

Food Crisis Gives New Impetus to Fasting

By Religious News Service

The world food crisis is reviving one of the most ancient and universal religious practices: fasting.

*The U.S. Catholic hierarchy recently called on 48 million lay Catholics, priests and religious to fast two days each week.

*Among Protestants, the Episcopal Church has pioneered in focusing attention on the value of fasting, but abstinence from food as a response to hunger throughout the world is found on many levels of Protestantism.

Public acceptance of fasting seems to be considerable. An estimated 250,000 Americans, including thousands of college students, took part in a Nov. 21 fast called by Oxfam-America and Project Relief.

"For my family to miss lunch a couple of days every week won't solve the hunger problem but it is a way to start something we must do," a Presbyterian layman said one recent Sunday morning in encouraging fellow parishioners to fast. "It's a reminder, if nothing else, that we have to start somewhere to feed the world."

While the number of calls for fasting is perhaps unprecedented today, fasting as a measure to aid the hungry is not new. It was employed in the U.S. in the late 1940s to raise funds to feed persons displaced by World War II. In 1961, Hong Kong Catholics fasted to assist a relief program.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) has maintained a "fast offering" fund for more than a century. In 1972, the latest year for which figures are available, some \$8.6 million from the fund was distributed to the needy. About one third of all Mormon families, each month, pay the suggested equivalent of at least the cost of a Sunday dinner plus one other meal.

Fasting is a spiritual discipline the Christian church inherited from Judaism. Jesus fasted, as did the Apostles, and fast days were established in the earliest Christian communities. The Didache, an early document on church practice, mentions Wednesday and Friday as fast days.

The Lenten Fast may have lasted only two days originally, but by the 4th Century it had been extended to 40 days in many

areas. The Eastern Christian church set Advent and Pentecost fasts as the years passed, while in the West vigil fasts before great festivals were introduced.

In modern Roman Catholic practice fasting generally means one chief meal a day. The only two general fast days remaining in the Catholic Church, as a result of recent changes, are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Various orders and groups encourage fasting and abstinence at other times.

Anglicanism maintains a calendar of fasts and days for abstinence, as do some Lutherans, but most Protestant denominations do not observe stipulated fasts. Although rarely practiced in a ritualistic manner, fasting is not, however, alien to Protestant spirituality.

The current stress on fasting makes a direct plea for less concern for luxuries. The U.S. Catholic bishops said in November:

"Appeals to Christian conscience of responsible stewardship highlighting the practice of days of fast and abstinence flow from the deepest roots of our biblical and ecclesiastical traditions

"We urge resistance to advertising and other forms of social pressure which promote affluent and wasteful eating habits."

With few exceptions, all world religions observe fasting. Jews fast from sunset on the Day of Atonement and have other minor fasts, such as the Fast of Ab. Islam set aside an entire month (Ramadan) as a time when no food or drink is taken during daylight.

Buddhist monks hold a fortnightly fast (Uposatha) which the laity is also urged to observe. Devout Hindus fast on the 11th day of each month and in fulfillment of certain vows.

Mahatma Gandhi used fasting as a political weapon to win the independence of India from Great Britain. His fasts were not, however, wholly political; they also served to strengthen his commitment to non-violence. Chiefly through Gandhi's influence on the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., fasting entered the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s and, from there, moved into anti-war efforts.

According to the late Dr. S.G.F. Brandon, a British scholar, three forms of fasting are identifiable in the sweep of religion:

*Preparation for initiation — before baptism, ordination or the introduction of an adolescent into adult society. This form can involve purification and cleansing. While making a political statement, fasting, civil rights and peace demonstrators often said they were also purifying their own motives. Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm

Workers Union, says his fasts promote rededication to non-violence.

*Mourning — for the dead or the suffering. In recent years, this form of fast has been publicly observed by groups protesting the Vietnam war, terrorism in the Middle East and anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.

*Penitence — for wrongdoing and sin. Fasting as a means of penance is probably the most common form. Still prevalent among monastic orders and built into many newer religious communities, fasting represents contribution, self-sacrifice, and self-denial for the sake of others.

Last July, in proposing Wednesday as a day of voluntary fasting and abstinence in the Archdiocese of New York, Cardinal Terence Cooke called such an act "a most suitable — and a most spiritually rewarding — way of offering up our sacrifice for the grave human needs of our fellow man."

It is unlikely that the funds raised from fasting in the U.S. and other affluent countries can meet the food needs of the hungry in the 32 most needy areas of the world.

American religious leaders hope, however, that if members will revive the practice of fasting in-home and community life the next step can be readjustment of a luxury-bound society toward moderation in the consumer lifestyle.



Some friends have complained that I have been too hard lately on the "peace and justice" boys within the Catholic Church. Conceding that some of them are misinformed, ill-informed, and uninformed amateurs, my friends argue that the Church still has to take a stand on at least general problems of justice and peace, and that eventually the incompetents will be replaced by trained professionals. The peace and justice crowd, my friends contend, needs a few more years to become professionally competent.

Well, perhaps. Surely we will be well rid of the curse of well-meaning amateurs. And I would be the last to deny anybody the right to earn his living, grind his axe, do his thing. Finally, it is not only the right but the duty of every Christian to cry out for justice where there is no justice.

But my fundamental problem with the peace and justice group as part of the organized Church goes beyond the question of confidence to that of credibility. Individuals can and must take a stance for justice, but for the Catholic Church in its present form to tell other human organizations about justice is more than a little ludicrous. How can anyone in the Western democratic world listen seriously to representatives of an organization in whose internal structure the most elementary forms of justice are absent?

Some of the speakers at the recent synod in Rome alluded to this problem, but apparently what they said wasn't taken seriously. However, when an organization without due processes without the right of protest, without popular selection of leadership, and without restraints on the exercise of leadership, pontificates about justice, most of those in the Western world who bother to listen will respond with hollow laughter — or perhaps with a quotation from the

Founder about the beam in our own eye.

In the Catholic Church, as a human organization, there is no effective way to appeal against an unjust decision, no way to protest an arbitrary policy (such as the sudden closing of a parochial school), no way to participate in the selection of pope, bishops, or pastors, and no way to remove a leader no matter how incompetent or psychopathic he may be. If Richard Nixon were pope or a pastor, he would still be in office.

And we presume to preach to others about justice? The Founder might have said something about whitened sepulchres.

When formal consultations do take place (more at the level of the apostolic delegate, it would appear, than at the level of a personnel board or a bishop), it is indeed admirable. But they have nothing to do with justice, nothing to do with the God-given right to participate in the selection of one's leaders. As Pope St. Leo put it, "qui praesidet super omnes, ab omnibus eligatur" ("He who presides over all must be chosen by law.") Any other form of selection is a violation of justice. That it has gone on for a long time doesn't make it less unjust. The present method of selecting pastors, bishops, and popes is a violation of fundamental human rights, a grave and monstrous injustice.

Similarly, the inability of a community to call for the removal of a known incompetent or a proven psychopath is also an injustice. Such removals should not be easy, but they should be possible. The process should be available. In the Catholic Church it is not, not in any meaningful, practical sense.

It was not always this way. In the medieval Church the democratic election of leaders was taken for granted, and the religious orders like the Dominicans and Franciscans, which were founded at that time, are still completely democratic. Canon law was then truly independent, not merely a tool used by the ecclesiastical power elite to impose its will on those who dared to disagree or criticize. The Church had a lot to do with bringing democracy to Western Europe. As an organizational structure it was then a light on the mountaintop.

It should become such a light again. But until it does, the peace and justice crowd is not going to have much more effect than tinkling brass and clanging cymbals.

U.S. Bishops Request Meeting with Ford

Washington, D.C. [RNS] — The U.S. Catholic bishops' top spokesman here has appealed to President Ford to meet with members of the Catholic hierarchy to discuss the "challenges and responsibilities" facing the American people concerning the world food crisis.

Bishop James S. Rausch, general secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) also urged in a Dec. 9 letter to Ford that the chief executive incorporate into his forthcoming State of the Union message the essential elements of a pastoral plan of action on the food crisis issued by the NCCB at its November general meeting.

Declaring that "these are indeed trying times both here and abroad" and stressing that the U.S. bishops are "solicitous of the heavy burdens resting upon your office" with regard to the current food question, Bishop Rausch suggested to the President "that a time be designated when several members of the Catholic hierarchy might meet with you for further discussion and elaboration" of their pastoral plan.

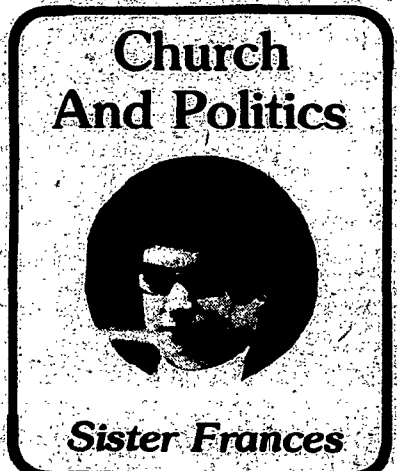
The bishops' plan proposed a program of public discussion "directed toward influencing appropriate executive and legislative action... to achieve national policies effectively dealing with the food issue, internationally and domestically," the bishop pointed out.

Formulated by a special task force chaired by Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York, the plan was unanimously approved by the nation's bishops (Nov. 21). It calls on the nation's Catholics to join with the bishops in two days of fasting a week as one phase of the battle against hunger in the world.

The plan addresses itself to national policies dealing with food issues and urges greater funding of the Food for Peace Program, additional incentive to agricultural development overseas, a modification of U.S.

trade policies to provide a just return to poor countries, and assurance that American family

farmers will be protected against the interests and impact of large agricultural corporations.



Of all our religious celebrations, Christmas is, in a certain sense, the simplest and yet the most intensely celebrated of all. The Son of God's coming as a child is so very ordinary yet remarkable in its frailty and dependence. He depends on Mary and Joseph for his most basic needs and immediately becomes a part of society's most basic community, the family.

The world today, as a larger community, is struggling with some of these same basic lessons that were witnessed on that first Christmas 2000 years ago. Are we really one community? Are all nations inter-related and inter-dependent? Can some exist in isolation from others? Of all our problems, World Hunger focuses on these questions most clearly. In a very real way, it is a simple problem and the most basic. If people do not have enough to eat then no other problem is really significant. Hunger was one of the first needs that Jesus faced and for a time he was totally dependent on others to fill that need.

Many nations of the world find themselves in a similar position this Christmas season. They exist in varying degrees of dependence on other nations for enough food just to get by. They wait patiently, at least for now, in the expectation that nations more abundantly endowed with food will recognize the in-

terdependence of the human community and respond to their call. The recent World Food Conference in Rome hoped to attempt to face the question but it ended in frustration and despair for many. Nations with food refused to make a real commitment to share their blessings with others. These nations somehow assumed they had the right to eat more than the rest of the world. These decisions were made largely by governments. They were political decisions. Political leaders explain these decisions mostly in terms of self-interest and fear. They say, for example, that inflation will be worse if we increase our food aid. (Consider: less than 1/10 of one percent of our food production is exported through food aid programs.) They say that we are already doing enough. (Consider: the United States provides only one-tenth of the food aid it did ten years ago yet sells grain to Russia for economic gain and to Egypt for military considerations.)

If we would heed the call of our own bishop who, with the other American bishops at a November meeting in Washington, invited us to join them in fasting two days a week, and if we also would support an effective legislative program, we could begin to address the problem. With some sacrifice and with sensitive political leadership, we could really make a difference in the way things are. Are we all making the effort? Are we aware of how our representatives and senators vote on food aid bills? Do we know their positions and views? Will we, and in the final analysis, the world as a whole, begin to recognize our dependence on one another as even the Son of God was dependent on a man and a woman?

"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink."

—Matt. 25:35