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Salt of the Earth

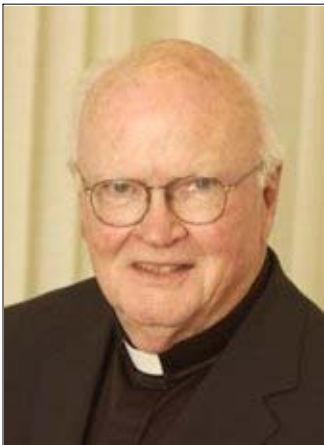
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The Baroni Principles for social action

Father William Byron, S.J.

Promoters of social justice and those engaged in urban ministry cannot afford to forget the late Monsignor Geno Baroni [1930-1984]. The U.S. Catholic Church and national social-policy advocates could use an infusion of the vision and spirit of this creative Italian American priest, civil-rights activist, and community mobilizer.



Baroni had deep confidence in the wisdom of ordinary people. Public policy, he believed, should be good news to the poor. In the Baroni perspective, “policy is people.” The community organizer’s task, Baroni thought, is to help people “politicize” their own good instincts and move their communities toward economic and political development.

Baroni was a complicated genius who did things viscerally, not intellectually. He was not a linear thinker but moved in patterns. He worked the phones, not the typewriter. Not all of the issues that engaged him – in his ministry as a parish-based civil-rights activist in the ’60s and as an ethnic-neighborhood organizer, adviser to bishops, and assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in the ’70s and early 80s – are on today’s social-justice agenda, but many are.

I believe it is time to catch and codify the “Baroni Principles” for mobilizing and developing community so that a Baroni method can be developed much as Maria Montessori’s principles have produced a Montessori Method of early-childhood education. It is my hope that, with these principles articulated and the method taught, Baroni Centers might emerge in some

universities, connecting with parishes and neighborhoods, the very communities Geno Baroni saw as indispensable foundations for social stability.

I have collected the following principles from my memory of conversations and discussions with Baroni over the years, as well as from Baroni's only speech – one he delivered often though he never wrote it down – and from the recollections of others who knew him better than I.

- Democracy does not happen automatically.
- The social-action approach begins in the individual heart.
- Work from idea, to committee, to coalition.
- People do not live in cities; they live in neighborhoods.
- The neighborhood is the building block of city planning.
- The neighborhood unit is the primary form of human settlement.
- Residential neighborhoods must be preserved over time.
- People in neighborhoods know more about what ails their communities than do outside social workers and urban strategists.
- Timing is critical. Seize a crisis, or if necessary, create one.
- Events do not happen until they are duly reported in the newspaper. Power feeds on news and news feeds on power.
- Programs brought into neighborhoods by outsiders are bound to fail.
- Neighborhood survival means parish survival; parish survival means neighborhood survival.
- Neighborhood organization needs clergy participation; the clergy know what is happening in the community and often have friends in City Hall.
- If you want to save the city, the country, and the world, you have to start in the neighborhood where people live.
- There is a connection between the deterioration of the neighborhood and the antecedent decline of the family, alienation of the individual from society, and the loss of moral standards.

- The primary places of identity are family, neighborhood, and community. Initiate empowerment here and then form effective coalitions.
- Interpersonal support systems begin in the family.
- Institutional support systems – churches, unions, fraternal organizations, for example – give strength to neighborhoods.
- When interpersonal and/or institutional support systems decline, the neighborhood is damaged or destroyed.
- Therapy groups are replacing neighborhoods as a source of support for the sick.
- If the cities are to be saved, ethnic and racial groups have to work with one another, not fight one another.
- Be aware of racial sensitivities, but don't pander to racial prejudice. Understand its source and take the issue above it.
- Apathy and violence are cousins coming from the same font – despair. When there is a lack of opportunity, psychological poverty will grow, and that leads to continued apathy and despair.
- You have to keep moving; not to move is to become stagnant.
- Information is power.
- Cultivate reporters; return their calls and give them leads.
- Politicians do not deal with problems until the problems are forced upon them.
- Action follows teaching by way of experience.
- Parents should be the first voices of justice for their children by way of example and experience.
- The way to break down walls is to go around them by building bridges, forming coalitions, forging bonds.
- Understanding the ethnic factor, the longtime key to understanding a northern urban area, is useful almost anywhere.
- The role of the church in social action is to help convene people.
- Self-help is self-determination and self-reliance.
- “Try it” is a consistent principle; not all ideas that look good in theory work out in practice.

- Community developers should not try to manage the projects their organizing efforts produce. These should be spun off into separate organizations.
- The organizer has to get ordinary people in touch with their roots, their heritage, their best.
- The organizer has to give ordinary people hope.
- The organizer has to believe that ordinary people can build bridges across racial and ethnic lines.
- Surround yourself with strong people, willing to challenge the conventional wisdom. Work with them as a team, not as an academic debating society.
- The organizer has to have deep respect for the ordinary in ordinary people.
- Know where you come from; it is part of what you are.
- Now and then slip away for a few days; get away from the intensity. Today is not the world's final day.
- Look for the "right language" that can bring people together.
- Tell stories and listen to the stories of others.
- Talk to anyone, friend or foe. You can never tell when someone is ready to be won over.
- Values are at the core of any organizing effort. Respond to people's deepest hopes and aspirations.
- When you make a mistake, admit it; then pick up the pieces and move on.
- It is easier to obtain forgiveness than to get permission.

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Geno's Principles

BY ALAN CURTIS

“Every economic and social issue is a moral issue.”

So said the late Father Geno Baroni, assistant secretary for neighborhood development at the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the late 1970s, the highest-ranking Catholic priest ever to serve in the federal executive branch.

Geno, as we called him, would have been 75 on October 24, 2005. So it is a good time to ask how this complicated genius, who made hundreds of calls a day to media and other influentials, would have worked the phones today.

He surely would consider immoral the government's insensitivity to poor African-Americans in New Orleans. He would say that it is immoral for the government to allow poverty to rise four years in a row, South Central Los Angeles to continue to decay over a decade after the race riots there, income and wealth inequality to increase, the rich to get more tax breaks, school segregation to increase, the government not to address the causes of Muslim hatred toward America, the military to torture prisoners, the states to spend more on prison building than on higher education, and the cities of America to remain vulnerable to nuclear, biological and chemical attack four years after September 11.

Geno would have viewed our government's failure to plan and act proactively as public immorality. Holland has created a sophisticated, high-tech system of flood control, a variation of which could have been built in New Orleans. But that requires a long-term, job-creating public infrastructure investment plan. In a report issued earlier this year, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave the U.S. a grade of “D” on such investment, concluding that, to catch up, we need to invest \$1.6T over the next five years in our dams, bridges, electric power grids, public transit, school facilities and aviation infrastructure.

Geno would have found it publicly immoral for the government to distort scientific findings to fit its political agenda - and to fail to

replicate to scale scientifically proven models that can significantly reduce poverty and develop neighborhoods such as the ninth ward of New Orleans. Examples of success include adequately funded Head Start, youth safe havens after school, full service community schools where nonprofits locate in the school, Quantum Opportunities computer-based remedial education to prevent dropouts in inner-city high schools, proven job training (not work first) like Job Corps nationally and the Argus Learning for Living Center in the South Bronx, community development corporations like the New Community Corporation in Newark, community-based banking modeled after the South Shore Bank in Chicago and problem-oriented, community-based policing to stabilize neighborhoods so that development, training and learning can proceed as multiple solutions, all targeted to the same neighborhoods.

Shortly before his death in 1984, Geno explored the horror of South Africa's apartheid townships and visited with Bishop Desmond Tutu. Today Geno might ask why our faith-based government hasn't rewarded the South African democracy with a Marshall Plan – and why, by contrast, we kowtow to an authoritarian, undemocratic, union-prohibiting, atheist China where new millionaires create “concubine villages” for their mistresses in enterprise zones like Shenzhen.

In his biography, Lawrence O'Rourke describes how Geno was the first to make self-help development grants in the U.S. directly to neighborhood-based nonprofit organizations, which are the institutional vehicles for so much of what works for the truly disadvantaged at the grassroots. Yet he probably funded more secular than faith-based nonprofits. That was far sighted. Today, there is no scientific evidence that, overall, faith-based nonprofits perform better than secular nonprofits. In scores of evaluations over 25 years, the Eisenhower Foundation has found that the key to indigenous nonprofit organization success is not based on faith-based versus secular, but on the institutional capacity of an organization. Successful grassroots nonprofits are well-managed financially and organizationally, have effective directors on their boards, possess dynamic staff leadership, are successful in fundraising, and are embraced by the community.

The need, then, is to invest in institutional capacity and reverse the current federal trend of starving successful secular organizations through stealth reductions in the discretionary domestic budget while financially and politically courting faith-based schemes, many of which are poorly managed.

Geno Baroni had deep confidence in the wisdom of ordinary people. He said “policy is people.” Geno’s organizing progression was from the individual heart, to committees, to coalitions. If we are to invest in human capital, Geno believed we must find the right language to bring people together, to reverse what is now the divisive winner-take-all politics of Washington. Geno said the way to break down walls was to build bridges. As he did in a famous speech he orchestrated in a Polish Catholic neighborhood in Pittsburgh in 1976, Geno brilliantly synthesized such grassroots coalition-building with public morality, bread-and-butter, pocketbook concerns of average citizens, and neighborhood values. He built coalitions of racial minorities and white urban ethnics; Protestants, Jews and Catholics; and secular and faith-based groups. The coalitions were so politically effective in the late 1970s that the ruling white elite ripped them apart in the racial-scare politics of the 1980s.

We must return to coalition building today, as part of the daily dialogues with friends and neighbors that is critical in strengthening an alternative infrastructure of common-sense solutions in America. A public-morality movement must follow Geno’s advice: to tell stories, listen to the stories of others, and talk to anyone (you can never tell when someone is ready to be won over). Geno believed that events don’t happen unless they are duly and accurately reported in the media. “Power feeds on news and news on power,” he said. “Seize a crisis, or, if necessary, create one...Timing is critical.”

Father William Byron, the former president of Catholic University, correctly believes it is time to codify the “Baroni Principles” for creating a conventional wisdom of public morality, developing neighborhoods and re-creating coalitions – in a way similar to the manner in which Maria Montessori’s principles have produced a Montessori Method of early childhood education. And, I might add, similar to the way the principles of Paul Wellstone and George Lakoff are being codified and carried out. Baroni Centers should be independent of government, financed by MoveOn.com-type Internet fundraising with the average citizens in whose wisdom Geno had such faith, and by philanthropists willing to take the risk.

Most civilizations fall not from external threat but from internal decay. To act, in a time of internal decay, as now, we must remember that Geno always said: "It is easier to beg forgiveness than to request permission."

Alan Curtis is president and CEO of the Eisenhower Foundation and editor of *Patriotism, Democracy and Common Sense* (Roman and Littlefield).

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