

## Applying Third World Economic Development Concepts to Developed Countries: A Humanitarian Approach

**Mons. Gennaro Martino. Professor of theology, writer, missionary.**

“Global financial crisis spreads.” “Stock market plunges to new lows.” “Economic uncertainty provides bleak outlook.” “Unemployment reaches new highs.” In a time when headlines like these are all too common, a message of personal dignity based on broadly equitable economic opportunity holds special meaning. Such a message was delivered by Gennaro Martino to Professionisti Italiani a Boston on September 28, 2010 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Monsignor Martino brought together both secular and spiritual perspectives in emphasizing that economic endeavor cannot exist apart from fundamental human values. Those values, including respect for the individual and social solidarity, ought to drive economic systems in the 21st century, he said.



Professor of theology and history of Christianity, Mons. Martino has authored 21 books and founded the non-profit Associazione Mondo Amico (AMA). The scope of humanitarian and development

activities conducted by AMA worldwide has included micro-lending programs with Nobel prize-winning economist Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank and author of “The Banker of the Poor,” as well as small hospitals for lepers, some of which were built with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. These projects have been implemented in developing countries such as India, Bolivia, Albania, Senegal, Uganda and Benin, and more than 50,000 children have benefitted. Mons. Martino has recently expanded the focus of his efforts to include disadvantaged areas in developed countries, where a good portion of what was previously considered middle class is now more accurately described as poor. Advantaged people in developed countries should develop a heightened

awareness that they are “in the same boat” as those who do not enjoy the same economic opportunities, particularly nowadays, suggested Mons. Martino. The economic crises that have struck the world beginning in 2008 have drastically reduced, or in many cases eliminated, paths to employment that can not only lift people socio-economically but allow them to realize more fulfilling existences as human beings. This is particularly true in western nations, where more jobs are shifting toward developing countries.



According to Mons. Martino, “It is up to every man and woman of good will to acquire a different point

of view, far from the mere selfish logic of profit, to fight for social justice so that wealth, which is increased by the work of all workers, from the humblest job to the most prestigious professions, could be fairly distributed for public good of the whole society.” Tangible solutions to the disparity between those with access to opportunity and those with no such access are possible, he maintained.

Mons. Martino pointed to the Grameen Bank as an example of such a solution. Founded in 1977, Grameen Bank is an independent institute focused on



microfinance, a vehicle for making small-scale loans without requiring collateral. Rather than welfare, these loans seek to

harness the innate inventiveness and ingeniousness of human beings and to create opportunities for self-employment. This revolutionary economic initiative is

committed to granting loans only to the poorest of the poor, those who are refused by traditional credit institutions because they have nothing to offer as security. The beneficiaries of each such loan must number at least five people committed to using the loan to lift themselves out of poverty.



Although it may be natural to assume that these programs should target the poorest societies of the world, the economic crises of the early 21st century have expanded the areas in which such efforts are bearing fruit. Mons. Martino pointed to his home town of Naples, Italy, where a tangible commitment to microfinance is embodied in the creation of the SPES Fund by the foundation “In Nome Della Vita.” This commitment is providing a concrete meaning to the concepts of hope, dignity and work.

Backed by agreements with large credit institutions in that city, the SPES Fund provides funding to individuals unable to supply the requisite collateral. Such funding includes sums up to 20,000 Euros, with a maximum length of five years. They support micro-businesses in the trade, handicraft, production and service segments. Applicants are not required to commit securities behind the loans, but they are asked to draw up plans demonstrating the viability of their planned entrepreneurial activities.

The Foundation also coordinates and supports community solidarity projects. These include homes like “La Casa di Tonia,” which shelters single mothers in need and offers a day nursery for poor families. Such efforts complement the economic initiatives of the Foundation, thereby providing support in multiple ways to assist pockets of disadvantaged people in developed nations.

The take-away message from the evening is perhaps best expressed in the words of Pope Paul VI quoted by Mons. Martino: “Organized programs designed to increase productivity should have but one aim: to serve human nature. Economics and technology are meaningless if they do not benefit man, for it is he they are to serve. Man is truly human only if he is the master of his own actions and the judge of their worth, only if he is the architect of this own progress.”



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**PIB’s next event**, on November 8<sup>th</sup>, will feature Mr. Claudio Bozzo, President of MSC-Mediterranean Shipping Company, and President of the Italian Chamber of Commerce in New York. The talk will focus on “New management and negotiation styles in the global economy”.

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Text by Bill Boni. Pictures by Valentina Oppezzo.