

Sustainable Development and Catholic Social Thought: Ending Extreme Hunger

“Every person has a right to life and to the material and spiritual support required to live a truly human existence. The right to a truly human life logically leads to the right to enough food to sustain a life with dignity. The poverty and hunger that diminish the lives of millions in our own land and in so many other countries are fundamental threats to human life and dignity and demand a response from believers.”

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *For I Was Hungry And You Gave Me Food*

As a result of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000 to 2015), a coordinated worldwide effort has succeeded in lessening extreme hunger around the world. However, hunger still affects too many children, women, and men. One in nine people (795 million) are undernourished, and three million children die each year from lack of access healthy food. While the vast majority of the world’s hungry population lives in developing countries, hunger starvation persists in even the most prosperous nations. 49 million Americans are impacted by hunger, malnutrition, and lack of food security, and 1 in 5 American children go to bed hungry every day.

In an effort to address the enduring crisis of poverty, the United Nations has put forth the Sustainable Development Goals, which seek to eradicate hunger world-wide by 2030. Pope John Paul II supported the UN Millennium Development Goals in 2000, and Pope Francis has hailed this most recent effort. As held by Catholic Social Teaching, the right to food is been a central human right connected to the right to life.



Popes Support the Right to Food

In his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII grounded human rights in the principle that “every human being is a person. . . [with] rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from their very nature.” The Pope declared that everyone has the right “to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily

food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally, the necessary social services. As Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J., has stated, “The right to food tops the list of rights because hunger is such a fundamental assault on human life itself—and is so widespread.”

In 2000, Pope John Paul II hailed the U.N. Millennium Development Goals and declared: “Essential food, health care, education, and work are not just the goals of development but they are fundamental rights, which are still denied to millions ... Human rights and human development must walk hand in hand.” John Paul’s concern with the right to food was long-standing. For 24 years, he wrote a message for every World Food Day calling people of faith to create and sustain systems that would allow all people “to share in the fruits of Creation.”

Pope Benedict XVI echoed this call, emphasizing the need for “a network of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water”; “eliminating the structural causes” of food insecurity; “promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries”; “investing in rural infrastructures, irrigation systems, transport, and organization of markets”; and the necessity “to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.”

Pope Francis visited the United Nations World Food Program in 2015 to voice his full support of the newly articulated Sustainable Development Goals and to call attention “to the need to implement sound and consistent projects and promote long-term development programs” so hunger can be eradicated by 2030. He noted that “the world possesses the food, the knowledge, the capacity, and the skills not only to confront the challenges of food insecurity and malnutrition but to end hunger.” Therefore, what we need “is the requisite global public will to embrace the urgency of addressing the right to food for all of humanity.”

The U.S. bishops have followed the lead of our popes and are involved in education and advocacy around hunger and concerns about agriculture and food production. In 2003, they published *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers*, and have continued advocating on issues related to hunger and U.S. farm bills. The bishops declared, “The fact that food is a basic need and a fundamental human right makes food production unique in meeting this essential human need.” They remind us that growing food to feed everyone requires just policies, systems, and structures that govern how we grow, produce, and distribute food.

Matthew 25 describes
how we all will
be judged:
Jesus declares,
“I was hungry
and you fed me.”



Ending Hunger by 2030

The UN Sustainable Development Goals propose to end hunger and ensure that all people—particularly the poor and vulnerable—have access to safe and nutritious food all year round by the year 2030. The U.N. also seeks to end all forms of malnutrition, end the problems of stunted growth and wasting away in children under five years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, and older persons. In order to successfully reach these targets in the next fifteen years, it is necessary to engage in the following strategies:

- Double the agricultural productivity and the incomes of small-scale food producers, particularly those of women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists, and fishers. This is to be achieved through secure and equal access to land, provision of resources and inputs, education, financial services, markets, and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.
- Ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production. These practices must help maintain ecosystems; strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding, and other disasters; and progressively improve land and soil quality.
- Maintain genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants, farmed and domesticated animals, and their related wild species through soundly managed seed and plant banks at national, regional, and international levels. Ensure access to, and fair and equitable sharing of, benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge as internationally agreed.
- Increase investment, through enhanced international cooperation, in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development, and plant and livestock gene banks. Enhance agricultural productive capacity in developing countries, with particular attention to the least developed countries.
- Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets. Strategies include the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round of the World Trade Organization.
- Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets and their derivatives, and facilitate timely access to market information in order to limit extreme food price volatility.

Many U.S. faith-based groups, such as Catholic Relief Services and Bread for the World, are joining with organizations around the world to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals. (See the information below to support their efforts.) These goals provide a clear roadmap to end hunger and to provide all members of the human family with a life of dignity.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. The concept of a “right” to food is sometimes difficult for people to understand and accept. Why might this be the case? Why do recent popes and our bishops see food as a human right?
2. Why is setting specific goals and timelines a useful way to accomplish objectives? Why has the United Nations pushed for measurable, benchmark goals to reduce and finally end hunger?
3. There are several bullet points that articulate what has to be done in order to end hunger which include more than simply giving people food, or even giving them modern tools to grow their own food. What among these did you find surprising and/or interesting? What do these measures tell us about the complexity of providing food for everyone? Who has to be involved in making sure all of these things happen? Can you have a role in this?

PRAYER

To feed the world is our challenge,
And we ask for the guidance to understand
The complexity of this undertaking, O Lord.

May we continue to pray and to learn
About food security for all of your children,
Who wait with hope to be called to the table
And to taste the abundance of your Creation.

May we support the UN Sustainable Development Goals
And the organizations who are now working
To make them a reality.

May we, ourselves, be nourished by our willingness
To learn and to act in solidarity
With many others working to end hunger in this world.
Amen.



FAITH IN ACTION

- The US Conference of Catholic Bishops educate and advocate on a wide range of issues related to hunger, food, and agriculture. See <http://bit.ly/1Y71PMa>. Join the Bishops as they promote policies that support the right of healthy food for all.
- Bread for the World has information on the UN Sustainable Goals, and a range of advocacy actions to help support them: <http://bit.ly/2c5zfq6>. Check with them often for new information and advocacy suggestions.

