



*An article from  
**Catholic Rural Life Magazine**  
Fall 2002 volume 45 number 1*

## **WORLD FOOD SECURITY**

**Martin McLaughlin, Ph.D.**  
**Center of Concern**

"Hunger," a London Economist writer stated on June 15, 2002, "is the natural state of mankind." Although this may seem an extreme statement, it seems clear that hunger is the scourge that always comes back, or perhaps never leaves. It is described in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the New Testament, in literature and history throughout the ages, and in the daily news. It is customary today to include in the general description of the problem the comment that in spite of the fact that the world produces enough food to feed everyone on the planet, a depressingly large number of people (the UN Food and Agriculture Organization says 780 million) do not have access to it. For the FAO that means they lack food security; in other words, they are chronically hungry, unable to feed themselves either by either growing food or buying it.

### **HUNGER OR FAMINE:**

The news media also speak of famine—a recurring event that right now threatens millions of people in five countries in southern Africa. For a variety of reasons, mostly bad weather and bad policies, they will need millions of tons of food aid from surplus-producing countries mainly in the Northern hemisphere. That food is available, but whether it will reach the hungry is uncertain; such a result depends on many political and economic decisions by a plethora of governments and other decision makers. One can hope that this African famine will be relieved; most of them are, although not without a great deal of suffering. But the chronic hunger of those who are termed food-insecure presents a continuing and so far unsolved problem. What is curious is why that is the case: Why, in a world that continually produces enough food to feed everybody, are one seventh of the human race denied it?

It is not for lack of attention. For almost the last thirty years the international community has wrestled with the problem of world hunger (now somewhat more affirmatively termed world food security). The United Nations has held two major conferences—the World Food Conference of 1974 and the World Food Summit of 1996—and many other events to deal with this problem and various aspects of it, like land reform and nutrition, and with its various regional expressions. It has been pointed out repeatedly that the best way to approach the problem is to grow more food where the hungry people are, under conditions that also provide access to it without becoming unacceptably dependent on external sources. Yet the problem persists. Why?

The main reason for this persistent injustice, this violation of a human right to food, is that both the structure and the dynamics of the global food system are dominated by a *de facto* cartel of international agribusiness corporations, the banks that support them, the wealthy individuals who benefit from their malign synergy, and the governments and international institutions that share their philosophy and sometimes their profits. Profit, of course, is not intrinsically evil, although a case can be made that excess profits are indefensible and that making profit the ultimate goal of economic, political, and social action, regardless of who gets hurt, is a sin.

In all the conferences of both the United Nations and the concerned nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) some efforts are generally made to describe today's global food problem, but rarely in systemic terms. The fact is that there is indeed a global food system, but it doesn't work for this large minority that are food-insecure, i.e., it doesn't get them fed—which one might logically expect a food system to do.

### **CONSIDERATIONS OF SUPPLY:**

On the supply side, it seems clear that there is a limit to the amount of land that can be farmed; actually it is now less than an acre per person worldwide. It appears unlikely that much more will become available without unacceptable costs and unpredictable damage to the resource base. In many parts of the developing world the ownership of cultivated land is heavily skewed toward foreign corporations and the larger landowners (e.g., 1 percent of the population of Zimbabwe, all white, has more than half the farmland). In the industrialized world, cultivation has become more and more chemical- and capital-intensive in the industrialized world—which leads to degradation of the environment and peonage for the farmers.

In many ways, water is even more problematic; crops can be grown without land, but not without water. Although most agriculture is rainfed and therefore risky, industrialized agriculture adds to the risk by polluting surface water and depleting underground aquifers far more quickly than they can be replenished. Water has traditionally been considered a free good and therefore has also been wasted, but current efforts to regulate its use by privatizing ownership and delivery threatens to limit the access of poor farmers to this essential element of the food system.

The present food system attempt to meet the energy requirements of populations by using animal, mechanical, and fossil-fuel energy for irrigation, fertilizer, containment of crop diseases and pests, and some other practices—a combination which is steadily depleting the limited potential of fossil fuels, polluting soil and water, and degrading the environment overall.

The environment itself is under pressure from agricultural production and at the same time sets limits on it. The limits to growth described in that eponymous volume may be out of date, but the fact that there are limits is not. The environment we all share as God's creatures is at risk from a multitude of human interventions; and not all of them, including agriculture, have been altogether benign. Even weather and climate—which may be the only supply-side elements not subject to human control—seem at risk from heightened global atmospheric warming, damage to the ozone layer, and other current phenomena.

Science, research, and technology are central to modern agricultural production; their contribution has been essential to permit food production to keep up with the increased food need and demand that have

accompanied population growth and differential consumption patterns, especially in the industrialized world. Progress in these areas tends to enhance the capital-intensive agriculture of the industrialized North and to downplay the significance of the subsistence agriculture of the largely impoverished South, where most of the hungry people are. The downside of scientific and technological progress has been particularly accentuated in recent years by the rising emphasis on genetic manipulation in food production, which bothers some persons for deeply religious and ethical reasons (e.g., patenting life forms) and other people because of the increased power it gives corporate agriculture in the food system. This concern is also reflected in the threat that unwise use of biotechnology can present to the necessity of preserving biodiversity.

Finally, on the supply side, finance seems in some way to have become the goal of the economic activity we now call globalization, rather than the lubricant of the process, as in the past. International movement of capital has been sharply on the rise until this past year, including in the agriculture sector. Private investment in such capital-intensive private sector activity as vertically integrated production and distribution does not seem to suffer from the limitations on budgets, of which we are constantly reminded; but credit is very difficult for small farmers in food-deficit developing countries to obtain.

#### **CONSIDERATIONS OF DEMAND:**

On the demand side, the major elements of the food system seem more daunting and intense, but more difficult to manage. Almost everyone points to population growth, because it is obvious that more people will require more food. More observers, however, are beginning to acknowledge that this causal connection is ambiguous; both excessive population growth and hunger are the results of pervasive, deepening poverty and the growing gap between rich and poor countries and rich and poor people within countries.

In any case, the obscene differential patterns of consumption of food (and other commodities and resources) between the generally affluent North and the generally poor South is at least equally consequential. The 1996 World Food Summit Declaration acknowledged that poverty is the main cause of hunger; the anniversary of the Summit echoed this view in June, 2002. In fact, poverty and hunger present an outstanding example of reciprocal causality. Although people in the industrialized North out-eat those in the economically underdeveloped South by a ratio of about four to one, the disparity also has a qualitative difference. People in the North have access to a more nutritious diet; but, as the statistics on obesity, diabetes, and heart disease indicate, they don't always take advantage of their opportunities. People in the South, on the other hand, not only have poorer diets in general, but also lack crucial micronutrients that we often don't even think about.

The system of production and distribution itself represents a third and most consequential characteristic of the global food system. As in any economic sector, the producer and the consumer meet, directly or indirectly, in the market. In the modern world, of course, what began as an exchange of commodity for commodity or service for service has evolved into a monetary exchange of goods, services, and capital. In modern exchange transactions the dominant element is money; without it the producer and/or the consumer is unable to participate. He or (more likely) she is marginalized or, from a solely economic point of view, redundant. The economy has no need of and does not care about such persons. In terms of this particular discussion, these persons lack food security.

## **THE MARKET SOLUTION:**

The food and agriculture sector is no exception to the general economic situation. The high-level government officials from more than 180 countries who participated in the 1996 Summit agreed that liberalized trade in food is the solution to food insecurity. They also agreed, like their predecessors in a 1974 UN World Food Conference, that the solution requires producing more food in the food-deficit countries where the hungry people are. Between those two dates, however, the world continued to grow enough food to feed two billion more people; but the increase in production took place almost entirely in the industrialized world where most of the corporations, but few of the hungry people, are.

The proponents of the free-market solution to economic problems assume that everyone is or can be in the market, but they ignore the reality that the market is not, in fact, free. The overarching purpose of trading partners today is not to compete, but to control; and the so-called free market is in fact managed by a few continually enlarging conglomerations of enterprises. Even though most staple foods are consumed the country where they are grown, all food (except what is donated) is distributed through markets dominated by the producer-distributor combination. Markets are the basic link between producer and consumer; they are the venue for trade, both domestic and international.

The trend line of international trade, though it has had its ups and downs, has generally moved upward. Unfortunately, however, research since the 1996 World Food Summit suggests that in the food and agriculture sector, at least, the benefits have been enjoyed mainly by the transnational corporations and related enterprises that have dominated agricultural trade in particular and the food system overall. All food and agriculture sub-sectors share this configuration. There may be competition between sugar and corn sweetener producers, or among poultry, pork, and beef producers, or between major grain traders, or between seed companies and companies, or between food and grocery manufacturers, or among restaurants and fast-food chains; but in each of these sub-sectors only a handful of companies are dominant. They may not all be household names, but they are well recognized within the major segments of the system: e.g. ADM, Cargill, Coca-Cola, Dole, Kroger's, McDonald's, Monsanto, Nestlé, Smithfield, Tyson Foods, Unilever, and such unexpected food behemoths as Philip Morris and Wal-Mart.

These companies own grain elevators, railroad cars, barges, ocean-going ships, airplanes, banks, and advertising media; they make and develop seeds and other inputs; they own and manage warehouses and retail outlets. Production, processing, input supply, distribution, and consumption outside the home thus are in the hands of a small number of economic decisionmakers, who decide what to produce, how to process, advertise, and distribute it, and how much to charge the consumer. The law of supply and demand has been replaced by a regime of production and profit. And that regime has great political influence in both legislative and executive departments of most governments.

It might be expected that the supply-side problems, being more "economic," would be more responsive to technical solutions, but this is hardly the case for such matters as land tenure and water pricing, which require differential decisions and often precipitate conflict. This result, of course, is even more problematic for demand-side problems, which generally concerned involve questions of allocation of productive assets

and distribution of profits, whose resolution often demands significant changes in both power structures and lifestyles.

### **A CATHOLIC SOCIAL ASSESSMENT:**

Although there is a good deal of attention to farming, hunger, and poverty in both the Old and the New Testaments, especially in the Advent liturgical excerpts from Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as the familiar parables about loaves and fishes and moral messages in the Pauline epistles, the early Church seems not to have been centrally concerned with food and agriculture. But once the mainly urban Church emerged from the catacombs and acquired property, there were regulations about use of the land, the treatment of those who worked it, and the disposition of its products. Church leaders appear to have been as accepting of the Roman model of agriculture as they were of its governance. Benedictine monks, of course, worked with peasants in the fields from the sixth century on, Summa writers of the later Middle Ages dealt with farming as one of several social topics, and the Cistercians helped develop market towns. But the sequence of the Black Death and a deteriorating relationship between the monasteries and the landed aristocracy largely devastated agriculture, which did not return to productivity and begin to modernize until the Industrial Revolution—and then especially in England.

The early social encyclicals, notably Rerum Novarum (1891) and Quadragesimo Anno (1931), mainly concerned about industrialization and the position of workers, had little to say about agriculture beyond general discussions of the common good and (in the first of these) the fact that God had given the earth to the use and enjoyment of the universal human race. However, when the new United Nations Organization began to establish its food and agriculture agencies in Rome—first, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), next, the World Food Program, and finally the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)—Pope Pius XII and his successors began a regular practice of addressing its global meetings. The first extended treatment of these subjects appeared in Pope Pius XII's addressees to the FAO in the 1960s and in Pope John XXIII's encyclical, Mater et Magistra, written in 1961 for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rerum Novarum, which referred, for the first time, to a "human right to food."

The presence of the UN agencies in Rome, especially the FAO, has offered frequent occasions for papal addresses to global meetings on food and agriculture. When the popes have focused on this subject matter, they have tended to focus on fairly general themes: the universal right to food; the relation between poverty and hunger; the human stewardship of God's creation; equity in land tenure; the importance of the family farm; the rights of farmworkers as an expression of their human dignity; the threat to rural life and rural communities from the accelerating industrialization of agriculture; and most recently, the new challenges of biotechnology and the increasingly dangerous threats that agriculture poses to the environment.

Many of the papal statements and other expressions of Catholic social thought have resonated with UN Summit language about how "intolerable" and "unacceptable it is that one seventh of the human race does not have access to enough food to live a decent human life. The Popes and their representatives have consistently emphasized the moral and spiritual aspects of these "economic and technical challenges." The Catholic bishops of the United States have also dealt with these issues in their 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy, Economic Justice for All, in statements since then, and in their current committee study on U.S. food and agriculture policy. All of these Catholic sources identify solidarity as the central virtue required

for an effective to prevent and remedy hunger in the world and accept economic development, viewed as improving the quality of life of poor people, as the programmatic model. They conclude that hunger afflicts human dignity and emphasizes the poverty and powerlessness of those who suffer hunger.

#### **PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT:**

These are variously stated, numbered, and applied. In the food and agriculture context they might be expressed this way:

2. Catholic social thought maintains as its central principle the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. Each such person has certain natural human rights that it is the duty of society to secure. The first of these is the right to life, which includes whatever is essential for life, and high on that list is food. The purpose of the food and agriculture system is to provide access to that food, and that access is the definition of food security. The right to food also implies that food must not be used as a weapon against an enemy.
3. Food is therefore an essential component of the common good, whose achievement is the central purpose of social and political action. Because the logical purpose of society, all members are expected to work for it; their work is ordered in that direction by legislation and regulation. These limitations are established by legal process and can be changed in the same fashion; in the case of food and agriculture they deal with such matters as land tenure, access to credit and other inputs, production methods, processing, advertising, pricing, and distribution. Natural rights, being implicit in creation, always trump the privileges of corporations, which are essentially derivative.
4. Human persons are considered to exercise stewardship over the universe created for everyone to share. This tradition of responsibility for the integrity of God's creation is both personal and collective for social justice and the integrity of the physical environment. In the agricultural area, Catholic social thought is centrally concerned with the farmer's direct responsibility for stewardship of God's creation. This idea is largely absent from modern agriculture, which uses heavy machinery, chemicals, and monocultural processes that harm the people who work directly with them and seriously damage the resource base. They are accompanied now by often inadequately tested genetically modified organisms, animal growth hormones, and such techniques as irradiation.
5. With regard to this last point, Catholic social thought generally resonates to the precautionary principle, which means "do no harm," not "take no risk." The basic question here is whether the research goal, the scientific process, the product or technology, and/or its distribution and application are ethical and consistent. That scientific and philosophical truth are one has been affirmed over the years by the Church fathers, the Medieval scholastics, and Church Councils, including Vatican I and II—and extensively by Pope John Paul II in his 1998 encyclical Fides et Ratio. From all the literature it seems clear that the Church is not opposed to agricultural biotechnology *per se*, but is concerned that overstep its scientific bounds and that its benefits be fairly shared.
6. Catholic social thought tends to favor smallholder agriculture, i.e., the family farm. This should come as no surprise to readers of this magazine; it has been the central program rationale of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference since the very beginning. The image of this kind of farm, a regrettably threatened species, is a small to mid-sized diversified farm operated primarily by members of one family, working to provide safe, high-quality food without damaging the resource base. This kind of farming minimizes the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers and heavy machinery, optimizes the use of fresh water and natural pesticides, preserves biodiversity and the ecology of fragile natural

systems, and avoids monoculture. It is not favored by agriculture policy today, which is biased in favor of large farms which are considered more efficient simply because of the scope of their operations. The corporations of the North are matched by the local oligarchies and latifundia of the South in their devotion to “economies of scale.”

7. Finally, Catholic social thought, in the practical order, recognizes that until food security is achieved, adequate safety nets must be provided, with public support, for those who are still food-insecure. In the industrialized countries these institutions, such as soup kitchens, food banks, gleaning arrangements, community food security programs, direct farmer-to-consumer markets, urban agriculture, etc., are usually supported by local government, agribusiness, and other market actors, in part because they have little impact on profit margins or market share. They are corporal works of mercy and partial answers to immediate social problems. They will be needed as long as the present system continues, but they are not solutions to the systemic problems.

### **ACTIVIST CONCLUSIONS:**

In approaching a solution to this set of problems there are obstacles to be overcome, changed thought and action patterns to be established and emphasized, and fallacies to be balanced by facts. First, the facts and fallacies:

1. **Fallacy:** Hunger, or food insecurity, is a problem of supply; there isn't enough food to feed everybody.  
**Fact:** The world produces, or carries over, each year enough food to feed everyone on the planet.
2. **Fallacy:** Population growth is the major cause of hunger; more people require more food.  
**Fact:** Although population growth is a major pressure on the food supply, over consumption in the industrialized world and a profit-driven distribution system exert at least equally powerful pressures.
3. **Fallacy:** Liberalized trade will solve the problem.  
**Fact:** Liberalized trade has produced and exacerbated the problem by marginalizing the poor; it focuses on supply, profit, price stabilization, and averages—but hungry people do not eat or die on the average.
4. **Fallacy:** Science, technology, and research will solve the problem.  
**Fact:** Research is, of course, crucial for progress; but agricultural research is heavily skewed against small farms and especially subsistence farming in tropical regions, and the results of such research tend to favor wealthy transnational corporations and the capital-intensive agriculture of the industrialized countries.
5. **Fallacy:** The current problem is short term, caused by temporary shortages in some commodities and a consequent rise in prices; increased food aid is the solution.  
**Fact:** The problems are demonstrably systemic and therefore long-term, in view of the structure and dynamics of the system.

Although some relationships in the global food system may not be altogether obvious in detail, identifying the major obstacle to improvement of the system presents little difficulty. It has become increasingly clear over the last quarter century that almost all aspects of the global economy are dominated by a combination of corporate agribusiness, wealthy people in both industrialized and developing countries, and the financial institutions and governments that guide and support them. This is particularly noticeable in the food and agriculture sector. The power of this combination needs to be reduced, and its mindset changed. Easier said

than done, of course, especially for a system that has been at least two centuries a-building and has moved into high gear since the end of the Cold War.

The power structure has to be approached on two levels: one, at the grassroots and the margins, by means of alternate food production and distribution technologies, many of which have already been developed and are in use in many parts of the world. Some adjustment in research priorities will be required, and more attention needs to be paid to the knowledge and experience of persons already engaged in subsistence agriculture. Land tenure needs to be improved, and smallholders need to be guaranteed fair access to environmentally benign agricultural inputs and credit. At the same time, at the second level, the economic consensus of the power structure must be confronted directly, in as many political and intellectual fora as possible. Although globalization has so far not revealed an ethic, it does have an arguable logic which must and can be challenged effectively in economic, political, and philosophical terms. There are effective leaders ready to do that.

This brief overview of the food situation does not allow time to deal with two other matters of perhaps overriding significance: first, although at least three global UN conferences this year will have been held that relate to these matters (in Monterrey in March, in Rome in June, and in Johannesburg in late August), the relative position of the food security question on the international agenda is not high in terms of the concerted governmental, institutional, and corporate effort toward globalization and surely is far down on any list of activities and concerns that includes the war on terrorism, which has changed many viewpoints and even more vocabularies; and second, how the dominant (some might say hegemonic) role of the United States will play out in all of these considerations. Will we suffer an even worse fate than the hegemon of the past, or will we find a way out of the morass that surrounds us?

I believe it is difficult to think of a more fundamental human right than the right to the food that sustains life. But will we be able to secure that right for those hungry millions of people now deprived of it? Despite their rhetoric, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the G-8 do not appear to have the will, and possibly the means, to undertake the task. They all have agendas that accord higher priority to other goals than food security. That leaves us with only the hope that other institutions and people will join those who are aware of the problem and its dimensions and ready to begin the two-pronged approach, among the policymakers and at the grassroots.

A long shot, perhaps; but to be left with only hope is far from being left with nothing. Hope is that virtue that could not be kept in its box, and it is the virtue we are forbidden to abandon. It seems more likely to be found in the grassroots efforts to exercise it than in the boardrooms, government offices, and legislative halls where power is vested and preserved.



National Catholic Rural Life Conference  
4625 Beaver Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199  
(515) 270-2634  
email address: [ncrlc@mchsi.com](mailto:ncrlc@mchsi.com)  
website: [www.ncrlc.com](http://www.ncrlc.com)

This article was published in the fall 2002 issue of Catholic Rural Life<sup>®</sup>. No portion of this article may be reproduced without written permission from The National Catholic Rural Life Conference. To purchase the fall 2002 issue of Catholic Rural Life, please contact The National Catholic Rural Life Conference office at 4625 Beaver Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199, call (515) 270-2634, or e-mail [NCRLC@mchsi.com](mailto:NCRLC@mchsi.com). The cost is \$2<sup>50</sup> an issue plus postage and handling.

---