“Beyond ethical comprehension”

Stephen Lewis, the Canadian who serves as UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, used those words at a meeting of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance last week. He was speaking of the failure of the wealthy nations of the world to direct resources and energy and passion to confront the AIDS tragedy in Africa and the Global South. The full sentence was this: “The criminal default of the Western world is beyond ethical comprehension.”

Even if we set aside the tragic enthusiasm of the Bush administration to embrace preemptive war as an appropriate means to conduct foreign policy, we are still faced with:

- his willingness to spend an estimated $100 billion dollars on war with Iraq, and
- his unwillingness to commit much more than one billion dollars to confront the global AIDS pandemic. (An appropriate US share of international initiatives is a minimum of $2.5 billion.)

Even if my ministry is focused upon Africa, it is not a matter of indifference to me that we are also faced with this administration’s unwillingness to seek meaningful prescription drug benefits for the elderly in our own country, or to confront the reality that 1.4 million more Americans are without health insurance now than when President Bush first took office, and some 1.3 million more Americans are living below the poverty line. This too could fit under the phrase, “beyond ethical comprehension.”

What worries me is that these skewed priorities, where human need and the common good are set aside for an unconvincing “imminent threat” and self-serving economic profit, are ceasing to be seen as “beyond ethical comprehension.” It doesn’t seem to surprise us anymore. We readily permit our political leadership to serve those who paid for them, and we readily embrace an economic leadership that works against our common interests and those of our brothers and sisters who live in the poorest countries on earth. Now that, to me, is “beyond ethical comprehension.”

There’s another way to look at Mr. Lewis’ phrase, “beyond ethical comprehension,” seeing instead something so compassionate, so self-giving, that it too may defy our comprehension. Whenever he is in Africa, Mr. Lewis says, he seeks out people living with AIDS, and in conversation he raises the question, “What do you need or want?” And the African women — it’s mainly African women — consistently name food first, not food for themselves, but for their families. The second thing they mention is education for their children, that it be provided before these women die of AIDS. Their priorities are beyond themselves.

When I think of how dismissive we sometimes are of Africa as “one crisis after another,” the responses from these African women living with AIDS remind me yet again that we in the US have much to learn from, and to identify with, our African sisters. Mr. Lewis is right: “The criminal default of the Western world is beyond ethical comprehension.” The way forward, to confront that “default,” is to hear a strikingly simple message from those who first want food and education for their children: We care. For something and someone besides us.

Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer

If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we’ll remove you from our list.

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