

The Food Crisis and the Church

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My comments are based on the assumption that there is a global food crisis and that it will be with us for some time. In discussing it here my scope is quite limited. I wish to focus on the unique relationship which the United States has to the global problem and the consequent special responsibility which the Christian community in the United States has for the problem.

The presentation will involve three steps: *first*, an analysis of the factual dimensions of the food crisis and the basic moral issues it poses; *second*, a description of why and how the United States bears a unique responsibility for the food question; *third*, a proposal regarding the potential of the Church in the United States to address the question of global and domestic hunger.

I. The Food Crisis: Empirical and Ethical Dimensions

A. The Empirical Dimensions

As a starting point for understanding the dimensions of the global food crisis we can use a statement taken from the United Nations' assessment of the food situation drawn up prior to the Food Conference in Rome: "History records more acute shortages in individual countries, but it is doubtful whether such a critical food situation has ever been so world-wide."

In understanding the importance of this analysis both the speed with which the crisis came upon us and the scope of its implications are crucial. The food crisis emerged in 1972 when global production

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declined for the first time in twenty years; between 1972 and 1973 the wheat stocks of exporting countries plunged from 49 million to 29 million tons. Global food reserves have fallen from a previous supply of 95 to 22 days.

The causes of the global food crisis are multiple and complex. They are comprised of a set of inter-related forces, all of which apply pressure on the food supply. My purpose in this presentation is more to identify these causes than to analyze them in detail.

1. *Food and Population*: Increasing population growth does exert acute pressure on the food supply. Given existing patterns of population growth at 2 per cent per annum, it will be necessary to double the world's food supply within the next generation to maintain even present per capita consumption.

2. *Food and Consumption*: The race between food and people has been a constant concern. A new pressure on the food supply is patterns of consumption—not how many people there are in the world, but how some people eat. The pattern of consumption in the industrialized nations places a severe, substantial strain on the supply of grain, which is the basic staple for most of the people of the world. Rising affluence is linked with rising consumption of meat products, which in turn consume massive amounts of grain.

3. *Climatic Changes*: Climatic changes in certain critical hunger areas like the Sahelian region of Africa have transformed these areas from hunger to starvation condition.

4. *Oil and Energy*: The quadrupling of oil prices within the last year has placed severe pressure on the foreign-exchange balances of all countries, but especially the poor ones. The need to meet the market price of oil has made it necessary for many developing countries to cut back on the importation of food.

The complexity of the causes of the food crisis should not blind us to the clarity of its consequences. The effects of the food crisis range from escalating prices and changing diets here in the United States to increasing hunger and malnutrition in some countries, to the specter of starvation hanging over an already devastated India, Bangladesh, and parts of Africa. The statistics hide the human reality of the problem, but they at least indicate the dimensions of our moral and political dilemma:

—in the United States, food prices have risen 54 per cent in twelve months;

—the United Nations estimates that in Asia and Africa 25-30 per cent of the population suffers from undernourishment;

—the public media estimate that over 400,000,000 people are threatened with starvation in the world, of which at least 10,000,000 seem certain to die this year.

B. The Pattern of Interdependence

As complex as the food crisis is in itself, it must be seen as part of a larger pattern. Food fits into a matrix of several issues, all of which point toward the growing interdependence of the globe. The food crisis is linked directly and systematically with questions of environment, population, economic relationships, and political power. This web of issues is the framework for our material interdependence.

The meaning of interdependence is that we now live locked together in a limited globe. Locked together, we are vulnerable to each other's actions and responsible for each other's lives. In the energy crisis we are on the receiving end of vulnerability, but in the food crisis we are in the position of power and possession. Our personal and policy choices can mean the difference of life or death for others.

Being locked together in a united globe means that the total answer to meeting the issues before us cannot simply be more of everything. Hence the problem of distributive justice becomes more pressing every day. As Pope Paul said in his address to the Food Conference, elementary social justice consists not only in not stealing but in knowing how to share.

The food crisis, in the Pope's words, is a crisis of solidarity and civilization. It is the prism through which we can perceive the moral demands of living in our interdependent world. At least three classical moral issues confront us in the food crisis.

C. The Ethical Issues

1. *Charity or Justice: How We Define the Problem.*

The way in which we define the food problem is critical because it is in light of this that we understand our moral responsibility. The food issue has been consistently put before the American people by Administration spokesmen as a question of humanitarian charity and relief. I submit this description distorts the problem and dilutes the nature of the moral claims before us.

It distorts the problem because in the public mind charity is commonly understood as sharing our surplus goods with the needy from a motive of generosity. The degree of obligation involved is understood as something above and beyond our responsibilities and obligation. It is a "supererogatory" work. This conception of the food problem distorts the issue because in the past food aid was in fact sharing our surplus with others, while today it is a very different question. In the postwar years, with a surplus of grain in the United States, it was both humanitarian impulse and programmatic calculation which led us to sponsor "Food for Peace." Today our surplus is gone; we are asked now not to share our surplus but to share our scarcity. Hence, the problem is not one of charity, but justice: how to adjudicate competing claims to scarce resources.

A conception of food aid as charity also dilutes the choice we face as a nation and a church. A view of the problem in terms of charity makes it easier for

us as a nation to choose not to increase aid, as we did in August in Rome. If our responsibility is in charity, the perception of the problem is that we have already proven ourselves morally responsible; the only question is whether we choose to be exceedingly generous.

On the other hand, a conception of the food crisis in terms of social justice yields a radically different perception of the problem. In the perception of justice, scarcity does not dissolve our moral responsibility, it rather intensifies the nature of the moral choice. To see the food crisis in terms of justice means to begin where the synodal fathers began and Pope Paul began in his speech to the Food Conference, with the *right to eat* as a basic human right owed to each person. If the right is being denied when the means are available to fulfill it, then, said the Pope, it is time to look at our mechanisms of dealing with food. This means looking at the systems and structures of production and distribution by which we determine what happens to food in an interdependent world.

The perception of social justice focuses not upon our motive for giving but upon the substance of our policy: aid, trade, corporate practices, and political purposes. Such a structural approach poses our moral responsibility not in terms of the option of charity but in terms of the duty of justice. To fail to respond to the right to eat is not to fail in generosity but in minimal human decency. It defies the bonds of solidarity needed to keep an interdependent world civil and humane.

2. *Conflicting Rights: To Eat and to Own.* Confronting the food crisis in terms of social justice means facing the question whether food is simply a matter of money and markets or whether it has a unique significance as a sacred trust. A social justice view argues that if the right to eat can be met, but is not being met, then it is necessary to ask what are the objective obstacles which stand in the way. For example, the law of the market, like any human creation, has its moral limits; if using it as the sole mechanism of distribution means that those most in need will not be fed, then the law of the market should be modified. In a limited, interdependent globe this is not a giveaway program but a means of meeting minimal justice.

3. *The Common Good: National and International.* To speak of modifying our domestic patterns of behavior to meet a pressing international need raises the third moral problem. Pope John indeed could be called the moral prophet of interdependence because of his expansion in *Mater et Magistra* of the traditional concept of the common good from its national focus to include the international community. If we move to meet starvation internationally it will have implications for our domestic life. In an interdependent world, finding a way to choose while taking both domestic and international needs seri-

ously is the essence of moral policy. The fact that tension exists does not dissolve our responsibility, but is precisely what national and international common good is about. How do we act responsibly toward all our neighbors?

Such a question raises the broad issue of what precisely is the relationship of the United States to the global food problem.

II. The United States and the Food Crisis

The premise of this presentation is that the United States bears a unique relationship to the problem of global hunger. That relationship is less a matter of choice than of fate; it flows from the position we hold in the system of food production and distribution. In an interdependent world the key policy issue is what rules will, in fact, govern control and distribution of essential resources. Presently, the United States and Canada control more of the world's exportable food supply than the Arab nations do of oil. What we do in this position can well be a procedural precedent-setting action in international affairs.

This international position cannot be adequately evaluated, however, apart from a changed domestic picture. As I have said, we have moved, vis-à-vis food supplies, to one of scarcity. It is no longer in our self-interest to help feed the hungry; it will require some difficult domestic choices. Indeed, the international food crisis exists at a time of escalating domestic prices, of economic recession and rapidly expanding unemployment. The implications of these facts must be taken into account. Stories of the elderly eating dog food, of children no longer able to buy school lunches, and of a rash of petty thievery in supermarkets by people who have never stolen anything show the human face of the domestic food problem.

We cannot deal with our international responsibility unless we deal with domestic needs. However, to use our domestic situation to dissolve our international responsibility is to open ourselves to a horrendous future. A century ago Dostoevsky said that the death of one innocent child is enough to destroy belief in God; today we know how many innocent children die, and we often know why they die. We even know approximately how many will die of hunger this year.

Such a prospect forces us to assess the choices we have before us. A comprehensive approach to the food problem requires an international and a domestic component.

—Internationally, the short-term need is for an immediate increase in emergency aid to the starving; for better or worse we are the primary source for this aid. In Rome we refused to increase our support, but the issue can be reopened in the public debate.

—A middle-range need is an international food

reserve, which also is now in doubt.

—The long-term problem is to provide financial and technical assistance in cooperation with other industrialized nations (and, one hopes, the OPEC countries), aimed at bringing the affected nations to a level of self-sufficiency.

Simply to state these objectives is not enough. Any expanded food aid would come through the U. S. Government's PL 480 program. But as a condition for expansion the PL 480 program should be carefully examined. There is a significant body of evidence which points toward the conclusion that in the past year the PL 480 program has been extensively used for political purposes. Such a conclusion is reflected in a comparison of where the most acute hunger is in the globe and where our food aid, mainly under Title I, went in fiscal 1974. South Vietnam, for instance, received about seven times the assistance of Bangladesh; Cambodia received twice as much aid as the Sahelian states. In requests for fiscal 1975 South Vietnam is scheduled to receive four times the aid to Bangladesh; Cambodia about twelve times the aid requested for the Sahel. In brief, on the international level the need is for a restructured program which then would be expanded.

Domestically, there are several elements needed as a foundation for the international food policy.

—First, in responding to international needs, the principle should be that the burden will be shared equitably in the United States; steps need to be taken so that those least able to pay—the middle and lower classes, the elderly, the unemployed—do not bear the major burden.

—Second, in line with this principle, specific measures, such as an increased food stamp program, an expanded school lunch program, a review of land use policy, and special consideration for impacted groups, are necessary.

—Third, specific and intensive consideration must be given to the farmers so that they are guaranteed a just and stable income. They are clearly not the villains of the piece and should not be treated as such.

Finally, at the head of our domestic and international choices on food stands the role of the large corporations which are responsible for processing and marketing food. Presently in the United States it is estimated that five corporations control 90 per cent of the world's grain reserves. Four of the five corporations are privately held, which means that although they control one of our most vital commodities, they are not required by law to give an accounting to either the public or the federal government of these operations. This subject is serious and complex; I cannot deal adequately with it here. However, it is impossible to analyze the food crisis without asking whether such power over a vital resource should exist without adequate public control and scrutiny.



III. The Church and the Food Crisis

In light of this too brief analysis of the empirical and ethical dimensions of the food question I would propose now some suggestions about the potential of the Church to contribute to the political, economic, and moral dilemma we face. As a first point, the perspective we have is crucial. The food problem is a long-term problem; it is part of the pattern of interdependence emerging in the globe. The Church's response to the problem should be long-term in conception and implementation; it should consist of a series of interrelated actions at the level of public policy, community education, and pastoral care.

A. *Public Policy*: At this level the Church has the potential of participating as a significant national institution in the policy debate and legislative process which will ultimately shape our food policy. The lines of a policy approach and legislative strategy are in the statement of the USCC Administrative Board last September. If this strategy is adopted as a priority item, the Church could be significantly present in a public arena in support of the following:

—Internationally: a restricted food policy including increased emergency aid, a grain reserve, and technical assistance for other nations, with food seen as a trust to be shared, not a weapon to be used.

—Domestically: a food program which is part of a larger economic strategy designed to control food prices for the consumer, to analyze the role of the corporations in the system of processing and marketing, to provide for the needs of farmers, and to pay special attention to the old, unemployed, and young.

B. *Community Education*: One of the needs of the moment is to keep the food question before the public; this was accomplished last summer by the Food Conference. It would be naive, however, to think that the continuing food problem will compete successfully with the Middle East, détente, the new Congress, or even the NFL Game of the Week. The Church as both an educational institution and a communications network can design its priorities so that it seeks through adult and child education, as well as through the public and religious media, to maintain the factual and moral dimensions of the food crisis as current news.

C. *Pastoral Care*: The pastoral presence of the Church in the midst of the Christian community is a unique resource for ministering to the needs of the hungry and for making the case for the hungry of other lands in their claim on our consciousness.

1. *Finding and Feeding the Hungry*: Taking hunger seriously as a pastoral priority means using all measures necessary to find the hungry in our midst.

This involves both personal means of increasing pastoral perception of the problem as well as institutional means of expanding and intensifying our efforts through church agencies such as Catholic Charities, St. Vincent de Paul Societies, The Campaign for Human Development, and Catholic Relief Services.

2. *Lifestyle Issues*: Food as part of the problem of living together in a limited world points to the topic of lifestyle; this does not concern all of our constituency—some have no choices to make because of economic constraints. For others, however, some changes in the way we live and eat are real possibilities. Indeed, the food issue can help us think through the substantial problem of a consumer culture and Christian values. What values should animate our lifestyle?

3. *Fasting and Abstinence*: One dimension of lifestyle emerging from the heart of Catholic tradition is the use of fasting and abstinence, now governed by a social purpose of saving in order to share with others. Here again many of our people have been forced to become vegetarians because of food prices. Priests and religious, however, could be specifically urged to be examples of austerity and witnesses to a social asceticism involving some form of fast and abstinence.

4. *Liturgy*: The themes of the liturgy, special seasons like Advent and Lent, as well as significant days like rogation days, could be used as the foundation for a total program of worship, education, asceticism, and public action regarding the food crisis.

In such a pastoral approach the integrity of finding ways to link personal actions with public programs and purposes is critically important. Our response to the food crisis should emerge from the fabric of faith and touch the fabric of our society.



I have suggested several large undertakings for the Church in a broad agenda of activity. In defense I can only offer the consequence of inaction, as stated best by C. P. Snow: When asked whether he feared a violent revolution of the hungry poor against those of us in the industrialized nations, Snow responded that the real threat was something very different: that we would watch them starve on color T.V. We are too close to that prospect today not to do all that is in our power to build a different kind of world order.