Just a few hundred years ago, before European powers began their colonization efforts in North America, dozens of Indigenous tribes were settled across the Gulf South region—thousands of human beings with developed cultures, faiths, and communities. As the United States began its westward expansion, it often pushed these tribes off their land by forcing them into treaties with the U.S. government. In return for these tribes ceding millions of acres of land and moving to reservations, the U.S. pledged to support these nations, protect their resources, and provide for their general wellbeing. This obligation of the federal government is called the trust relationship, and sadly, it is one that the U.S. government has consistently failed to fulfill.

There are currently 574 federally-recognized tribal nations within the United States, including 11 in the Gulf South, and many more tribes that have not yet completed the long and arduous process of achieving federal recognition. President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris have expressed their commitment to supporting Native Americans. Here are just a few of the issues that their administration and the new U.S. Congress will need to address in order to fulfill the United States’ trust obligations to Indian country.

Health Care
Despite the fact that providing health care to Native Americans is part of the trust obligations of the federal government, health care for Native peoples in the United States is badly underfunded. The 2018 Broken Promises report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights noted that the budget of the Indian Health Service (IHS) “meets just over half of the health care needs of Native Americans.” Rates of diabetes, liver disease, mental health problems, infant mortality, suicide, and other health problems are disproportionately high among Native Americans. The lack of funding for adequate health care no doubt contributes to these problems.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, that underfunding has been felt acutely. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians got hit hard by the virus in May and June. By November, 85 tribal members had been killed by the virus and over...
1200 members—about 12 percent of the tribe—had tested positive for it. Choc-taws faced harassment on social media and in public as other residents of Mississippi blamed the tribe for the state’s high numbers. No doubt these other residents did not consider that it was their own elected U.S. officials that had chosen not to fully fund Native health care despite the federal government’s treaty obligations and that this underfunding is precisely what caused the strain in resources. A racist “blame the victim” mentality is alive and well among Americans today.

Environmental Justice
Environmental protection and climate change are also critical issues for Native Americans. For many tribes, especially coastal ones, environmental problems pose an existential threat.

In Louisiana, the effects of the petrochemical industry and climate change have already been felt by some Indigenous communities. The Isle de Jean Charles band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe is being forced to relocate due to rising sea levels caused both by climate change and by the oil industry’s excessive canal-digging. Other Louisiana tribes such as Pointe-au-Chien and the United Houma Nation are also alarmed as their lands are disappearing. All of these are state-recognized tribes and are seeking federal recognition in hopes that it will provide them with better opportunities to preserve their lands. They first applied in 1979 but received a response of “no” from the federal government—fifteen years later in 1994.

The Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, whose heritage is deeply connected to the rapidly-disappearing Everglades, are also concerned about rising sea levels threatening their lands and livelihood. One 17-year-old Seminole activist, Valholly Frank, made headlines recently when she joined with other young people in Florida to sue Gov. Ron DeSantis and other officials for inaction on climate change. Tribes such as these are working hard at developing climate change adaptation and resilience plans as well as lobbying for federal and state governments to take action against climate change.

Criminal Jurisdiction
Tribal lands held in trust by the federal government have a unique set of challenges when it comes to criminal justice. The complex web of criminal jurisdiction laws for federal tribes can make it harder for victims of crime to receive adequate justice. Whether tribes, the state, or the federal government have jurisdiction over a particular criminal case occurring on tribal lands depends upon the type of crime and whether or not the perpetrator and victim are Indians. This complexity can make it more difficult to achieve justice for victims and easier for perpetrators to continue committing violence.

For example, violence against Indigenous women by non-Indigenous perpetrators is extremely high. A U.S. Department of Justice study in 2016 showed that over 84 percent of Native women reported having been victims of violence at some point in their lifetimes. Of these women, 97 percent reported having been victimized by a non-Indigenous perpetrator, compared to 35 percent reporting having been victimized by an Indigenous perpetrator.

But before the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was re-authorized in 2013, tribes could not arrest, much less prosecute, non-Indian perpetrators who assaulted Indian victims on tribal lands. Because of the Supreme Court’s 1978 decision Oliphant v. Suquamish, tribes could only try cases in which both parties were Indian and could only arrest Indian perpetrators. Any case involving a non-Indian party automatically was under federal jurisdiction. The 2013 VAWA gave tribal jurisdiction to domestic violence crimes involving non-Indian perpetrators, but it did not give tribes jurisdiction for cases involving non-Indian perpetrators of rape, stalking, trafficking, and child and elder abuse. A 2018 re-authorization of VAWA that gave tribes jurisdiction in those cases has been passed by the House of Representatives but has been held up by Republicans in the Senate who are concerned that tribes are being given too much power.

Conclusion
Tribal nations in the Gulf South and across the United States are exercising resilience, creativity, and strength as they continue to contribute to their communities and help bring about justice in the world. Their non-Indigenous neighbors can help by urging elected U.S. officials to fulfill the United States’ trust obligations, take climate change seriously, and protect tribal sovereignty and victims of crime by re-authorizing a stronger version of the Violence Against Women Act. Native communities did not disappear after the massacre at Wounded Knee. In many ways they are surviving and thriving, but they need the United States to keep its promises.

ENDNOTES

1 The terminology employed throughout this article (Indian, Native American, Indigenous, tribe, etc.) is in accordance with the language used by the National Congress of American Indians and the individual tribes to whom this article refers.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Over the course of two millennia, the Catholic Church accommodated itself to a variety of forms of government and thrived—or not—within different political contexts. The Second Vatican Council noted that the cultural, economic, and social evolution of peoples into the mid-twentieth century had resulted in profound changes in human institutions and how people related to one another. This was particularly true of the political community, “especially with regard to universal rights and duties both in the exercise of civil liberty and in the attainment of the common good…”\(^1\) While the Council did not prescribe a universally ideal form of government, it made clear that “the political community exists for that common good in which the community finds its full justification and meaning…”\(^2\)

The council then called for enhanced political participation in these words:

> It is in full accord with human nature that juridical political structures should, with ever better success and without any discrimination, afford all their citizens the chance to participate freely and actively in establishing the constitutional bases of a political community, governing the state, determining the scope and purpose of various institutions, and choosing leaders.\(^3\)

The right and duty to vote followed, which attaches to every citizen in a participative political society such that, according to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it is “morally obligatory” to exercise the right to vote as an expression of our “co-responsibility for the common good…”\(^4\)

In 1991, following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe two years earlier, Saint Pope John Paul II raised the profile of democracy in these words:

> The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.\(^5\)

But democracy itself is not unlimited. It is in turn subject to the duty to protect human rights, to recognize human and religious values, and to respect truth and the rule of law.

Respect for human rights flows from the two most basic principles of Catholic social doctrine: the sanctity and dignity of the human person and the common good. John Paul describes totalitarianism, in contrast to democracy, as denying “the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate — no individual, group, class, nation or State.” In its understanding of the common good, moreover, the Church includes the duty of government to respect the rights of individuals within the body politic. Essential are commonly accepted values such as human life and human rights, including religious freedom, within a framework of the common good. Even in a democracy, then, “Not even the majority of a social body may violate these rights…”\(^6\) John Paul explained further, “As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.”\(^7\)

The pope warns against the dangers of those promoting fanaticism or fundamentalism, who, in the name of scientific or religious ideology, “claim the right to impose on others their own concept of what is true and good.” Truth is not determined by majorities, the pope writes.


\(^2\) Ibid., 74.

\(^3\) Ibid., 75.


\(^6\) Ibid., 44.

\(^7\) Ibid., 46.
Solitary confinement is often defined as the practice of isolating incarcerated people in closed cells for 22-24 hours a day with minimum human contact for periods of time ranging from days to decades. Extensive research has shown that solitary confinement can have traumatic effects on the brain, causing hallucinations, panic attacks, paranoia, depression, and a litany of other psychological and physical problems. In 2011 the United Nations stated that forced social isolation in excess of 15 days often rises to the level of torture, yet a 2019 report by JSRI, Solitary Watch, and the ACLU of Louisiana found that 77 percent of persons held in solitary confinement in Louisiana had been there for more than a year, and 30 percent for more than five years.

The Vera Institute for Justice found that in 2016 Louisiana prisons used solitary confinement at nearly four times the national rate. In a nation-wide survey of state systems of corrections’ use of restrictive housing in 2019, data provided by the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections indicate a dramatic decrease in the use of solitary confinement in Louisiana prisons. Nevertheless, the state still exceeds the national average of percentage of prisoners in restrictive housing by 26 percent.

Because of the profound immorality of solitary confinement, the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition (LSCC) hosted a panel discussion of solitary survivors and faith leaders on September 23rd and asked them to articulate moral and ethical arguments for ending solitary confinement. What follows are highlights from that discussion.

The Immorality of Solitary Confinement

Several panelists spoke to why they believe solitary confinement is immoral, including Albert Woodfox, who was held in solitary at Louisiana State Prison (Angola) for 44 years and 10 months. He explained, “The most immoral aspect is that it is anti-humanity. It serves no penological purpose.” Prisoners are placed in solitary for arbitrary reasons, such as “rebelling against being treated a certain way, talked to a certain way...” He concluded, “The sole purpose of solitary confinement is to break the human spirit.”

Consuela Gaines is the Chapter Organizer for VOTE in the Lafayette region. Two of the 22 years that Ms. Gaines spent in prison were in solitary confinement, which proved to be a time of intense suffering. “I had some really, really hard times while in solitary confinement. I can remember it like it was yesterday. I had suicidal thoughts. It really played on me mentally..."
There were moments when I struggled with my [Islamic] faith. I questioned God a lot. This suffering led Ms. Gaines to the following realization: “To be deprived of being able to be around other humans—that’s not normal. That is cruel. God did not create us to exist that way. He created us to interact with other human beings.”

**Moral Arguments to End Solitary**

Rabbi Katie Bauman serves as the Senior Rabbi at Touro Synagogue in New Orleans and was the moderator for the event. She began the discussion by articulating a basic tenet of the Jewish faith: “[W]e are made in the image and likeness of God, and that really should inform how we interact with every single person. When I look at our faith more broadly, I see and hear the call of prophets and God’s insistence that society’s treatment of the most vulnerable is the barometer of the character of that society.”

Bishop Shelton J. Fabre heads the Catholic Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, and chairs the USCCB Ad-Hoc Subcommittee against Racism. In his opening remarks, Bishop Fabre articulated the seven principles of Catholic Social Teaching, which he described as “a rich tradition of wisdom that calls each person to build a just society.” Bishop Fabre noted that the first principle that undergirds the rest—the need to respect the life and dignity of each person—as well as the principle of solidarity are especially germane to ending solitary confinement. He reminded viewers that in 2014 Pope Francis decried extreme forms of isolation, calling them torture.

**Role of Faith Communities in Ending Solitary Confinement**

Panelists were asked how faith communities can help abolish solitary confinement. Said Ms. Gaines, “Religious communities have great influence…. The object of the criminal justice system is to make everyone safer… but solitary confinement does not make us safer. …If we can learn from spiritual leaders the harm of it, we can begin to have these conversations.”

At their 2019 annual assembly, Louisiana Interchurch Conference (LIC) leaders unanimously passed a resolution urging state leaders to “invest in humane and effective alternatives to solitary confinement” and for Louisiana to “continue to take action to end prolonged solitary confinement in our prisons and jails.” Panel member Rev. Dan Krutz, an Episcopal priest and Executive Director of LIC, made the following observation:

“So many times people of faith think that if they believe the right thing they have done the job. People of faith need to see that our faith really comes alive when we put it to work. This area of criminal justice is prime for that. When I think about my own tradition, of people being in prison and being visited and cared for. It is reminding people that it is a part of our heritage and we need to live it now in the current moment of our lives. That this is a precious moment to act.”

**Conclusion**

Pope Francis’ social encyclical on the need for fraternity and social friendship in today’s fractured world, Fratelli Tutti, was released ten days after the LSSC panel discussion. In this document Pope Francis describes what I believe are additional compelling reasons why solitary confinement should be banned:

“Human beings are so made that they cannot live, develop, and find fulfillment except in the sincere gift of self to others. Nor can they fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons… No one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love. This is part of the mystery of authentic human existence. Life exists where there is bonding, community, and fraternity.”

Let’s work together to end the inhumanity of solitary confinement and build a world where no incarcerated person is denied the right to authentic human existence through meaningful social interactions with others. A first step for people of faith in Louisiana is to sign a petition calling upon state leaders to end the use of solitary confinement at [https://tinyurl.com/LSSCsing](https://tinyurl.com/LSSCsing).

**ENDNOTES**

2. ibid.
7. Remarks have been edited for brevity and clarity. The entire discussion, including compelling insights from panelists Rev. Ron Stief, Executive Director of the National Religious Coalition Against Torture, and Ben Wortham, Senior Director of Health Integration at Catholic Charities USA, may be viewed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOQdJmV7yAe](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOQdJmV7yAe).
It is always good to keep this basic fact in mind when contemplating hunger: this country and this world produce more than enough food to feed everyone. The problem of hunger is therefore a problem of distribution. It is also a problem of political will. We can end hunger if we cared to do so, here in the U.S. and around the world. We have the food and we have the financial ability. Unfortunately, the poor are invisible to too many, and they are often without much power to affect change. It is therefore up to each of us to join them in advocating for a community, a nation, and a world without hunger.

In this article, I will focus on the problem of hunger in the United States as a whole, as well as in the individual Gulf South states.

Before the pandemic, hunger was a problem even here, in our very wealthy country. In 2019, an estimated 10.5 percent of U.S. households—over 35 million people—were food insecure (that is, with limited or uncertain access to food) at some point during the year.

Bread for the World, a Christian anti-hunger organization, provides data on each U.S. state and ranks them by their level of hunger. The state they identified before the pandemic as having the greatest hunger problem was New Mexico, followed by Mississippi. Louisiana ranked third, Alabama seventh, Texas ninth, and Florida twenty-second.

These states burdened by poverty—and the hunger that results—have populations that were very vulnerable when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Now, reports are showing that the economic fallout from the pandemic has led to significant increases in hunger.

The Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, taken October 28 to November 9, 2020, found that 12 percent of adults were living in households that did have enough to eat at some point during the previous seven days. The Pulse Survey indicated that number was 8.8 percent just prior to the pandemic.

The survey provides data broken down by state (and including Washington, D.C.). Table 1 shows how the Gulf South states are doing in terms of food scarcity:
As can be seen in Table 1, food scarcity is a particular problem in the Gulf South states, especially in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. Texas and Florida are also significantly above the national average.

Imagine, in Mississippi and Louisiana, about 1 in 5 households report not having enough to eat. It is also important to note that in these states and across the nation, households with children, in general, as well as Hispanic and Black families, in particular, have even higher rates of food scarcity.

Nationally, Black households are nearly two-and-a-half times more likely to struggle with food scarcity than white households.\(^8\)

The main federal government program designed to help meet the food and nutrition needs of people is SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as Food Stamps). The number of people on SNAP has grown substantially since the onset of the pandemic. Increased need, together with greater flexibility and increased benefits established to meet this need, brought the number of SNAP beneficiaries from 36.9 million in February 2020, to more than 43 million by May.\(^9\) More recent numbers have not been released, but they are likely to remain high and possibly increase due to the current economic conditions.

In addition to SNAP and some other government assistance, reports indicate that across the country in the summer and fall of 2020, there was a substantial increase in the usage of food pantries and soup kitchens, as individuals and families became desperate in these hard times.\(^10\)

According to Katie Fitzgerald of Feeding America, the country’s leading hunger relief organization, “About 40 percent of the people who are showing up for food distributions have never before had to rely on charitable food assistance.”\(^11\) Feeding America says demand for their services has increased 60% since the beginning of the pandemic last March.\(^12\)

Many organizations are working to connect those in need with local resources. For example:

- FoodPANtries.org hosts a national database of sources for free or subsidized groceries
- FoodFinder is a mobile and web app that helps find local food assistance programs
- WhyHunger.org hosts a national database of emergency food providers and support services

Perhaps the hero of our times in the effort to feed people in a time of disaster is chef José Andrés. His organization, World Central Kitchen, and their 2400 restaurant partners fed more than 30 million meals across some 350 U.S. cities during the first 6 months of the pandemic.\(^13\)

Government food programs and private—including faith-based—charitable organizations are essential during this time of crisis. However, we need more than just emergency food. People need employment, substantial unemployment compensation, or other forms of income support to help carry them through the crisis. Another round of federal aid to help deal with the array of challenges that individuals, families, and small businesses are facing is also essential.

Beyond even that, however, we need to think of fundamental changes we can make to our society that lift people up and out of vulnerability and fear and into lives that are, in the long term, far more secure than they have been for years. We need universal health care, living wages, and far less income and wealth inequality. As Pope Francis tells us, “Inequality is the root of social ills.”\(^14\) Building a society that at its foundation is more equal and just will make future crises like our current one far less catastrophic. In addition, such a society in better times will be one that will allow all of us to live lives of basic comfort and dignity.

ENDNOTES


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THE MISSION OF THE JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Jesuit Social Research Institute works to transform the Gulf South through action research, analysis, education, and advocacy on the core issues of poverty, race, and migration. The Institute is a collaboration of Loyola University New Orleans and the Society of Jesus rooted in the faith that does justice.