A Renewed Politics of Communal Solidarity

By Michael Gottsegen

In the next year, the fight over how to insure the long-term solvency of social security will recommence. For nearly a decade, there has been a consensus among experts that the system is in trouble, and that the ratio between the number of retirees drawing social security checks and the number of wage earners paying into the social security trust fund will shift an increasing burden to the latter as the baby boomers begin to retire en masse after 2015.

The politics of social security reform has pitted one generation against another, today's elderly against tomorrow's elderly, the World War II generation against the baby boomers, and the baby boomers against generation x. Each cohort presses for its own advantage. Today's elderly want to insure that their benefits are undiminished, and generation x worries about the burden that will fall upon it when the boomers retire. Politicians meanwhile pander to today's elderly, knowing that they vote in the largest numbers and fearing punishment by AARP if they dare to suggest that benefits be cut or that recipients whose net income is above a certain level be taxed. Raising payroll taxes to pay for the increasing aggregate benefit levels is equally dangerous politically.

Fearing they will be penalized whichever way they turn, politicians properly regard social security as the third rail of American politics and refuse to touch it, praying for the appointment of yet another bipartisan commission that will spare them from having to choose. Consequently the issue remains unresolved year after year.

America's continuing failure to deal with the social security issue reflects a deeper social and cultural lack that impinges upon a wide range of political issues. Americans lack the deeply felt bonds of fellow-feeling that are needed to weave a diverse civic association into a single body in which each member feels the good of the whole to be her own good and any injury to any part of the whole to be an injury to herself. Such fellow-feeling would unite Americans in bonds of sympathy and identification - in bonds of strongly felt peoplehood, as it were -- that would cut across the socio-economic and generational fault lines that divide America today. Were the American body politic united in this way, the contours of American political debate would presumably shift from a zero-sum competition between different self-interested groups over the relative distribution of burdens and benefits to a collective search for a common good that all segments of society regard as their own good. Were the American body politic woven together by such bonds of solidarity and shared identity, the politics of social security

would be quite different from what they are today, as would the politics of environmental protection, health care and global trade.

This is, of course, a fantasy. The conventional wisdom tells us that Americans are not bound in this way and are not likely to ever be. At their best, small communities may be bound in this way, but modern societies are not. They are too large and too diverse to be united by such bonds of solidarity and fellow-feeling. As the classic sociologists of the early twentieth century made us all aware, the passage to modernity entailed a basic and irreversible shift from such communities to a mass society, from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft, from intimate face-to-face communities that were bound together by thick ties of solidarity and fellow-feeling to wider associations of persons who are connected to one another by far weaker ties of contingent (and typically commercial) self-interest. The modern polity may still employ the political rhetoric that originated in closely knit, face-to-face political communities, but the underlying reality of modern political life could not be more different. Only a fool would mistake the rhetoric of concern for the common good for what politics is really about.

But perhaps it is time for us to question the soundness of the conventional wisdom. A politics that sets the interests of grand parents against the interest of their grand children should be countered by a politics that appeals to the ties of inter-generational sympathy and identification that most Americans still regard as natural. A politics that sets the middle-class against the poor, or everyone against the rich, should be countered by a politics that summons the members of each group to be more mindful of the reality of our interdependency and our common future.

Perhaps we as a people shall never reach the point at which most members of the polity feel themselves to be organelles within the body of the whole and to feel that their own individual well-being depends upon the well-being of every other member, but this is the star by which we ought to steer as we go forward into an increasingly interdependent future. This holds for the American body politic alone only in the first instance. Beyond this, insofar as each country is but an organelle within the interdependent whole of humanity, and humanity but an organelle within the interdependent whole of the biosphere, we must aspire to extending the bounds of our fellow-feeling and solidarity to encompass these larger wholes as well. The political ethic of the 21st Century will only be adequate to the challenges of this century if it can become that encompassing. At their best, the religions have served to nurture the pre-political sensibilities that a global political ethic presupposes. Perhaps the religions can play this all important role in the present age.