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David Gergen warns fight against poverty will be long, hard

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 28, 2009 NCR Today

PORTLAND, Ore.
David Gergen, longtime political commentator and advisor to four presidents, lauded the national Catholic Charities campaign to reduce poverty in America Sept. 25 but warned that ?progress is hard work; politics is hard work. It just takes a long time.?

tGergen, a senior political analyst for CNN and director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University in Boston, addressed the Catholic Charities USA 2009 Annual Gathering on the second day of its Sept. 24-26 meeting in Portland.

Some 450 Catholic Charities leaders from across the country, including three from American Samoa ? Cecilia Solofa and Dominican Sisters Elsa and Evangeline ? attended the gathering.

tGergen said ?it would be a wonderful thing? if CCUSA could achieve its goal of cutting the number of Americans living in poverty in half by the year 2020.

tBut he suggested that they model their efforts after those of the late Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., who devoted 47 years in the U.S. Senate to giving the nation?s poor better access to education, health care and other life necessities.

t?The truth is, it takes long, hard work ? year after year, decade after decade,? he said. ?Progress does not come easy, but it?s a moral imperative.?
tHe said Catholic Charities leaders can take heart from the fact that ?we have a president and Congress more committed to your agenda than we?ve had in a long, long time.

tHe gave President Obama good odds of getting a health care reform bill passed before the end of the year. But he said that with the health care fight and the current economic crisis, Obama does not appear to have a new war on poverty high on his current list of priorities.

tHe called that ?a wise political decision.?

tGergen noted that in FDR?s first term, confronting the Great Depression, his first priority was to help people shore up their lives through the job-creating Civilian Conservation Corps within the first 100 days of his administration, which quickly put 250,000 people back to work. It was only after helping people that, in the second half of that term Roosevelt began taking up the New Deal?s structural reforms, he said.

tHe suggested that at best Obama might address poverty relief as a second-half agenda of his first term in office.

tBut even then, he said, there are major obstacles, with ?one big swollen river of [federal] red ink setting off alarm bells in Congress, in business, in Beijing? ? a reference to the huge chunk of U.S. debt held by China.

t?The president?s heart is in the right place, his convictions are in the right place, but he doesn?t have the money? to launch an anti-poverty initiative on top of the economic stimulus and health reform packages, he said.

t?The facts are daunting,? he said, but he nevertheless urged Catholic Charities leaders to ?go out and push for your agenda. Keep the heat on.?

tBut he also urged them not to go it alone, but to ?think a lot more about partnerships,? to be imaginative ? ?finding innovative solutions that get us out of the boxes we?re in? ? and to find ways to mobilize the ?strong sense of idealism? emerging in America?s millennium generation.

tHe praised the decision recently to triple the size of Americorps to 250,000 volunteers a year. ?Once these people serve, they become good citizens. They become concerned citizens who really care,? he said.

tHe called the millennium generation ?the biggest generation in our history? and said, ?It is time to put these idealistic young people to work? in ways that respond to their idealism and desire to serve others.

t?This is the time to change. The money may not be there, but the energy and the idealism are there,? he said.

t?We?re not going to spend our way out of our problems. I don?t think we are going to tax our way out of our problems,? he said. ?I think we?re going to have to innovate our way out of our problems. ? We are very good at entrepeneurship, at innovation, at change, at coming up with new ideas, creativity.?

tAt the end of a lively question-answer period Alison Mertz, a young woman with Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa, Calif., rose to thank Gergen for his remarks on the idealism of her generation and the need to nurture it, saying she was one of those who was led to a career in social service by her earlier experiences as a student in volunteer work.

tGergen started questioning her, asking her to detail those experiences and how they shaped her commitment. As she did, he thanked her and commented, ?You?re the perfect end to this conversation.?

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