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## Anthony Basil Taylor: Observations about the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) efforts in OKC



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### Observations about the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) efforts in OKC

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Mon at 2:18pm

Observations about the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) efforts in Oklahoma City. This is in response to a number of emails I have received about IAF.

A number of people have written me about the community organizing group IAF, about which people seem to have a great deal of fear. I am always surprised at how much fear even the smallest attempts at working for social justice can generate. There is an old saying that I find helpful in dealing with things like this: "The perfect is the enemy of the good"—meaning that without a certain amount of ambiguity tolerance, you'll never get anything done. No one claims that IAF is perfect, but there's a lot of good it can do—and it seems to me that many of those who most oppose it do not intend to actively pursue any alternate approach to achieve the same goals—most would rather just not do anything at all. Why? Many of us are, quite frankly, already comfortable with the way things are now—the plight of the poor is hard to take all that seriously if we have never really experienced it ourselves. Moreover, change can be threatening and we certainly don't like conflict. I hope the following observations about IAF as I understand it will bring some light to a topic that has already generated far too much heat:

1. Every IAF group is independent and chooses for itself which projects it will undertake. If a given parish participates, you can be sure that the IAF group to which it belongs will not undertake any project that is contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church. Why? Because the projects are chosen by consensus and you are at the table when the choices are made...and can exercise, in effect, veto power if something is proposed that is contrary to the faith. You also have the option of simply quitting if working together no longer "works." What could happen, however, is that a project acceptable to you might get chosen that is not your highest priority since some other participant might not be willing to go along with your highest priority items. But consensus does assure that no group is forced to act contrary to its beliefs.

2. Because each IAF group is independent, what other groups do elsewhere (say where there is no Catholic participation) is irrelevant because IAF projects are local. Its sort of like what they do at the state legislature in Utah is irrelevant to what you might want to do in Oklahoma.

3. The sort of “compromise” skills developed in groups like IAF are for the purpose of helping members of the otherwise very disparate group reach consensus on the choice of projects on which they can work together. What is at issue here is not compromise (as in betrayal of) core values, as some seem to fear, but rather developing a tool for overcoming impasses in the effort to reach consensus. You will notice that the USCCB does this all the time in lobbying Congress. For instance: even though abortion is immoral even in cases of rape and incest, and even to save the life of the mother, the USCCB is willing to go along with these exceptions because in practical terms, without this compromise, no anti-abortion legislation has any possibility of being passed. Preventing all other abortions (99% of abortions?) would be such a great improvement over current law that the USCCB is willing to compromise on this point. Is it in favor of that 1% of abortions that remain legal? No, of course not. But in this instance, the all-or-nothing insistence on a perfect anti-abortion law would result in a greater evil (more abortions) where settling for a lesser good—an attainable-though-imperfect law—results in fewer abortions. This does not mean that we abandon the goal of eliminating all abortions, but we can endorse it because it is a step in the right direction.

4. Some express concern about moral relativism, moral rationalization and supposed Machiavellian political activism on the part of IAF. Many of these concerns come from reading the more radical writings of Saul Alinsky who was very instrumental in founding IAF, but this is really a “red herring.” The reason is that each IAF group is autonomous and decides for itself the approach it will take, such that those who participate can make sure that their group avoids doing anything that they find objectionable. And on this topic, I think worries about Saul Alinsky and his writings are exaggerated.

People 230 years ago had similar worries about Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, etc. Though they were Deists (in effect, the “atheists” of their day), they did have valuable—though controversial—insights and a vision about how to make the world a better place...most of which the current “powers that be” found very troubling. Not all of their ideas have borne the test of time, but subsequent generations have built successfully on the foundation they laid, modifying it in very significant ways. The net result is the still-evolving political system we have today, which though imperfect, is still much better than the monarchical system it replaced. So also Saul Alinsky has valuable—though controversial—insights to offer. Probably not all of his ideas will bear the test of time either, but he does offer us a foundation from which to begin our efforts to make the world a better place today. Individual IAF groups evolve just like any other group of people, modifying their approach in ways that reflect the vision of the participants and the requirements of the problems being tackled at the time.

5. Some have picked up on troubling language in some of Saul Alinsky’s writings that reflect tactics that we could never endorse, for instance: demonizing one’s adversaries. But this is nothing new with Alinsky—this unworthy tactic has been around since the dawn of time and IAF participants are fully capable of making sure that their group does not engage in this sort of un-Christian (and ultimately self-defeating) behavior. Moreover, I must tell you that I hear a lot more demonizing language coming from those who oppose IAF and other community

organizing efforts than I do coming from those who work to improve the lot of the poor! It seems to me that if those who are so fearful of IAF would just get involved in the process with an open mind and an open heart, everyone would benefit!

6. Surely you realize that there are lots of social ills that are crying out for redress, about which we are called to respond...and about which there is no ambiguity in Church teaching, for instance: the excessive and oppressive economic disparities between persons and peoples, addressed so eloquently by Pope Benedict XVI in his recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. The strength of groups like IAF is precisely that they provide us a way to work together with other non-Catholic (and even non-Christian) groups on matters of shared concern—and thus provide us with an opportunity for practical, grass-roots ecumenical collaboration. This is not likely to happen if we limit ourselves to more narrowly conceived in-house efforts.

While I was still the pastor of Sacred Heart parish in Oklahoma City, I met with the representatives of IAF and we were still making plans to participate in this effort when I was named bishop of Little Rock. If I were still there, I am sure that we would have pursued this further—not because IAF is perfect, but because: 1) in practical terms, nothing better was being proposed and the alternative was to do nothing, which would be worse—a missed opportunity to do good, and 2) by “being at the table” right from the beginning, we could ensure that we could endorse with a clear conscience everything that IAF did locally—knowing that we could veto anything we could not live with and/or withdraw from the entire effort if necessary.

I hope this is helpful.