

January 20, 2009 – Inauguration Day
Prepared by Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns staff

Hebrews 6:10-20	The importance of an oath – which anchors us and enables people to hold fast to hope.
Psalms 111:1-2, 4-5, 9-10	God ratifies God’s covenant
Mark 2:23-28	“The Sabbath was made for humans and not humans for the Sabbath.”

“We earnestly desire each of you to demonstrate the same eagerness for the fulfillment of hope until the end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who, through faith and patience, are inheriting the promises.” Hebrews 6:11-12

Today, as Barack Obama takes the oath of office, the reading from Hebrews reminds us that God’s promise repeatedly renewed in every generation also is an oath -- one that encourages us to hold fast to the hope that lies before us. Certainly hopes are raised whenever a new president and Congress begin their work, and this inauguration is especially hopeful as the first person of African descent is sworn into the highest office in the United States. At the same time, this president, this congress and the U.S. people face daunting challenges.

U.S. headlines blare news of bursting bubbles, inflation and debt resulting in unemployment and economic difficulties on a personal and national level. Inflation and debt rates have never been higher, and they are increasing exponentially. Maryknoll missionaries in Asia, Africa and Latin America witness how these difficulties reverberate in the lives of the people they accompany. As food and energy prices rise beyond their reach, hunger spreads and suffering and hardship deepen.

Moreover, as we approach the reality of peak oil and other decreasing natural resources, we are reminded of the earth’s real limits. People in Asia, Africa and Latin America know the fragility of the earth in an intimate way as colonialism’s legacy of environmental degradation exposes them to the direct impact of climate change. We are living in unprecedented times that call for unprecedented action. Today’s gospel calls us to take a long, hard look at our history and tradition and reinterpret customs, laws and paradigms to create new responses to this present reality. Jesus called the Pharisees (who saw themselves as keepers of the law and tradition) to do just that – to reinterpret their thinking about the Sabbath and to remember when in times of extreme hunger, rules were overlooked so that people could survive.

Jesus says to the Pharisees: “The sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath.” The Sabbath and the Jubilee year were established, in part, to ensure that all would have enough for a life of dignity. Leviticus 23:22 demands that some of the harvest and its gleanings be left for the poor and the strangers so that they could take what they needed. Just as Jesus brings the Pharisees back to the intent of the law, we need to return to the true meaning of development – to create the infrastructure needed to support societies while not depleting the earth and its resources.

In many ways our economic system has become like the restrictive Pharisaic tradition. For years global economists, governed by the “law of economic growth,” have equated GDP growth with development. But in many parts of the world where Maryknoll missionaries work the most impoverished people and the environment are bearing the burden of this equation. In many countries we have seen whole sectors of the economy, such as small scale and subsistence farms and small, locally owned businesses, destroyed while good laws meant to protect the worker and the environment are weakened or ignored.

On this inauguration day, as many feel a tremendous sense of hope in the new decision makers being sworn into office, Hebrews speaks of the earnest eagerness for the fulfillment of hope, while reminding us not to become sluggish. It tells us that we too, if we work with faith and patience, can inherit the promise of hope. This is a fitting reminder that we must remain engaged with the new administration and Congress to make known our vision of justice and peace for our country and for our world. We cannot become sluggish. Our future, the future of people living in resource-poor countries and the future of our planet are dependent on it.

For more information:

Download a copy of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns’ policy proposals for the new administration and Congress at www.maryknollogc.org and schedule a meeting with your representatives’ home offices to deliver and discuss them. Or come to Ecumenical Advocacy Days (www.advocacydays.org) March 13-16 and visit them in Washington. D.C.

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