

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 31, 2011

No one really knows the precise number of hungry people in our world. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates it to be one of every seven people. In 1996 the World Food Summit set out to reduce the number of malnourished people by half by 2015. From what I've read the number of hungry people has actually increased in the past decade and a half.

Hunger was no stranger in the days of Isaiah and of Jesus as well. In the first reading, Isaiah voices the dream of the returning exiles. With their pitiful resources, they long for all to be able to eat well. No one would die of thirst or malnutrition. In the Gospel, Jesus enacts God's promise to fill the hungry with good food as he feeds a crowd of thousands.

In today's world, there is no excuse for widespread hunger. There is easily enough food for everyone and then some. War and despots will cause some people to go hungry, no matter what we do. But the resources, technology and knowledge needed to end the sort of routine, pervasive hunger the world now tolerates are readily available.

In the Gospel, Jesus' disciples presume that there is enough food for everyone, but they figure it is someone else's responsibility to provide it. Jesus directs them away from an impulse toward self-sufficiency to a solution that depends on remaining in community and pooling and redistributing their resources. In a Eucharistic action he transforms all that they have, and there is enough.

The early Christians seem to have grasped that. If *anyone* is hungry or thirsty, naked or a stranger, sick or in prison, it is always Christ who clamors for bread or water, Christ who cries to be clothed or welcome, Christ whom you visit. We have to admit with the 1974 Synod of Bishops that "the promotion of human rights is required by the gospel and is central to the Church's ministry." Churches are already doing a lot to take care of hungry people. God, however, requires both charity and justice.

The quest for justice is crucial for Christian spirituality. That remarkable theologian of hope, Jurgen Moltmann, paradoxically insists that the Church can discover its identity only to the extent that it associates with, identifies with, the God-forsaken of this world, whose exemplar is the Godforsaken of Calvary. "If you want to liberate from oppression and meaningless existence, you must first recognize the glory of God does not shine on the crowns of the mighty, but on the face of the crucified Christ."

Such spirituality demands of me a Eucharistic spirituality, where the Christ of Holy Thursday not only feeds me. More importantly, he does with me today what he did that night with the bread. He takes me, and he blesses me, and he breaks me, and he gives me. Then as now, Christ or I, the bread must be broken. Otherwise it cannot be given – especially to those who are themselves broken.

A nameless woman came into our after Mass reception last Sunday and took some food because she didn't have any money to feed her two little girls. "It was a blessing because it's good food. The people are very nice. You give us what we need, and you have things kids like. My husband works but we run out of money toward the end of the month."

Virtually every religious tradition insists on sharing with the poor and the hungry. Catholic Charities probably does more than any other institution to teach social concern and take on otherwise neglected problems of poverty. I saw a cartoon the other day in which Pontius says, "sometimes I'd like to ask God why God allows poverty, famine and injustice when God could do something about it." The other character asks, "What stopping you?" Pontius replies, "I'm afraid God might ask me the same question."

Our whole country urgently needs a renewed commitment to justice for poor and hungry people. Yet the nation has become more fragmented, more driven by special interests, more attuned to a culture of violence, more stressed by family breakdown, less civil in its discourse and more cynical about its government. Could it be that individualism has become the nation's Achilles' heel, that individual liberty, detached from a sense of responsibility for justice and the common good, is ultimately destructive?

The Gospel today invites us to resist the temptation to consider it someone else's responsibility to address the problem of world hunger. People of faith must act. Millions are still excluded from the banquet, but God wants to bring them to the table. The one Bread we eat must be given back, must be transformed into a bread we break for the millions, must be scattered again over the hills, into the valley, through the deserts until each sister of mine, each brother, from east to west, can smile each night and murmur, "I am full."

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