

Voice of the Poor

February 13, 2010

Report from the Annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering Charity in Truth: Seeking the Common Good

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The following is offered as an “on the spot” report because so many of you had to cancel your trip to Washington this year

While nearly 500 Catholics from across the country had registered for the conference, only 200 were able to get to Washington. Missing were VOP members from Washington state, California, Arizona and up and down the east coast. VOP reps from Atlanta, Stockton, Milwaukee, Phoenix and San Francisco were able to get to Washington but many others were stuck at home including SVdP President, Joe Flannigan, and Executive Director, Roger Playwin.

Ron Meyer and Lucy Howell (VOP Phoenix and members of the National VOP Committee) managed to squeak into Baltimore on Friday at 1:30. BWI shut down at 2 p.m Lisa LaLiberte and Debbie DiCarlo (Phoenix) and Joanne Welter (Tucson) had arrived a day earlier for “wrap-around” meetings. Unbelievably Ignacio Rodriguez and Jose Robles, Diocese of Phoenix, arrived late Monday evening during a short window at Reagan National Airport. Travelers attempting to arrive on Saturday or Sunday (or leaving Tuesday, Wednesday and part of Thursday) were simply out of luck. The three area airports were closed continually for a week by the back- to-back storms causing cancellations at 14 airports in the east and midwest. For most of the 80 or so left at the Hyatt Capitol Hill on Tuesday, the earliest possible flights home were found to be either late Thursday or on Friday.

Sunday, Feb. 7:

Major heroes were the USCCB and Hyatt Capitol Hill staff who had to continually adjust the conference schedule based on speakers unable to get to Washington or the hotel. 24” of snow fell last Friday and Saturday followed by an equal amount on Tuesday and Wednesday. Public transportation in all forms was shut down and local roads/interstates were impassable. Snow removal crews could not keep up with the volume of snow. Lucy and Ron observed skip loaders filling dump trucks with snow on Friday (today) in an effort to clear roads.

Mass on Sunday afternoon was celebrated by a New Orleans Jesuit subbing for the Bishop of Rockville Centre who was unable to get down from Long Island. A handful of enthusiastic singers made up for the missing choir, stranded in Maryland. Monsignor Ray East arrived a bit late having spent three hours at the closed Metro station at Anacostia (all Metro and buses having been shut down). Following Mass, the group adjourned for drinks and a buffet set up with big screens to watch the BIG GAME. The euphoria of the Saints’ fans was not to be believed.

Monday, Feb. 8:

Everything was closed and transportation was non-existent.

An address by John Carr, Executive Director of the USCCB's Office of Justice, Peace and Human Development. "Catholic Social Message and Mission: Speaking Charity in Truth to Power" was amusing, thought-provoking and eloquent. An audio of John Carr's address as well as other speakers at the CSMG can be ordered from USCCB at <http://www.usccb.org/jphd/csmg/index.shtml>. Text of information for Hill visits prepared by USCCB can also be found on this site. Lucy's notes are below:

There are many ironies following the election of Barack Obama including the transition from hope to fear, gridlock in Congress, the loss of Edward Kennedy's seat in MA (the one state with universal healthcare) and impact on the Senate, Obama's struggle to make a case for health care to Americans in the prolonged debate, Senator McCain's call for Sarah Palin to help him in his re-election campaign, anger at Democrats for bailing out Wall Street, "NO" being a good message for the Republican party.

Notably absent in recent months has been any mention of poverty or the poor.

John described the influential role of the bishops in the ongoing healthcare debate resulting in adoption by the House of the Stupak Amendment. The difference in this debate was made by prolife Democrats.

John urged Catholics going to the Hill for meetings with our elected members, to raise the unspoken work, "poverty," in messages from USCCB about immigration, healthcare, jobs and aid for Afghanistan and Haiti. He referred to Pope Benedict's most recent encyclical, "Caritas in Veritate" (the theme of this year's gathering): "Justice is the primary way of charity...it is the institutional path, the political path of charity."

The summary message for Hill visits from USCCB:

- Put the needs of the poor first
- Pass healthcare as an urgent national priority and moral imperative
- Fix immigration
- Invest in long-term development of Haiti and other poor nations
- Reform and strengthen development assistance to promote a better, safer world

Healthcare criteria from USCCB:

- Need universal healthcare that protects, not threatens life
- Access for the poor including legal immigrants
- Promote freedom of options for the common good

- **Contain costs equitably across a spectrum of payers**

Immigration reform:

- **Listen to adversaries**
- **More communication at the parish and community level is needed**
- **Country not whole until the needs and contributions of immigrants are addressed**

International Development Assistance:

- **One of few areas not subject to the recently announced spending freeze**
- **Afghanistan – message is responsible withdrawal**
- **Climate change – the poorest nations are the most affected**

Finally, John stated that as Catholics we bring principles, not solutions. We stand up for human life and dignity – the church must be at the center of this movement. There is an opportunity for promotion of this message at the local level using the principle of human life and dignity as a litmus test.

We will not prevail unless thinking is changed – we must think bigger, broader and deeper. Political polarization is now seeping into the church: Does faith shape your political views or is it the other way around?

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John Carr was followed by Ray Boshara of the New America Foundation who addressed the gathering through Skype from St. Louis. It worked well and members of the audience were able to ask questions. Cecelia Munoz, White House Director of Intergovernmental Affairs (formerly of Catholic Charities in Chicago) followed Ray. Following lunch, Dr. Maryann Cosimano Love addressed participants on foreign policy and global poverty. Various workshops on the four areas (immigration, jobs, healthcare and foreign investment) to be raised at congressional offices were given.

Bread for the World cancelled its reception Monday evening no doubt fearful that attendees would slip on the ice en route to their offices! Voice of the Poor was an intimate meeting (80 had signed up during conference registration but only 15 attended). The highlight was a question and answer session with USCCB’s spokesman on healthcare reform, Kathy Saile. Brief reports were made but the meeting was shortened because of the absence of Kathy Jorgensen “Navigation, Charlene Flaherty “CSG” and Rev. Sean Carroll, S.J of the Kino Border Initiative – all unable to leave Arizona. A special spiritual reflection prepared for VOP was read by Ron Meyer. Information shared at this meeting will be posted online by Deborah Payne at www.voiceofthepoor.org

Tuesday, Feb. 9:

Tuesday morning dawned gray and cold and calls began coming in from airlines cancelling flights for Wed. Conference announcements had the ominous advice that if you were able to leave Washington, you should do so now.... Ron and Lucy split the AZ delegation list of 10 offices to determine which ones would actually be open. We discovered only 3 of the 10 offices had staffers present and we were asked to come as early as possible so that staff could get home before the next wave of snow. We were able to visit the offices of Senator McCain, Congressman Pastor and Congressman Flake. Amazingly, the congressional switchboard forwarded calls to the AZ offices of Harry Mitchell, John Shadegg, Trent Franks and Senator Kyl. Packets will be delivered to the Phoenix offices on our return home.

Mark Shields moved his appearance up to Tuesday afternoon (David Brookes remained stranded in New York) to give an entertaining and, at times, poignant commentary on the deadlock in Congress and extreme partisan atmosphere. A reception (no members of Congress could make it) was held at the hotel followed by the Capitol Steps, hilarious as usual with the opening number, "Return to Spender" to the tune of "Return to Sender".

Needless to say, all spare moments were spent in the fruitless effort of trying to rearrange flights. Reality set in when weather stations declared another state of emergency over the east and Chicago O'Hare was shut down. We had nowhere to go...

Wednesday, Feb. 10:

Not to abandon us, however, the conference organizers arranged for Monsignor East to officiate at Mass on Wednesday followed by a delicious lunch. A final reception was announced for Wednesday evening.

Thursday, Feb. 11:

Dawned sunny and crisp, Lucy and Ron walked round trip (4 miles each way) to Georgetown for lunch and a visit with Lucy's 97 year old aunt. Debbie DiCarlo was able to get out on a late afternoon flight as were Ignacio and Jose.

Friday, Feb. 12:

Museums were open. Cars were on the streets in great numbers including buses. Train taken to BWI but 6:30 flight delayed to departure of 8:10 p.m. Arizona will be a welcome sight as another storm is expected in Washington on Tuesday!

Follow up:

1. USCCB packets and introductory information from SVdP will be delivered to local offices.
2. Thank you's will be sent to staff we saw in Washington.
3. More contact with local offices will be made this year.

Next year's CSMG dates are Feb. 13-16 at the Omini Shoreham Hotel in D.C.