

FOOD

At the heart of "Respect Life" is respect for the human rights by which life and dignity are protected and enhanced. Catholic doctrine on human rights is the product of a long tradition, cultivated with new urgency in the last 30 years in the teaching of Popes Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI and Vatican Council II.

Protecting and fostering human rights nationally and internationally has become an increasingly urgent and progressively difficult task. The urgency and the difficulty stem from the same fact of contemporary life: the growing material interdependence of our world. Material interdependence is not difficult to perceive or to understand; it is created by the bonds of modern technology and communication which level barriers of time and space; by the bonds of economic relationships which transcend national and regional groupings; and by the common bond of environmental dependence upon air, water and resources. These external dimensions of interdependence, however, fail to highlight the real problem we face. Rights and interdependence are related in the moral order.

The fact of interdependence points toward its moral meaning. We must learn how to live **LOCKED TOGETHER** on a **LIMITED GLOBE**. Mutual vulnerability characterizes our lives today. We touch each others' lives, fortunes and fates for good or for ill more directly than at any period of history.

There are degrees of vulnerability, usually correlated to levels of economic, political and military power; yet, as the "gas crisis" illustrated in striking terms for the average American, even the world's most powerful nation is no longer insulated from the decisions of others.

Vulnerability implies responsibility. Knowing that others are affected by policies we support or practices we encourage means that we cannot be indifferent to the fact that in our world today fundamental human needs go unmet and basic human rights go unfulfilled. Determining our responsibility and deciding how to fulfill it are not simple tasks, but complexity is not an excuse for compliance or complicity. The world contains unjust structures and systems of social organization. Respect for life means, in part, being committed to changing these. This is the first step in facing the moral meaning of interdependence.

The second dimension of moral interdependence is the understanding that we live in a **LIMITED** world — a world of finite resources which all need but only some get; a world in which the supply of limited resources already shows signs of strain. As we confront the questions of justice, human rights, and respect for life, we face a newly perceived problem: the total answer to fulfilling the demands of justice cannot be simply producing **MORE**. Awareness of our limited environment and resources means that distributive justice — sharing not just our surplus but **OUR SCARCITY** — is now the other dimension of the moral meaning of interdependence. Shall we accept responsibility for our mutual vulnerability? Shall we be willing to share our scarcity? Our respect for life depends greatly upon our answers to these questions.

A critical illustration of the implications of these questions is the issue of food production, distribution and consumption in the world today. What does this mean for us as Catholics in America in 1974?

The moral problem arises from the fact that food, an absolutely essential resource which everyone needs, is now in short supply. United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim described the situation in his address to the Special Session of the UN last April: "Never in recent decades have world reserves been so frighteningly low. The production of enough food to feed, even reasonably well, people all over the world ... most certainly represents the largest single pressure on our natural resources."

There are two fundamental pressures on the food supply; these are complemented by other factors of a more transitory nature. The "transitory factors" are climatic conditions (e.g., the present drought in Africa) and the consequences



of the drastic rise in petroleum prices with its impact on food and fertilizer costs. The two fundamental (i.e., continuing) pressures are the rate of population growth and patterns of resource consumption.

Before examining these two factors, it is important to note that considering BOTH in relation to food supply in itself represents a new and important insight. Only a decade ago the basic problem was defined simply as a race between food and population growth. Moreover, "control" of population was understood in a very simplistic, inadequate fashion, consisting primarily of providing people with a sufficient supply of contraceptives, together with encouragement, incentives or pressure to use them. Today, while the relationship of food and population growth is recognized as a problem, it is understood to be only **PART** of the problem. The pattern of resource consumption in wealthy or developed nations is regarded as equally important.

How are food, population and consumption related? In very general terms, the food-population picture rests on the fact that the rate of population growth globally is at present 2 per cent per year. At this rate, merely maintaining current per capita consumption levels requires a doubling of food production over the next 20 years. The rate of population growth varies drastically in different sections of the globe, reaching three per cent per year in some places and approaching "zero population growth" in others.

Less often noted — at least in the United States — is that consumption rates vary much more drastically around the globe. The fundamental statistic is that, as six per cent of the world's population, we in the United States consume close to 40 per cent of its resources. (This happens in a **LIMITED** world.) To understand how food fits into this statistic, it is necessary to look not only at amounts but patterns of consumption — not only how much people eat, but what they eat.

The easiest approach is to examine consumption of grain in the world. Grain is the basic staple in the human diet; it provides the basic of food intake and its production accounts for over 70 per cent of the world's crop area. The average per capita consumption of grain in the developing countries is approximately 400 pounds per year. In the United States and Canada it is approximately 1,000 pounds per year. But in terms of the relationship of food and consumption, the amount is not the principle factor.

More important is the pattern of consumption. It is this which has placed new pressure on food supplies. Grain is consumed either directly (bread, cereals, etc.) or indirectly (meat, eggs). In the poor countries the intake of 400 pounds is almost exhausted in direct consumption. In the United States and Canada only 150 pounds are consumed directly, while the rest is indirect consumption. Indirect consumption (e.g., using

grain to fatten beef cattle) rises proportionately with rising affluence. After per capita income passes \$500 per year the indirect consumption of grain through consumption of meat rises. The problem is that in a world of **LIMITED** supplies indirect consumption is remarkably costly: it takes about eight pounds of grain to produce a pound of beef. In the United States per capita consumption of beef rose from 55 pounds in 1940 to 117 pounds in 1972.

The pressure on food supplies in the world, therefore, is not simply a question of how many people live in the world (population) but also how some people live (life-style). The population-resources picture is often depicted in terms of a world which cannot tolerate the reproductive patterns of Asians and Latin Americans. The equally important — perhaps more important — question is whether a limited world can afford the consumption habits of North Americans and Europeans.

The United States and Canada have played a unique role as a "breadbasket" for the world. This role has been animated by humanitarian considerations, to be sure, but it also has coincided with our economic interests. Exporting food under the "Food for Peace" program (Public Law 480), which made food available at reduced costs to poor countries, also helped provide an outlet for our surplus agricultural products. Now, because of the food crisis in the globe, we no longer have surpluses.

What does this mean as far as food is concerned? It means that as Americans, the principal suppliers of food for the world in a time of shortage, we need to understand clearly the requirements of justice. To allow people to die, for example, as they are in danger of dying in Sahelian countries of Africa or in Bangladesh today, because they cannot afford the market price for food is to fail in justice. People have a **RIGHT** to eat. This right places a duty on other members of the human family to see that it is at least minimally fulfilled.

The "structures and systems" which stand in the way of that right at the moment include the fact that people must be able to buy food or they cannot obtain it. An alternative structure would be to supplement the market system with a food reserve, built up by donations from exporting countries and continually sustained.

The food question is an issue of human rights. Like all issues of human rights it is a principal means of respecting life. As Christians we know that where we respect life, by justice and self-sacrifice, we manifest our love for God who gave us life.

SUGGESTED PROGRAMS

1. Sponsor a "hunger banquet" to vividly demonstrate (in proportion to actual conditions) the nutritional inequities in the world. Serve most of the guests something like rice and tea, and the remainder of the guests a full course meal. Details for this and other programs available from American Freedom from Hunger Foundation, 1717 H St., N.W., Washington, D.C.

2. Sponsor a program to educate the community-parish members about deficiencies of present diets available for those on various forms of public assistance. Suggest a group try the "welfare diet," prepared by the National Welfare Rights Assn. (1424 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C.)

3. Set up a comparison shoppers' service. Have group representatives "shop" in several local food markets. Draw up a list of comparative prices, and print results in parish bulletin each week. This could be expanded in especially low-income areas to see that those on low and fixed incomes are able to get the most for their food dollars.

4. An existing parish organization could compile a recipe book of low-cost, high nutrition meals, making good use of the more abundant foods. Group could meet weekly and each participant would bring to each meeting a recipe (and sample). These recipes are collected and compiled into an inexpensively printed (mimeo would do) book. The book can be made available at cost to parishioners on Sunday after Masses, at county and state fairs, and other local gatherings. If sold for more than cost, the proceeds could be donated to a specific food project.