

Reflections on Poverty



Hunger

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Introduction

Catholic Charities USA *Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America* has four main priorities: to reduce hunger, to ensure universal health care coverage, to foster economic security and to create more affordable housing.

The purpose of this reflection paper is to provide Catholic Charities employees the opportunity to become better acquainted with the Campaign to Reduce Poverty and discover new possibilities for action at the local level concerning the issue of hunger. The method employed is fairly simple. Participants will participate in a process that involves a series of prayer moments, information on church documents and CCUSA's *Poverty in America*, reflection questions, and group discussions. Through content, discussion, prayer and reflection you will be able to discern your personal response and the response of your agency to the hunger crisis in our world.

Opening Prayer

Leader:

Let us take a moment and remind ourselves that we are in the presence of God.

Let us pray. How marvelous is your world O Lord! You have given us the grains of the fields, the water from the seas to sustain and feed us. Help us to be good stewards, to care for the gift we have been given, to ensure that all have enough to eat. As we gather today open our hearts and minds to your wisdom. Remind us that whatever we do for those who are hungry, we do for you. Be with us as we listen to your Word.

Introduction

Have you ever considered the important role food plays in our lives? Not just for nutrition, but also to mark events? Many of us have fond memories of gathering around the dinner table for Thanksgiving dinner, for birthdays, Sunday dinners, time to be with family and friends.

And then consider other times we celebrate with food: weddings, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, having lunch with friends. After a funeral, the dinner that follows provides an opportunity to share memories of our loved one, to find comfort in the meal and in one another. We send treats to school for our children's birthdays. And finally, what would the Super Bowl be without food?

Families also have special foods for special occasions: tamales on Christmas, black-eyed peas on New Year's for luck, hamburgers and hotdogs on the 4th of July. Food is a very important part of our lives!

Process

What role does food play in those important times in your life?

What are the 'special foods' for your family?

Reflection

We also hear from scripture the importance of food. Jesus' public ministry began with the wedding feast at Cana. He spent part of his last evening on earth at the Last Supper with his loved ones.

In the parable of the loaves and fish, Jesus was concerned with the hunger of the crowd. Although he was God and could have created food, he relied on those present to share what they had, in order that all may be fed.

A reading from Matthew (Mt. 14: 14-21)

When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves."

(Jesus) said to them, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves."

But they said to him, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have here."

Then he said, "Bring them here to me,"

and he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds.

They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over – twelve wicker baskets full.

Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children.

Process

What is God saying to you in this reading?

What is your responsibility in 'feeding the hungry?'

Prayer

Leader:

Lord, hear our prayers as we gather.

Leader:

For our government officials, that they see adequate nutrition for all people as a basic human right and pass legislation to ensure that right, we pray to the Lord:

All: Lord, hear our prayer

Leader:

For the people of our country, that they realize the care of the poor is everyone's responsibility, we pray to the Lord:

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader:

For the elderly widow or retired couple, whose social security doesn't stretch far enough for groceries, we pray to the Lord:

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader:

For the homeless, for whom every day is a challenge to eat, we pray to the Lord:

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader:

For struggling families working two jobs in order to feed and clothe their children, we pray to the Lord:

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader:

Loving God, you cared for the widow, the orphan, those rejected by society.

Hear our prayers. Help us build a world respecting the dignity of each person. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Information on Church Documents

There are millions of Americans who go hungry every day. Children going to school without breakfast. Senior citizens having to decide whether to buy medicine or food. Parents working two jobs in order to survive.

The most basic principle of Catholic social teaching is the belief in the dignity of the human person. Each person is created in the image of God. Each person is precious; and as we hear from Pope Benedict in *Deus Caritas est*, “When we close our eyes to our neighbor we close our eyes to God.”

He also writes:

The Church is God’s family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life. Yet at the same time caritas – agape extends beyond the frontiers of the Church. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains as a standard which imposes universal love toward the needy we encounter “by chance.” (cf. Lk 10:31), whoever they may be.

Process

What do these teachings mean to me personally?

Reflection

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: (58: 7-9)

*Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;
Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own.*

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be
healed; Your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the LORD shall be
your rear guard.*

*Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer, you shall cry for help, and he will
say: Here I am! The Word of the Lord.*

All: Thanks be to God.

Process:

Who are the hungry in our community?

How can I personally impact hunger? (Silent reflection and group sharing)

Invite participants to choose one personal response/action to combat hunger.
(Not to be shared with the group)

Information on Church Documents

Dealing with poverty is not a luxury to which our nation can attend when it finds the time and resources. Rather it is a moral imperative of the highest priority. (Taken from “Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral on Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy.”)

Poverty afflicts more than one out of every eight families in the nation. 37 million people – about 12.6% of the population-live below the official federal poverty level. 25 million people in our nation sought help from food banks last year – an increase of 18% since 1997. Statistics gathered by Catholic Charities show a steady increase in request for emergency assistance, food, and utility assistance (See *Poverty in America*, page v).

As a Catholic organization we believe in the dignity of each human person and that person’s right to adequate food and nutrition. To provide less is unacceptable (see pp. 6-7) And yet we read the above statistics and realize poverty and hunger are increasing rather than decreasing.

A principle of Catholic social teaching is the right for every individual to participate in the decisions that impact his/her life, to be actively engaged. In our agencies we continue to feed the hungry, but we also must advocate for an end to hunger. We must find ways for the poor to help themselves. Effective social justice must seek solutions that actively engage the poor to help themselves.

Process

What can we do as an agency to work to eliminate hunger?

How can we empower our clients to participate more fully in the decisions that impact their lives? List possible options and choose one on which to focus as an agency.

Information on Church Documents

Another consistent theme of Catholic social teaching is the option for the poor. Giving priority to the poor and vulnerable strengthens our entire society. In the pastoral letter, “A Place at the Table: A Catholic Recommitment to Overcome Poverty and to Respect God’s Children,” the US Catholic Bishops challenge all Catholics to speak out on behalf of the poor, to lift up those in need, to work together to eliminate poverty.

The table we seek for all rests on these four institutions or legs: (1) what families and individuals can do, (2) what community and religious institutions can do, (3) what the private sector can do and (4) what government can do to work together to overcome poverty.

We’ve seen how important it is for us as individuals and as a church to share what we have, to work to eliminate hunger and poverty. Although we will continue to work toward this in our agencies, we must also work collectively through government to establish justice and effective public change.

Through CCUSA's Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America: we are called to become even more engaged in speaking out about poverty. Specific proposals related to hunger are:

- Strengthen the Food Stamp Program to better assist the working poor and the elderly.
- Protect funding for critical food programs that serve low-income families, including the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and the Community Food and Nutrition Program.
- Ensure that federal nutrition programs meet the unique needs of rural families (See *Poverty in America*, pp. 17-22)

In addition, any action that improves the standard of living for the poor will help to alleviate hunger.

We can impact the life of one individual or family. Our churches and agencies can help many people. But for these to be a change in society, we must engage our government. It is the fourth leg on the table as described in the pastoral letter. For significant change there needs to be a re-ordering of societal values; a collective change of heart and or social policy.

The goal of CCUSA is reduce poverty by 50% by the year 2020. Reducing poverty is one of the goals which require the active involvement of the government, for no other institution has the capacity or the scale necessary to attack poverty in a comprehensive way...It is the government that has the primary and ultimate responsibility to ensure that there is adequate funding for these services (See *Poverty in America*, pp. 23-26).

Process

What are some specific things we can do in our agency to increase public awareness of the presence of hunger in our community?

How will we become more active politically in advocacy against hunger and poverty?

(Brainstorm as a group and develop a plan of action)

Closing Prayer

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: 1:4-8

The word of the LORD came to me thus:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.

“Ah, Lord GOD!” I said, “I know not how to speak; I am too young.”

But the LORD answered me, Say not, “I am too young.” To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak.

Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.

Pause

Leader:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

(St. Theresa of Avila)

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