

Freedom from Hunger

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The 'Freedom from Hunger' campaign has focussed the attention of the more favoured countries on the glaring inequalities that exist in the world today between nations. There is much talk of 'one world', and with the immense speeding up of communications, physically speaking, this concept is now real. But the world is divided into two camps as clearly as when Disraeli wrote about the 'two nations' in Victorian England. On the one hand, there are the 'provided for', those who enjoy this world's goods and live in plenty and luxury; and on the other hand, the 'have-nots' who stagnate in want and are familiar only with the fear of hunger, sickness and death. Far from being filled up, the gap between these two groups is growing wider, for prosperity breeds prosperity, and want engenders want.

The amount of actual hunger and under-nourishment in the world is difficult to calculate, for under-developed countries have under-developed statistics. And scientists differ about what actually constitutes under-feeding in terms of calories and so on. This has led at times to exaggeration. It does not seem at all true, as is sometimes claimed, that two out of three people in the world go to bed hungry. The best evidence, produced by Dr P. V. Sukhatme of FAO in May 1961, estimates the proportion as between ten and fifteen per cent, that is to say between 300 million and 450 million of the inhabitants of the world. Malnutrition is also a scourge of the less developed countries and leads to diseases such as kwashiorkor, pellagra, beriberi, etc. The same report puts the number of those suffering from under-nutrition and malnutrition as fifty per cent of the world's inhabitants.

It is important to realize that the figures for actual hunger in the world have been set too high. Colin Clark has done great service by frequently pointing this out, for the exaggerations have tended to bring about a feeling of hopelessness and despair. But, as Sir John Russell has pointed out, ten to fifteen per cent is certainly a manageable figure. Nevertheless, the thought of at least 300 million fellow inhabitants of the world living in hunger must arouse the compassion and awaken the consciences of Christians.

Pope John XXIII has clearly stated the issue.¹

'You are welcome, for your aims coincide with those of the Church in this matter and the task on which you are engaged seems supremely deserving of our approbation and encouragement. What, in fact, is the Church's task on earth? It is to continue the work of Christ, and it is written of him that "he went about doing good and healing . . ." He also warmly recommended to his followers the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, and the first on the list of these latter is "to feed the hungry".'

Millions of human beings suffer from hunger; others while they do not, strictly speaking, go hungry, are underfed. These are the facts. They must be made known, they must be preached from the house-tops, as the Gospel advises: "Preach ye on the house-tops". Consciences must be awakened to a sense of the responsibility that rests on the human community and on each individual, on the most privileged people especially. Nobody can nowadays offer the excuse, in a world where distances count for nothing, that he is unaware of the needs of his far-away brothers, or that it is not his job to help him. We are all collectively responsible for the undernourished.'

Moreover, the misery and degradation of poverty include more than mere physical hunger. They involve all the evils summed up in the unemotional word, under-development: lack of basic education, lack of decent housing, lack of opportunities for improvement, inability to put into practice the simple rules of hygiene, which would be a defence against mass diseases, lack of industrial development, dearth of adequate capital and savings to make the vicious circle of poverty breeding poverty into a constructive spiral which would narrow the gap between the privileged and the under-privileged. Nor is the hunger for material things alone. The Popes have stressed that a certain modicum of economic prosperity is necessary for the things of the spirit to have a full chance to exercise their influence on ordinary human beings. For example, Pope Pius XII emphasized that

'the normal growth and increase of religious life presupposes a certain measure of healthy economic conditions. Who can resist a pang of emotion upon seeing how economic misery and social evils render Christian life according to the commands of God more difficult and too often demand heroic sacrifices?'

¹In his address to the International Conference organized by F.A.O., 4 May, 1960.

²Address to Members of Italian Catholic Action, 3 May 1951.

Indeed, when we talk of actual acute hunger, although it does exist, we are on less sure ground, statistically, than when we turn to the economic and social conditions which I have indicated, and which are more easily contrasted with those in the prosperous countries of the West. This contrast brings out the glaring inequalities which exist in the world today. Statistics always tend to over-simplification, but a few may be helpful to put the situation in perspective.

In the United States, the population of 176 million people have an annual income of nearly 500,000 million dollars, an average of about 2,800 dollars per head. In free Asia, in Africa and Latin America more than 1,000 million people have an annual income of only 120,000 million dollars or 120 dollars per person. In India, one of the black spots in the world food and population picture, the average annual income is only sixty dollars.

The United States, with only 6.5 per cent of the world's population produces 40 per cent of the value of the total goods and services available to mankind; with 52.4 per cent of the world's population Asia produces 11.5 per cent of the world's annual income.

More and more people are becoming aware of these facts and feel that such conditions offend against justice and charity. God created the goods of this world for the use of all men. Pope Pius XII pointed out

'The fundamental point of the social question is this: that the goods created by God for all men should in the same way reach all . . . justice guiding and charity helping. God does not wish that some should have exaggerated riches, while others are in such straits that they lack the bare necessities of life'.

The words of Our Lord 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat . . . As often as you did it to the least of my brothers you did it to me', give Christians sure guidance for their attitude to these problems.

'Charity begins at home' is a saying of the pagan writer, Terence. It was Christ, the Son of God, who, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, implied that charity begins away from home with people who are not of our country, or race. Or, rather, the concept of home has to be extended to the whole world. The Christian dare not ask for a passport before he thinks fit to do the works of charity, still less of justice.

Applied Christian charity in the sphere of international aid and international justice is still in the embryonic stage. Yet it could and must be a tremendous power, providing the drive for wiping out hunger and poverty which the experts regard as perfectly possible for the first time

in world history.

The wholehearted combined efforts of all Christians throughout the world to put into practice the teaching of the Gospel on the corporal works of mercy would be an overwhelming moral force issuing into practical action to remedy the great scandal of our age: the division of the world into 'haves' and 'have-nots'. This co-operation would not, of course, be a narrowly Christian thing; it would extend to all men of good will, of every religion or of none, who are moved by truly humanitarian ideals.

This moral force must, of course, be geared to the realities of economics, demography and the social sciences. Vague moralizing or intense, but ill-informed, moral indignation, are out of place here. Perhaps in no other field are the words of St Augustine so true: 'Love without knowledge goes astray, knowledge without love puffs up, love with knowledge builds up'.

With Christian love as the motive force, the evils of exploitation, of paternalism, of condescending financial aid with strings attached, and of a new economic imperialism will be avoided. In their place will come a genuine partnership between the developed and the developing nations of the world. This will lead to a balanced growth which will give full scope to their spiritual and cultural heritage, and help them to avoid undue and crippling political rivalry xenophobic nationalism, and the evils of waste and extravagance.

The special role of the Church, as envisaged by Pope John XXIII, is to see to it that this development is not purely economic and materialistic. We do not want a temporal messianism which would provide bread, but which would forget that man does not live by bread alone.

Poverty could be wiped off the face of the earth in this century, it is true; and it is our duty to see to it by hard work and ingenuity that it is. But this must be done without wiping out human values which are what give men human dignity. That is why in face of these great problems—heart-rending as they are—we must not panic and submit to an 'existential' morality which would be prepared to use any means, moral or immoral, to achieve so laudable an end. We must have the courage to face the fact that the poverty and other evils which afflict the less favoured half of the world did not grow up overnight nor will they be banished overnight.

There are some Catholics who feel uneasiness about giving material help. They regard the Church's mission as exclusively spiritual. Their objection might be a valid one if it was help of an exclusively material-

istic kind that we were suggesting. As it is, such objections are contrary to the teaching of the Popes and the practice of nearly two thousand years of the Church's life. Indeed they deserve the implied strictures of the Russian writer Nicholas Berdyaev in the following fine passage in his *Fate of Man in the Modern World*:

'Christian piety all too often has seemed to be a withdrawal from the world and from men, a sort of transcendent egoism, the unwillingness to share the suffering of the world and man. It was not sufficiently infused with Christian love and mercy. It lacked human warmth. And the world has risen in protest against this form of piety, as a refined form of egoism, as indifference to the world's sorrow. Against this protest only a re-born piety can stand. Care for the life of another, even material, bodily care, is spiritual in essence. Bread for myself is a material question: bread for my neighbour is a spiritual question'.

There are others who feel that nothing practical will be done to solve the immense problems at the level of governments: that private charity is unavailing and public aid will not be adequately forthcoming. The 'Freedom from Hunger' Campaign, if it is successful, as we can be sure it will be, will give the lie to both these pessimistic forebodings.

In the middle of June the Acting Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant, proposed a ten-year plan of assistance to under-developed countries to relieve hunger and poverty. With an extension of this plan, which would cost an initial £1,400,000,000 to £1,785,000,000 in extra aid, he said that living standards could be doubled within twenty-five to thirty years.

Such are the dimensions of the problem, and Catholics, above all others, should be the first to recognize the need to do all that is humanly possible to bring food to the hungry and to lessen the injustice that has created such misery to so many.