

Panel Presentation of Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler, SSND (Mankato)
Talk for International Meeting in Mundelein, IL October 27, 1997

Members of the General Chapter, Sister Patricia Flynn, Sister Ingeborg, and Sister Catharina.

Thank you for allowing me to share briefly with you some thoughts on poverty. This was Mother Theresa Gerhardinger's major emphasis and I believe she was prophetic in her choice. What I wish to say, I give with a warning. It is only my opinion and I do not claim inside knowledge. One looks about and there grows a sense of Titanic danger, and my fear today is that early in the next millennium, we will suffer a global revolution. The third and fourth worlds will revolt against the West. The distance between the "haves" and the "have-not" peoples becomes larger. The rate of hunger grows and people will not be able to tolerate this much longer. Parents can not bear to see their children dying of hunger.

Also, the nuclear weapons still stored in Russia, especially in the Ukraine, are for sale, illegally surely. If Libya, Syria, Iran, for example, or other hostile nations obtain, them, the planet can be destroyed. Long and deep hatreds propel nations into self-destruction.

The genocide of recent years, such as in the Balkans, Rwanda, Algeria, Columbia, and Peru give us a clue to the bitterness that deepens. In Peru, the terrorists called "Shining Path" asked for dialog. In the end they were all murdered. So much for dialogue and compromise. The resentment toward immigrants and refugees indicate greed and selfishness. In the United States there are entire counties in the northwest and southwest, where the entire county population could not fill a jumbo jet. Yet we hear that there's no room. 250 million world refugees presently present a specter to the world community. In Rome alone, the majority of refugees are Muslim. One of the root causes for these dangers is poverty. Yet, there is enough to go around, if we all learned to share.

Pope John Paul II calls for waiving the Third World debt to Western Nations. In many countries, once the annual interest on the debt is paid, there's nothing left to pay off even part of the principal. Third World debts were forgiven by Norway and Sweden – prophetic acts of mercy on the part of two Protestant Nations! This is a world volcano, sending occasional smoke signals which may erupt and engulf us.

My entry as it were to the ministry of civil rights began on a Sunday in March 1965. I was on the staff of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ). A group of Afro-Americans were beginning a fifty-mile walk on Highway 80 toward Montgomery, Alabama, the capital. As marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were beaten, clubbed by the patrol storm troopers. ABC-TV filmed it, and all America saw it that Sunday night. Dr. Martin Luther King called the NCCIJ for priests and nuns to come to Selma.

The first task was to find the nuns to go down there. But, first I called Mother Bernardia, my Provincial, seeking permission. She'd seen the TV accounts and agreed, but she cautioned, "Stay in back! Eight of us nuns all in habit flew to Alabama the next morning. In Montgomery, we took a van to Selma. We were met at the door of the St. Matthew Baptist Church by the Pastor. He took my hand, led me into the Church where people were singing and praying. The Pastor led me to the pulpit and said, "Tell us why you've come!"

Each morning after that we stood in a row: six feet from a row of State storm troopers, holding their billy clubs. In the middle of that week, President Lyndon Johnson made his famous Civil Right's speech which heralded the beginning of the Public Accommodations Act. This began, at least by law, the integration of Blacks in U.S. society.

Our Education Department subsequently developed programs designed to address needs, for example: efforts to integrate the history of minorities in history textbooks.

- a) Assistance by nuns in 108 Black Colleges, in which nuns, mostly with Ph.D's taught while Black faculty completed their graduate degrees
- b) Sisters' Urban Education courses, preparing inner-city teachers for acculturation of curriculum. This was affiliated with Loyola University
- c) Training in race relations workshops for Catholic Laity.

After my term was over at NCCIJ I became Executive Director, which led to exciting new...(a line is missing)...Interreligious Task Force for Soviet Jewry. It had never been tried before.

The NCCIJ Board of Directors voted unanimously in favor, so we began 15 years of our Task Force. Approximately 6 million Jews were allowed to emigrate. When Golda Meier gave me a medal in Brussels, Belgium, she said "What you did for us, you should do for all denominations." I thought of this last week when Boris Yeltsin signed the law forbidding some Churches from existing in Russia today. I love the Jews and recall my father always said, "God will treat a country as that country has treated its Jews".

In 1994 the U.N. announced the "Year of Women", which later became the "Decade of Women". To prepare for this, some of my Protestant, Catholic and Jewish friends decided to organize The Institute of Women Today. Our aim was to empower economically poor women and their children to achieve their highest potential in education, housing and jobs. The women's movement is as important as The Industrial Revolution. We were born, women, and therefore were born into the movement.

The Holy Spirit led us to women in state and federal prisons, where we were able to begin diverse prison industries, making possible wage earning by the incarcerated women. In shoulder bags alone, the prison women earned \$180,000 –in quilting, \$75,000. Thus, while prisoners had the time, they earned money for their children.

It is from these women that I learned a wisdom that was precious to me. Sexual abuse had been their earliest memory. We spent 3 day week ends with them. And always we took lawyers and counselors with us. Even Dorothy Day joined us. She loved the Jewish lawyer who was our president. On one occasion, in Alderson, West Virginia, a Federal Prison, one of our attorneys was fluent in Spanish. There were 70 Hispanic women from Texas and Florida. Literally, they knelt at her feet, for they had never talked to a lawyer, even those who pleaded their case. The Attorney discovered that their civil rights had been denied them because no one translated for them in court. In the following week, the lawyer was able to get their cases overturned and the Hispanic prisoners were freed.

Poor women opened my eyes to the plight of women world-wide. For example, in Brazil, there are 500,000 girl prostitutes; in Thailand 800,000 child prostitutes. China boasts that they no longer practice girl infanticide because girls are aborted before birth.

As we worked with women in prisons and jails, we realized that what they needed was a safe place to come to when they were released. There was no place where they could be reunited with their children, and together be welcomed in a home.

(Ed. note. Her presentation ends abruptly. When the editor asked about this the conjecture of the archivist was that the time constraints of the chapter meeting was the cause.)