



# Catholic Social Thought and Hunger

“Today the peoples in hunger are making a dramatic appeal to the peoples blessed with abundance.”

—Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967, no. 3

Consideration of hunger in Catholic social thought begins with the concept of human rights articulated, for example, by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* in 1963. There, Pope John grounded human rights in the principle that “every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will” and “because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature.”<sup>1</sup> These rights, the pope continued, are universal and inviolable.

Pope John then began his enumeration of human rights: “Every man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and 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.”<sup>2</sup> While the pope also laid out rights pertaining to a worthy standard of living, moral and cultural values, worship, choosing a state of life, economic and political life, immigration, and association, he began with food.

The right to food tops the list of rights because hunger is such a fundamental assault on human life itself—and so widespread. It is listed first in the beatitudes of Jesus when he declares, “I was hungry and you fed me.”<sup>3</sup> The Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Council cast the hunger reality and our response in the light of early Church teaching in these words:

*Since there are so many people in this world afflicted with hunger, this sacred Council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the saying of the Fathers: “Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him you have killed him.”<sup>4</sup>*

Two significant twentieth-century insights develop this teaching: First, that care for the hungry person on the street where I live is now universalized—“the social question has become worldwide,” as Pope Paul VI put it. He explained, “Today the peoples in hunger are making a dramatic appeal to the peoples blessed with abundance.”<sup>5</sup>

The second key development, reflecting the worldwide nature of the social question, is the important necessity for both individual action and systemic change

to confront hunger and to secure the right to food for all people. The Vatican Council named this in its urgent call to “individuals and governments.” This dual emphasis runs through much of modern Catholic social teaching. We see this interplay of individuals and structures most recently in discussions of hunger in *Caritas in Veritate* by Pope Benedict XVI. There Benedict first cites the “dramatic appeal” of Pope Paul on human responsibility as an example of “vocation”—free people calling on other free people to assume shared responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

Then, in a more detailed discussion of hunger, Benedict emphasizes 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, 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.*”<sup>7</sup>

For Christians and all people of good will, the reality of hunger today calls for feeding the individual hungry person, developing community solutions such as food banks and soup kitchens, and legislation and action by governments and economic institutions at all levels to make the kinds of systemic changes that end hunger and assure the right to food for all.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* [*Peace on Earth*], 1963, no. 9.
- 2 *Ibid.*, no. 11.
- 3 *Matthew* 25:35.
- 4 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [*The Church in the Modern World*], 1965, no. 69.
- 5 Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* [*On the Development of Peoples*], 1967, no. 3.
- 6 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* [*Charity in Truth*], 2009, no. 17.
- 7 *Ibid.*, no. 27 (emphasis in original).