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Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Reflection on the Condition of the Hungry - Souper Bowl Luncheon

Annual Hunger Awareness Gathering

Sponsored by the Knights of Malta

Kansas City's Downtown Marriott Hotel

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Those of you who were here last year may recall the dismal picture I painted about the prevalence of hunger in our society in general and here in Kansas City in particular. Many of us believed at that time that it couldn't get any worse. Unfortunately, it has. It is safe to say that there is probably no country in the world where hunger has not become a social problem of significant magnitude.

There are many reasons for this happening and there is a growing realization among our leaders that the situation is spinning out of control to such an extent that a stark pessimism is gutting the will and the courage of those who have the ability to reverse this destructive tide of malnutrition and, I might add, unnecessary starvation.

Aided and abetted by its marauding companions Pestilence, War and Death, the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse, Hunger, is casting a long shadow as it multiplies victims in its gallop of destruction across the globe.

On all levels the statistics are mind-boggling. In October, the U.N. Food Agency issued its annual report. It indicated that currently there are there are one billion — and I emphasize the “B” — people in the world who are hungry and the numbers are increasing daily. Otiye Ig-buzor, the director of ActionAid International, described the grim situation with one terrifying sentence, and I quote, “We know a child dies every six seconds of malnutrition.” This means -- in more graphic terms -- that during the hour and a half allocated to this luncheon, 900 children will have died worldwide from hunger.

Let's narrow our vision to the United States, the envied land of bountiful harvests “from sea to shining sea.” Long before our unemployment rate reached 10.2 percent, more than 37 million of our fellow citizens were living in poverty, and two-thirds of these, at least at that time, had jobs. That breaks down to one in eight Americans which, in turn, includes one in every six children.

Some years back, Catholic Charities USA reported that 25 million people in our nation sought help from food banks, an increase of 18 percent over the previous year. Those of you who serve in food kitchens and pack bags in food pantries can testify to this trend. Our economy is in a shambles, money is scarcer, homelessness is rising as foreclosures increase, medical care is becoming elitist and the question is, “Why should we still wonder why millions of our people go to bed hungry every night, that is, if they have a bed to sleep in.”

Let's look at a New York Times editorial of just two weeks ago, Nov. 18:

Families were categorized as “food secure” or “food insecure” based on how they answered several questions on their eating habits during the previous 12 months. Among other things, adults were asked whether they or any of their children had ever forgone eating for an entire day because the family lacked money for food.

According to the new federal data, the number of people in households that lacked consistent access to adequate nutrition rose to 49 million in 2008, 13 million more than in the previous year and the most since the federal government began keeping the data 14 years ago.

About a third of struggling households had what researchers called “very low food security,” meaning that members of the household skipped meals, cut portions or passed on food at some point during the year because they lacked money. The other two-thirds managed to feed themselves by eating cheaper or less varied foods, relying on government aid like food stamps or resorting to food pantries and soup kitchens, which have been seeing heavier and heavier traffic in recent years.

Families with inadequate resources typically feed the children first, shielding them from hardship as much as possible. But the new data showed that the number of households in which children were exposed to “very low food security” rose from 506,000 from 323,000 in 2007, a 56 percent increase.

As if we needed more proof, as of this past Sunday, the same New York Times carried on its front page and extensive report on the increasing demand for food stamps nationally. I say every day, “Thank God for food stamps.” We simply cannot envision what the crisis would be like without them!

The number of food stamp recipients has increased about 9 million since the recession began in December '07. The program now feeds one in eight Americans and nearly one in four children.

We know that Missouri was crowned No. 1 in the annual border war football game at Arrowhead Stadium this past Saturday. Bud I bet you did not know that of the 50 states, Missouri is also No. 1 in its reliance on food stamps among those who are eligible to receive them — s whopping 98 percent of those who are eligible actually use them. We have 21 counties in our state where half the children rely on food stamps.

I am indebted to Susan Engel of our diocesan Catholic Charities office for developing a whole range of statistics and human interest stories about hunger in our own neighborhoods. The narratives display a depressing monotony — increasing numbers, less food, men actually crying as they ask for help because they feel they have been failures as their families’ bread-winners. Desperation and frustration, a sense of worthlessness, a willingness to work when there is no work, the pain of seeing your children crying for food when there is no food and you cannot do anything about it.

But there is another side to the coin. There are some who care — those who make sacrifices so others may eat, those who day after day prepare and serve hot meals in our parish kitchens and do so with a smile. There are those who collect canned goods, make sandwiches, listen patiently to hard-luck stories, are willing to be hood-winked now and again — all, and make no mistake, all of us are in this together, we must be manufacturers of the greatest

of all commodities, HOPE for, without it, we cannot keep the waters at bay until the tide turns,

With God's help and bolstered by the conviction that every human life has a dignity to be revered, a better society must be constructed step by difficult step, until food pantries and soup kitchens are consigned to the history books.

We can do it.

We must do it.

An unavoidable penalty of being a Christian is the inability to eat in peace and comfort if there are hungry children at the door.

The United Nations World Summit on Food Security convention was held in Rome last month.

Pope Benedict XVI was the guest speaker at the opening session November 16 and allow me to close my remarks by re-echoing a few of his remarks:

No. 1: "Hunger is the most cruel and concrete sign of poverty."

No. 2: "Opulence and waste are no longer acceptable when the tragedy of hunger is assuming even greater proportions."

No. 3: "The transcendental worth of every human being must be recognized if there is to be 'the conversion of heart that underpins the commitment to eradicate deprivation, hunger and poverty in all its forms.'"

No. 4: "The fundamental right to life depends on the right to sufficient, healthy and nutritious food and safe drinking water."

In his conclusion, the pope thanked the participants for their continuing efforts "to ensure that all people are given their daily bread."

And let me do the same. I thank you for being here today and for all that you do to provide bread for everybody here in Kansas City, where everything is up to date, or is supposed to be.

God bless you.