

The tsunamis in the Indian Ocean last week have caused unimaginable damage, injury, illness and loss of life. The scale of this tragedy brings heartache to the world. The United States and other nations are helping those in need, and Catholic Relief Services is also on the job. Our bishops urge us to pray for the victims and to contribute to their support. We'll have a second collection next weekend to lend our help.

In the midst of a frustrating week, an agent of the United Nations complained that the rich countries of the world were stingy in their response. Secretary of State Colin Powell and others have objected that we are exceptionally generous to people in need. In terms of total dollars, the United States contributes more strongly to international relief than any other nation of the world. But we are vulnerable to the accusation because figuring foreign aid as a percentage of gross national product, we rank among the least contributors. Americans live amid tremendous affluence compared with the rest of the world, though we hardly realize it. If you have running water, a heated home in winter and a job that pays more than \$1 a day, you are far better off than most of the rest of the world.

Pope John Paul II delivers a message for the World Day of Peace every January 1st. This year, among his many ideas for peace, he endorses foreign financial aid. He says, "the only really effective means of enabling [nations] to deal with the grave problem of poverty is to provide them with the necessary resources through *foreign financial aid* — public and private." I often write to public officials encouraging their support for efforts like the Millennium Challenge Account, which links foreign aid to real development in other countries, with the goal of minimizing global poverty in this new millennium. On the whole, our senators and representatives favor the idea, but some of them hesitate to support the needy of other nations if it means limiting funds for our Department of Defense.

As individuals, we can help the poor around the world by writing to congress and privately contributing as we are able. And very practically, we can take stock of how we live our own lives. In this new year, could we live more simply so that we can contribute more generously to the poor? Can we conserve our resources and make the earth more able to care for the needy elsewhere? Can we live more peacefully at home, building a world where problems are resolved not by violence and anger, but with charity?

In today's first reading, Isaiah envisions the whole earth covered in darkness – all the nations covered with thick clouds. But the Lord shines upon Jerusalem, and all the nations of the world are able to walk because of the light shining from that city. We hear that reading on Epiphany because it foreshadows the star that guided the magi. Coming from different nations of the world, they found Christ because of the light that guided them there. When we live in peace and charity, the people who see us will find Christ, because his light will shine through us.