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SUMMIT ON
VOLUNTEERISM
A Response to
Economic Crisis

Most Rev. William Lori, Diocese of Bridgeport

Thank you very much, Father Ryscavage. Certainly I'm very grateful to Fairfield University and to the Knights of Columbus for convening us today and giving us all the opportunity to share our perspectives on volunteerism and how we can do this more effectively together as opposed to doing it separately.

I suppose I'm up here today sort of as exhibit A or B or C, I don't know which, but I probably represent in a sort of typical way 194 catholic dioceses across the United States, at least the Latin Rite ones. And many of us find ourselves doing the same thing in our communities, serving in the same ways, but doing so in a way that probably isn't well-known or well understood, even by the people who are part of our dioceses. It's simply part of life. It's part of mission. It's part of who we are and what we're called to do. In many locales, including the one I am privileged to serve, often it's the case that a local diocese will be the largest provider of social, charitable, and educational services absent the government. And that's probably simply a matter of volume.

To give you a little statistic that you may find surprising, my diocese encompasses Fairfield County, arguably one of the nicest places around. This year, Catholic Charities, represented here today by Mr. Al Barber, will serve to the homeless and the homebound 1.1 million meals. And that's pretty staggering when you think of a wealthy area that is less than 700 square miles in its area. We also do a lot of education of inner city kids. Sometimes you hear about Catholic schools closing in the city. It's a sad thing, but it happens because Catholic schools and other private schools do a wonderful job of educating inner city kids who come from below the poverty line. We are so far, in my neck of the woods, bucking the trend. But I can tell you, it is a very difficult trend to buck. But talk about something that is transformational in the life of kids, we get them up to grade level in reading and math. If we get them into high school, they all graduate. And if they graduate, they almost all go to college. And so it's an important thing.

We couldn't do any of this without volunteers. If you look at our Catholic Charities operation, the ratio between the paid staff, professional staff, and volunteers is four to one, four volunteers to one paid staff person. Let me give you a sense of how this volunteerism works in a diocese. I don't like to think of any diocese as typical because I love it so much. And as you can see, it's pretty much what my whole life is wrapped up in.

First of all, some of the people who are in senior leadership might argue that they are practically volunteering because the salaries are so bad. Many of the people that are senior leadership have been drawn from places like GE. For example, Al Barber came to us from GE, the CFO was a managing partner at Pricewaterhouse. They're all around, they retire early, and I try to get them in to help us do the job as well as we can do it. But one of the persons who came aboard after hearing my salary offer said to me, well, Bishop, that will certainly help with the dry cleaning.



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The schools couldn't operate without volunteers. We have a wonderful program called Shepherds. These are wonderfully successful men and women who have prepared themselves well to come and to befriend some of the kids in our inner city schools, to open to them some new worlds, some new possibilities, to tutor them, and really to enable these kids to believe in themselves so as to become the persons that God meant them to be. It's a great program that couldn't be done without these volunteers and an array of others.

We run some very large soup kitchens such as the Burton House in Bridgeport, the New Covenant of Hospitality of Stamford, and demand is up incredibly. We have lots and lots of volunteers, some of whom are kids from our confirmation classes, some are business people, some are housewives. When they get me to be a volunteer, it's not very lucky because I usually get the oatmeal all over the place, and they say, Bishop, you go out and you visit the people and let us run the line.

Of course I would also say that one of our jobs also is to be alert to the needs that are out there. One time I got an extraordinary letter in the mail. It was from a woman who herself was on food stamps, had very meager resources. What she observed is that every Sunday there were a lot of people near the Johns Street Bridge in Bridgeport who didn't have anything to eat because you see Burton House and other places in Bridgeport were closed on Sunday. So from her food stamps and her meager resources, she started to provide them with a Sunday meal. We recognized, of course, the lacuna, but we also recognized a great soul, a great heart. And she helped us. We became her partner in a very real way. And I think she gave us new heart for the work that we're doing, and now we're proud to be working with her. We wouldn't have known that without this extraordinary woman writing me this hand written letter that I got one Tuesday morning.

I think that most dioceses, and I think ours is no exception, recognize that we are in a community of providers. And it's important for us to recognize that we do not do all things well. And so when we recognize that we're not able to do programs well and someone else is doing it better, we have no pride about trading or asking another organization to take it over. Similarly, if it's thought that we're able to do something better, we'd like to be open and to the best of our ability, to get that done.

We have great partnerships. For example, AmeriCares, and the folks who run my youth services got together for what they call the AmeriCares Days of Caring in Bridgeport. United Way in Fairfield County and Catholic Charities are in a partnership called Neighbor to Neighbor. And we've been very lucky to get into partnerships with Sacred Heart University, Fairfield University, and Habitat for Humanity to do all kinds of things. We do have to be a community. Our eyes should be on the people who need our help, not on who can serve the most and not in any way should we be proprietary about the programs that we run.

Father Ryscavage asked me to speak about the faith-based dimension. That's certainly something that is kicked around, spoken about a lot today, and it's extremely important. It should not be a surprise that faith works wonders. It should not be a surprise that people of faith have, if you will, an extra important motivation to go out and to serve. And it's common really to all faiths. I don't even know, I couldn't even



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begin to tell you the kinds of charitable work that goes on across nearly 90 parishes in Fairfield County. I could tell you though that modern technology has struck even the Catholic Church. And you know you knew someone would invent this someday. There's a computer program called ParishSOFT, and it is a marvelous tool for tracking time, treasure, and talent. So what I might not know this year perhaps next year when our conversion is finished I will know.

I think that it's important to say that when you pray for somebody, when you rub shoulders with somebody that you never thought you'd meet, that person cannot be a stranger, that person cannot be an enemy, that person becomes a friend. And so the community that you build is not simply the people you go to church with, but you're opened up to whole new beautiful and important worlds. And people of faith are expected by their respective faiths to do this. The first principle is charity. The first principle is love. And any time we're doing anything less than that, we are being untrue, not only to a moral imperative, but also, as Father Schneider said so well, to a Gospel imperative.

I might add this. As we partner diverse faiths with one another, church and government, church and university, all of these marvelous partnerships that can be had in a democratic culture, it's important for us as people of faith to be able to keep our faith. Not to water it down, not to be trimmed or to be limited when we enter into a partnership, but simply to accept each other for who we are, for what our faith teaches, even when it differs, and allow the goodness that flows from our faith commitments to bloom and to shine forth. I think that's the way America was created to be. And I'm hoping that the little diocese I serve will be one of the engines that helps that happen. Thank you so much.