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Annual Hunger Awareness Luncheon  
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*This talk was delivered after viewing the video, "Build The Tallest Tower."*

From the video you have just seen you can readily understand why a picture is worth a thousand words.

In the scriptures, God's word, there are overwhelming references to food as a necessity for life with the obvious implication that we are to share it with others.

In the Old Testament, God promised Moses and his followers a land "flowing with milk and honey." God is portrayed as the ultimate bread winner when he provides manna from heaven for his wandering and hungry people. This becomes the raw material for the Passover experience and celebration. In this morning's Mass, Isaias told us that the coming Messiah, among other qualities, would be, "like a shepherd (who) feeds his sheep."

In Christ's time we have the observation that the poor will be with us always. We have the Lord feeding the multitudes in the desert, warning the greedy not to shortchange the poor when doling out food. We meditate on his participation in all the food-related events and promises which lead up to the Last Supper and the Eucharist and his admonition "to feed my lambs, feed my sheep." I know that many of these incidents have loftier interpretations but they do not exclude the basic obligation which we have as followers of the same Christ to feed the hungry, especially those who cannot feed themselves, namely, the poor. That's where the "fundamental option" comes from. And then we have the challenging, and maybe frightening words of Matthew 25, "I was hungry and you gave me to eat." "When, Lord, did we see you hungry?... "Whatever you did for the least brothers of mine, you did for me." On the other hand, those who do not recognize Christ personified in the poor who are hungry forfeit their salvation. And yet, elsewhere, the compassionate Lord promises eternal life to those who merely give a cup of water in his name.

Heaven is often portrayed as a "banquet" where it will be our privilege to sit with the Lord – one might say an "everlasting" supper as distinct to a "last" supper. Somehow I feel we may need a ticket to get in. In the light of Matthew's narrative we may be asked to examine our consciences – even after the grave there may be no such thing as a "free lunch!"

On Sunday night a dead man was found behind one of our local schools. The police suspect he froze to death. As of late last night he was still not identified. Yet, he was somebody's son. Maybe he had siblings. Maybe he had a wife or maybe he was the father of children. Who knows – besides God? And it will happen again and again this winter as surely as hundreds of adults and children in our lovely Kansas City will totter on the edge of starvation during these

cold days.

How bad is it?

Government documents do not use the word “hungry.” They prefer the euphemism “places with food insecurity.” (It reminds me of the time that I was told I was not bald, just tonsorially handicapped!)

In the early years of this century, Missouri stands in 25th place on the Food Insecurity list published by the Center on Hunger and Poverty of Brandeis University. This is one place worse than the national average and 13 places behind the State of Kansas. Moreover, there is evidence that Missouri is continuing to slip down the ladder so the challenge we face is getting worse, not better. *(Note -- the foregoing paragraph is correction of a misinterpretation of the statistics previously given in this place. We regret the error. -- RJB)*

Now, I am not going to talk to you about hunger in the Sudan, Malawi, the U.S. or even the State of Missouri. Those numbers are almost incomprehensible. Let me say a few words about hunger “right here in” Kansas City.

Three, or is it four, words: it's getting worse? Locally, an estimated 141,000 persons are hungry or food insecure. In 2002, 25 U.S. cities were surveyed and the need for “emergency food assistance” showed an average 19% increase over the previous year. Kansas City headed the list with an increase of a whopping 52%. *(Source: U.S. Conference of Mayors)* Harvesters Network calculated that 45% of those needing food are adults, 40% are children and 15% elderly. In the same year 5.4 million meals were served by the same network. *(Source: Harvesters, Kansas City and Office of Peace and Justice, Kansas City-St. Joseph Diocese)* Last year The Catholic Social Ministry Association, not all the agencies under Catholic auspices, in the Kansas City area alone served over 62,000 dinners and distributed almost 21,000 bags of food. *(Source: Catholic Charities, Kansas City-St. Joseph Diocese)* I could give you statistics “till the cows come home” but they all amount to one conclusion, “it's bad and it's getting worse.”

I beg you to remember the following. We live in the richest nation in the history of the world. The food is there; we are actually paying our farmers not to grow food. Young children who do not have an adequate diet do not develop properly – physically, mentally, emotionally and in their learning abilities. The elderly who do not eat lose resistance to cope with health problems surrendering their ability to take care of themselves in the autumn of their lives. Adults who are malnourished perform poorly at work and lose the incentive to develop new skills. Simply put, stomachs were made for food and bodies and minds disintegrate when the food they receive may be barely enough for mere survival but not enough for adequate growth and nourishment. Let me be snide by also making the observation that in a nation with such really unnecessary food problems we also have the greatest obesity problems. Let me be “catty”, pun intended, by telling you that animal lovers in the U.S. and Europe spend \$13 billion a year on pet food, almost the same amount it would take to feed the hungry worldwide; to take care of a terrible but solvable problem. There is no time for me to talk about the problems of waste, the short-sightedness of government priorities, the policies involved in the taxation of food – let me fall back on the old cliché, if we are smart enough to “put a man on the moon” surely we should have the ability and the will to distribute our more than adequate food supplies to those who go to bed hungry, if they have a bed, night after night after night.

We live in a great country which we all love. We value our democracy. We glory in our freedom, political and religious.

And yet there is a downside. I am not placing the blame at anybody's door. No one of us intends it. I might venture to say that most of us are almost blissfully unaware of the gradual corrosion of the foundations of our society. We are actively campaigning to do away with the death penalty and I hope we succeed but are we not, in a very subtle and almost invisible way, condemning 10% of our people to lives of endless inadequacy and even premature death? I know I am being cynical but cynicism sometimes attracts outrageous attention – with our blasé inattention to the implications of (a) less food stamps, (b) much higher costs of heating oil and (c) natural gas and spiraling increases in the price of medications, are we not saying to the poor:

“Sure, you live in a great democracy. In a democracy you have options. You make the choice. Is it going to be food, or heat or your medications? You cannot afford all three. Do you wish to die of malnutrition, hypothermia, an untreated disease or of all three?”

And there, as lawyers are wont to say, “I rest my case.”