are struggling; to take actions that address basic needs; and to inspire actions that promote the common good of all. In brief, we are called to be the Body of Christ in our families, parishes and communities.

Let us be mindful that despite the severity of this crisis, we all have something to offer. The global economic meltdown is a wake up call for the whole world. Regardless of the billions of dollars that are in the pipeline to be spent on recovery efforts and the tax cuts that will be enacted, this crisis cannot and will not be resolved by Washington policy alone. The rebuilding of America must happen in the towns, cities, rural and suburban communities across this nation. The poor must not be left out of the various bailouts and stimulus packages. People of faith have much to contribute to these debates and policy discussions.

This moment in history is a test of our love of neighbor. It is a test of our creativity as a people. Perhaps, it is a call to live more simply. Perhaps, it is a time to think more critically about how our trade and foreign policies impact global markets. Perhaps, it is a time for greater corporate responsibility and ethics in business. Perhaps, it is a time for us to volunteer with a local agency or to become better informed about legislation and public policies. All of us can use this time for greater reflection, discernment and prayer about what we are doing to build up the Kingdom of God.