

COURIER-JOURNAL

Vol. 1, No. 3 • January 18, 1984

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005. All contents copyright © 1984 by NC News Service.

Faith Today

'The Eucharist is linked to ordinary human hunger.' Really.

By Katharine Bird

Early one dawn, the missionary was driving down a mountain road in Guatemala when he caught sight of a dignified elderly woman. She was walking along, a bowl balanced on her head. Then the woman stumbled and dropped the bowl, and the corn scattered over the roadside. The woman, crying, bent down to gather up the corn, kernel by kernel, into her apron.

For her, the corn represented life — it was all she had to eat for the next two weeks.

The priest stopped and helped the woman collect the grains. Then he continued on to the airport where he caught a plane home. Many hours later he arrived at his home in western Minnesota.

This was at the time of the grain harvest and the harvest was plentiful — 130 bushels to every acre. Driving along the priest was struck by the sight of the grain elevators, higher than his head and full to the brim.

The contrast between the two scenes was staggering.

Bishop Raymond Lucker of New Ulm, Minn., told that story during a seminar in Washington, D.C. The woman is symbolic of all those in the world who have so many things going against them, he said. The woman was elderly, an Indian and poor in a nation where a minority of the people owns the productive land and where Indians are oppressed.

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The story flashed into my mind as I prepared to write this article. For me, its symbols of corn and grain — food for life — were reminders of the Eucharist. "I am the bread of life," Jesus had said. To me, that always had meant that the Eucharist is a very special form of nourishment.

A woman far away, weeping over the spilled corn she so badly needed, was a reminder of the Eucharist. But, I wondered, can that thought be turned around? Is the Mass also a reminder for Christians of that woman and of

What does Mass have to do with a Guatemalan woman's hunger, or the pain of people who have so much going against them? Sometimes it's difficult to see the connection. But the Eucharist holds a vision of how things could be for humanity.

others like her whose needs are so profound?

I decided to put that question to Bishop Lucker. He paused, then responded: There is a sense in which that woman and people like us are united in the Eucharist, in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And, the bishop indicated, this is not a nebulous sort of unity. It unites the reality of the Guatemalan woman's life — her pain and frustration, perhaps her anger — and the reality of our own lives.

Bishop Lucker cautioned, however, that "people need to be open to the power of the Eucharist." For the story doesn't end simply with receiving Jesus in the Eucharist. Christians also receive a message "to bring him into our lives."

Explaining what that implies, Bishop Lucker recalled that, at the end of each Mass, the priest turns to the congregation and says: "Go in peace to serve the world."

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For the bishop and people in the Diocese of New Ulm, the instruction to go and serve the world takes form in the assistance they provide to 7,000 poor people in San Lucas Toliman, a village in the Guatemalan highlands. Bishop Lucker told how 20 years ago, people in New Ulm took on this responsibility.

In some instances, the bishop said a New Ulm family "adopts" a village family in a financial way by contributing \$700 a year. The people of the diocese also have helped villagers build three schools, train catechists and learn



new techniques of farming, the bishop said.

These images and reflections suggest that the Eucharist holds a vision for the world. Msgr. John Egan spoke of this in a recent address. Long known for his work in the field of social action, Msgr. Egan is now director of the archdiocesan Office of Human Relations and Ecumenism in Chicago. In the liturgy, he said, there is a basic realization "that we are created to be mutually dependent, to enhance one

another's existence." This is a vision of unity and of responsibility, he indicated. It reaches beyond those who are gathered for a particular Mass in a particular place.

Isn't it because of this vision that the Mass can be said to point toward the woman who wept over the kernels of corn she had lost? This is part of the mystery of the Eucharist: The woman's hunger and the nourishment offered in the Eucharist are linked.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

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