

FROM THE PASTOR'S



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WORLD HUNGER— PROBLEM & SOLUTIONS

A couple of weeks ago I said that 30,000 people a day die of hunger. When we think of hungry people most of us rightly think of the poor in poor countries. Few of us think of hungry people here in the United States. We have millions of hungry children and adults here at home as the following article will show. In the October edition of *U.S. Catholic* there was an article called *Recipe for a Hungry Planet* by Tara Dix. The following are some excerpts.

Facts are facts: There is enough food in the world to feed the world. So why do 1 billion still go hungry? Why do 30,000 die every day of starvation? And why does the number of hungry people rise at a rate of 5 million per year?

Catholic Relief Services' food aid expert William Lynch says it is quite simply a lack of desire. "Of course there is enough food to give to those who need it," he says. "But is there the will? Absolutely not."

Most agree the eradication of hunger and poverty depends on a combination of person-to-person compassion in the form of organized aid as well as an overhaul of societal and civic structures that prevent equitable access to food. The task seems Herculean, and the average Joe is easily discouraged.

Still, one would be hard-pressed to find a person of faith who doesn't see feeding the hungry as part of a Christian's duty. "The theme of meals and eating permeates the gospels," says Mark Brinkmoeller, director of church relations for Bread for the World, an anti-hunger organization. "In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, 'Whom have you fed?' And we will be judged on this. This is intrinsic to our faith."

Sen. George McGovern, former ambassador to the United Nations' food agency and coauthor of *Ending Hunger Now* (Augsburg Fortress), puts it in blunt terms: "If we fail to do this we will stand condemned before the bar of history. In that case, shame on you, and shame on me."

The biggest problem facing the hungry is the poverty trap: the cyclical combination of no money, no food, and no health care. Malnutrition leads to illness; illness drains financial resources; drained finances lead to malnutrition. Factor in a lack of access to education, financial services, or credit—all of which prevent upward economic mobility—and you've got a person who is—in a word—trapped.

On the international scene, we see photographs of emaciated victims of famine caused by drought, civil war, or natural disaster. We see children with distended bellies and vacant eyes, collarbones and shoulder blades protruding. These are the extreme, but all too frequent, cases. About 8 percent of child deaths from starvation are a result of emergency food shortage.

In our own country we may not see hunger the way we can in the midst of international crises, but it's there: in students who can't concentrate because their stomachs are empty, in elderly people who skip meals, and in parents who forego their own needs so that their kids can eat. America's Second Harvest served 25.3 million Americans with emergency food aid last year, including almost 9 million children.

Meanwhile thousands of people look for ways to fill all these empty bellies, and among them a thousand different approaches can be found. Here are five of those ways and what you can do to join the effort.

1. Give a man a fish

The secret to Heifer International's success is that animals reproduce, says Ray White, one of Heifer's directors, of the worldwide organization that provides domestic animals to needy families in the United States and abroad. "If you put two tractors together, you don't get a third tractor," he says.

From water buffalo, cows, and sheep to rabbits, chickens, and honey-bees, Heifer provides animals that will be a source of income, food, or both, and gives people the tools they will need to succeed, like training in animal care, agricultural techniques, finances, marketing, reading, and writing. Recipients promise to pass on the gift by donating at least one of their animal's offspring to a neighbor in need.

White recently returned from a Heifer project in Nepal, where a women's cooperative received a small herd of goats several years ago. The co-op now has more than \$10,000 in a bank savings account and was able to pass on 56 goats—more than they started with—to another women's co-op.

2. This time it's political

Bread for the World (BFW) believes that hunger is indeed a political problem, so it lobbies the U.S. government to adopt or strengthen legislation that will get food to those who need it. BFW looks both at

domestic hunger—including dispelling the myth that there is no domestic hunger with facts such as “14 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet” - and channeling U.S. funds to international food aid.

“The difficulty we face, though, is that there is so little faith in government and its ability to solve problems. When you serve at a food pantry, you see the person actually receive the can of food you give; it’s tangible. But through government there is a disconnect.”

BFW provides background on legislation, then asks people to write letters to their congressional representatives or the President. They also encourage phone calls and visits to representatives.

BFW’s efforts, along with its lobbying partners on Capitol Hill, including Catholic Charities and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, secured a \$1.4 billion increase in foreign aid earmarked for poverty relief in the 2007 budget. They also helped to avoid major cuts proposed to food stamps.

Ending world hunger will take the political will of the world as well as the United States. According to Jeffrey Sachs, economist and founder of Millennium Promise, the question is not “Can rich countries afford to help the poor ones?” but “Can the rich afford not to?” His answer, of course, is no. And while Sachs believes in the fundamental moral obligation to alleviate the poverty and hunger around the world, his book *The End of Poverty* (Penguin) appeals even more to the purely economic rationale.

Sachs suggest a five-fold approach for international investment. All five elements must be implemented simultaneously to make improvements that last: agriculture, healthcare, education, infrastructure, and safe drinking water and sanitation.

Sachs insists that international funds at even 0.5 percent of rich-world GDP would be enough to end extreme poverty in the world. He cites the example of Ghana, which developed a poverty reduction strategy in 2002 that called for \$8 billion in foreign aid over five years. Sachs calls the strategy “exceptionally well-designed” with high potential for success. But donors would only come up with \$2 billion, and Ghana’s attempt at attacking poverty came up woefully short.

Sachs may succeed where others have failed with his ability to popularize the economics of poverty eradication. He’s toured Africa on highly publicized trips with superstars Bono and Angelina Jolie, who are happy to lend their names and money to the effort. Students at Columbia University were even selling T-shirts that read “Jeff Sachs is my homeboy.”

3. Bank it

A major problem for most poor people is that they

do not have access to financial services such as lines of credit, savings accounts, or any kind of financial advice or planning. In most of the developing world, bank fees for a simple account are out of reach. As such, cash hidden under a mattress or in a jar is about the only choice.

A \$50 loan could be enough capital to start a fruit stand or a sewing shop. In theory, a person would then be able to support herself sufficiently, as well as pay back the loan over time.

Susy Cheston is senior vice president of Opportunity International, a Christian microfinance organization that serves nearly 1 million clients with small loans. Cheston tells the story of Ana Martinex, a mother of five children in El Salvador. His family lost everything they had in an earthquake, and Martinez’s husband could not find work. They lived in a shantytown in a one-room, corrugated metal house with no plumbing or electricity. But Ana could make beautiful piñatas. She told Cheston, “If I had some paper and materials, I could sell so many of these.”

So Cheston arranged for a \$100 loan, which Martinez used to buy paper, glue, and chicken wire. She quickly increased her business to take in \$4 per day, then \$6 a day. The first things she did were to enroll her children in school and buy them shoes. A few years later they moved into a three room concrete home with a roof, electricity, and plumbing.

Well-meaning people often ask Cheston how they can send shoes to the children in El Salvador. “I say to them, ‘We certainly could have bought shoes and sent them to Ana, but instead we invested \$100 so she was able to buy them herself.’ Most importantly she has the pride, dignity, and joy of being able to care for her own children.”

When Muhammad Yunus started lending money to poor people, critics said he would never see it repaid. But in fact Yunus found the opposite to be true, from cash loans out of his own pocket, he built the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, which boasts a 99 percent repayment rate, much higher than that of commercial lenders or credit cards. The recipient of the 2006 Noble Peace Prize, Grameen Bank now has 6.39 million borrowers, 96 percent of whom are women, and provides services in 69,140 villages.

4. You are what you eat

In contrast, *Diet for a Small Planet* (Ballantine) author Francis Moore Lappe, who credits Catholic social teaching as one of her influences, says that higher agricultural yields are simply not the answer, since there is already enough food to feed the whole planet yet the food is not distributed equally.

The root of the trouble is the centralization of economic power: Those who have power dictate what

foods are produced and how they are made available. Those who don't have power are at the mercy of the system. "I came to see how our production system treats even an essential ingredient of life itself-food-as just another commodity, totally divorcing itself from human need," Lappe says.


A prime symptom of this problem, says Lappe, is that nearly half of all grain worldwide is fed to livestock. In the United States it takes an average of 16 pounds of grain fed to cows to produce one pound of beef. Lappe says a meat-centered diet is inherently wasteful, because humans can get protein from plant sources, and Americans already eat twice the amount of protein their bodies can use. In short, wealthier nations create a market demand for meat, so grain gets fed to livestock, and those who cannot afford meat are left without.

Interestingly Lappe is not a vegetarian. "What I advocate is the return to the traditional diet on which our bodies evolved. Traditionally the human diet has centered on plant foods with animal foods playing a supplementary role," she says.

Lappe's daughter, Anna Lappe, has joined the fight for good equality and together they founded the Small Planet Institute. "We know we have persistent hunger because of lack of democracy, not lack of food," says Anna. "People who go hungry have a lack of power over their own food choices. We can shift food democracy by using our own power to choose food from local sources."

For a list of resources for fighting world hunger, visit uscatholic.org

Have a blessed week,



What can you do to end hunger?

- Give a llama, goat, cow, or rabbits through Heifer International for Christmas and birthday gifts, or in honor of a loved one who has passed away (heifer.org).
- Donate to Catholic Relief Services (crs.org), America's Second Harvest (secondharvest.org), or Heifer International.
- Volunteer at your local food bank or serve meals in a homeless shelter.
- Take action through Bread for the World. Call or visit you're your congressperson and urge him or her to support current legislative priorities (bread.org).
- Give money to a donation-based microfinance institution, such as Opportunity International (opportunity.org), FINCA (villagebanking.org), Grameen Bank (Grameenfoundation.org), or Unitus (unitus.org) Catholic Relief Services also has microfinance programs.

Visit uscatholic.org for more ideas

Facts and Figures on Health

- Poor nutrition and calorie deficiencies cause nearly one in three people to die prematurely or have disabilities, according to the World Health Organization.
- Infants and children are among the most at risk of undernourishment.
- In 2005, about 10.1 million children died before they reached their fifth birthday. Almost all of these deaths occurred in developing countries.
- The four most common childhood illnesses are diarrhea, acute respiratory illness, malaria and measles. Each of these illnesses is both preventable and treatable. Yet, again, poverty interferes in parents' ability to access immunizations and medicines. Chronic undernourishment on top of insufficient treatment greatly increases a child's risk of death.