

Priest presents bitter truths as well as hope

Arthur Jones | Sep. 28, 2010



Adam Smith, right, a part-time employee of the Catholic Charities-run Hermano Pedro Day Program in Washington, helps an unemployed man search for a job Aug. 27. (CNS/Bob Roller)

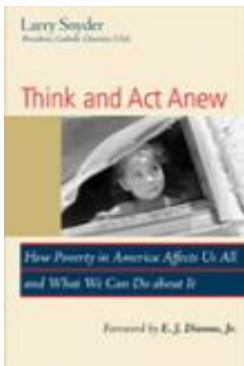
The focal point was six 30-pound bags of green beans. They needed to be washed, snapped and tossed into a cooking pot the size of three bass drums stacked together.

The goal was preparing food that would help feed 600 people, the daily demand on Baltimore's Our Daily Bread soup kitchen -- a demand up from 320 people six years ago. Six parishioners from a nearby Catholic church, a recently graduated research assistant from a Catholic parish 16 miles away, and one other volunteer worked the green beans for three hours. The parishioners were members of their parish justice and peace committee, which, when not chopping beans, works for systemic change.

Pull the camera farther back from Our Daily Bread's brand-new building in Baltimore, and the on-the-ground volunteering leading to systemic change is seen as a microcosmic example of the archdiocese's Catholic Charities.

Our Daily Bread comes under the local Catholic Charities umbrella, though funding comes from a variety of sources; similarly, Baltimore's Catholic Charities is concerned with systemic change. One example covers a multitude: a concentration on job-training programs in a city with 10.1 percent unemployment (among those still looking).

Pull the camera farther back still and it's Catholic Charities USA that's in overall focus, the national organization for 170 Catholic Charities covering every U.S. state. This year marks Catholic Charities' centennial. Fr. Larry Snyder, a priest of the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese and president of Catholic Charities USA -- in a forward, not backward-looking, book, *Think and Act Anew* -- briefly touches on the past to tell us about U.S. Catholicism's social justice tomorrow.



THINK AND ACT ANEW: HOW POVERTY IN AMERICA AFFECTS US ALL AND

WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

By Larry Snyder

Published by Orbis Books, \$16

A neat touch. He tells us the term "social justice" was first used by Fr. Luigi Taparelli D'Azeglio, a counselor to Pope Leo XIII.

Snyder anchors his book on Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, and builds from there. In a flashback, we're with the "founding generation of charities" attempting to ameliorate the post-World War I trauma of returning veterans with no jobs, a generation soon to face an economic speculative bubble that burst into the Great Depression.

Today's social justice snapshot, writes Snyder, is equally bleak: 40 million living in poverty and 15 million unemployed. However, as in 1919, so today "Catholic Charities [does] not look around for sign of hope, but instead sets out to be a sign of hope."

Its mandate is rooted in Jesus' Gospel imperative and its foundational principle is out of Genesis: the innate dignity and value of every human person.

In a brief book that deals in "bitter truths" as well as hope, Snyder provides a five-point list of "Someone is poor if ..."; adds Maimonides' eight levels of giving; and includes a "Not All Poor People Are Equal" catalog. Equally encouraging are the snapshots of innovative programs from Silicon Valley, where 54 percent of eligible residents don't apply for food stamps; to Harlem Children's Zone, "one of the most successful antipoverty programs in the country"; to the Earthworks Urban Farm in Detroit.

"The basic question before us," writes Snyder, "is what kind of society we want to be. But our obligation does not stop there. As people of faith we will not get it right until we acknowledge that everyone is our sister and brother -- even those whose appearance or behavior is unappealing to us."

At this point in the book, which has already chided Wall Street, excerpted papal teaching, and debated the common good and free markets, Snyder is astonishingly close to its end. It is a tightly packed volume that runs through its teaching and exhorting course in only 118 pages.

For Catholics and others, *Think and Act Anew* is a social justice jewel case containing many gems, not least E.J. Dionne's foreword saying this: "A Baptist friend of mine who is a divinity professor tells me that one of her favorite classes every year involves introducing her mostly Protestant students to Catholic social teaching."

Snyder himself provides this telling endnote: "As we will it, so shall the future be" -- provided we pick up the peeler and prepare the spuds, sign the petitions, get involved in efforts for low-income housing, protest injustice and work for systemic change as if success were immaterial and action for others all-important.

All that -- buttressed by prayer and the Eucharist. It can start with some green beans and a paring knife.

[Arthur Jones is *NCR*'s book editor.]

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