



## Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

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Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

### **The Soup-er Bowl**

Hunger Awareness Luncheon  
sponsored by the  
Knights of Malta

December 7, 2010

Can widespread hunger exist in the most affluent society the world has ever known? You know the answer to that question: it is a resounding YES.

Should widespread hunger exist in the most affluent society the world has ever known? Aware of who you are, I fully expect that your response would be a resounding NO.

At this event a year ago I said that things couldn't get worse.

I was wrong.

I have been reading the social commentators, the statisticians, the editorial writers, the spin doctors, the politicians from both sides of the aisle and let me tell you that they never cease to amaze me. This year they tell us that there is good news and there is bad news. The bad news, obviously, is that this year there are more hungry people in the United States than there were a year ago. And now, listen to this, the good news is that the rate of increase of hungry people has lessened somewhat. That's good news? That's like telling the people on the Titanic that the ship is sinking in the ocean where it is really 100 feet less than the 2 ½ miles depth beneath its hull. It's all bad news even if the reports indicate that there are not more than 10 extra hunger victims this year than last.

What are the facts?

First of all, let me tell you that the experts do not like to use the word "hungry". They say that hungry people are "food insecure", a linguistic gimmick we use to lessen the moral implications associated with starving children and which still allows us to be smugly comfortable even when the voices of the poor are echoing across the land. It is historically debated as to who replied to the news that the people had no bread with the callous response, "Let them eat cake!" In Luke's gospel we can meditate on the parable of Lazarus lying in rags at the gate of the rich man. In this land of plenty, ironically currently struggling with an epidemic of obesity, for one in six Americans hunger is a reality. These are not just people living in ghettos of poverty in isolated parts of the country or the "no go" areas of our urban slums. They are often our neighbors whose sense of family pride will frequently urge them to hide their bare shelves and empty refrigerators – they may be hard working people in poorly paid jobs, they have children and may be caring for their elderly relatives and, especially in this current economic climate, they simply cannot make ends meet. They are forced to go without adequate meals, sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks. What little money they have or charity assistance they receive becomes the ingredient for a desperate game of roulette – pay the rent or buy food, purchase the child's medication or struggle to pay the utilities to ensure some modicum of heat in this cold weather or, God forbid, succumb to the temptation to end it all! (Sorry about that – but it happens!)

The statistics are staggering. Hunger, is, of course, intimately linked with poverty and poverty is intimately linked with unemployment and that's why I know the hunger statistics for this year, 2010, will be

catastrophic because last Friday the jobless rate, when it was predicted by the experts to decline, actually rose to 9.8% marking 19 straight months with an unemployment rate over 9% - and, by the way, the same experts tell us that the recession officially ended in June 2009!

Here are the grim statistics for 2009, the last full year for which we have data, as they relate to poverty in this beautiful land of ours.

In 2009, 43.6 million people (14.3% of the population) were in poverty. Almost 25 million of these were in the 18 to 64 age category. 15.5 million were children under the age of 18 and 3.4 million were seniors 65 years of age and older.

Translating these rates of poverty into the incidence of hunger in our midst is an exercise of depressing magnitude.

Generally speaking, rates of hunger are higher than the numbers who live below the official poverty level. In 2009, 50 plus million lived in "food insecure" households – 33 million adults and 17 million children.

As you would suspect those with a precarious hold on the economic ladder fared the worst – households headed by single women and single men and, racially, the scourge of hunger was felt disproportionately by African-American and Hispanic households.

I really do not relish giving your statistics because you will not be able to remember them and I only do so to stress the enormity of the problem. Also, statistics effectively hide the millions of human interest stories involved in this crisis. Many of you are, God bless you, on the front lines of feeding hungry people every day and I'm sure you have many heart-breaking stories to relate--- about the young mother who fainted at work because she had given the last of the cornflakes (and that's all they had!) to her children that morning before they left for school and for what she hoped would be a government-sponsored hot lunch; about the father who brought his two children to get something from the "dollar menu" at McDonalds while carefully hiding why he wasn't eating – because he could not afford another \$1.00 McChicken!

But having shared this litany of misery with you, I want to highlight the good news also.

I thank God for all of you because you are doing something about this massive problem – you are feeding the hungry and St. Matthew tells us that Christ made such a condition of salvation. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink,...." (Matt. 23:35) I thank God for school lunch programs, for food stamps, for Harvesters, for all our food kitchens and pantries, for the St. Vincent de Paul Society and Catholic Charities, for the Salvation Army, the Red Cross and the restaurants which donate their unused food to charitable food programs and so avoid the inexcusable sinfulness of waste. I thank God for Meals on Wheels and all the good people who cook and serve and deliver such essential nutrition. I thank God for our local ABC affiliate KMBC which just last week announced success in its drive to provide 30,000 meals for the poor of Kansas City.

I thank God for the students of Archbishop O'Hara High School and St. Pius X High School who recently collected 19,000 cans of food and \$2,000 in cash to feed the poor. I thank God and congratulate the students of Sion High School. who are being honored here today for 15 tons of food collected for Redeemptorist Center. (I have a scoop for you!) Before this lunch, in speaking to the Sion students, I discovered that this year they have collected over 34 tons of food for the same pantry.)

I also congratulate St. James Kitchen which has given me the privilege each year of hosting my birthday party for their daily guests on February 8<sup>th</sup> in exchange for the most moderate of all donations, working out at approximately 60 cents per person. (That even beats McDonald's One Dollar Menu!) Naturally I recommend such a meaningful program.

I shudder to think what the situation would be like if we did not have these programs. In many ways I see myself as a modern Oliver Twist – I am asking for more!

And we will have more if we realize that God put us on this earth, and here I quote St. John Damascene, “to take care of our fellow man.”

More so perhaps than any previous pope, Benedict XVI put it clearly and succinctly when he wrote in “*Deus Caritas Est*,” “the Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.”

Did you ever realize that the gospels are filled with references to food which can nourish our spirits and strengthen our resolution to reach out to others? We hear of salvation as a banquet with God; we are amused about Christ’s little tiff with Martha and Mary about food preparation; we behold the Master using hospitality, even that of the Pharisees, to instruct us about authenticity and, above all else, we have inherited Christ in the Eucharist, the *Panis Angelicus*.

One of the most telling incidents in the gospels however is what we call the “feeding of the five thousand,” a problem proportionately like ours today. Christ was advised to send the people away but he refused. Instead, he got everyone organized, seating them in groups of fifty and sending the disciples among them and the bread was multiplied in their hands – you are his disciples now and you too must be organized – and you too must ensure that there is no waste – as he so instructed, when they collected the twelve baskets laden with the leftovers.

I would like to think that our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, had this in mind when he penned these lines, “As a community the Church must practice love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community.”

And this, my dear people, is what you do every day and even though I may thank you from this podium, and this I do, I also know that you will be blessed many times over by those with whom you share your bread, because they can be the face of Christ in our troubled society.

Thank you for listening.