

The Church in the World

Bishops: Hunger a Pro-Life Issue

But Linking the Two Issues May Bring Political Repercussions

By Liz Armstrong

Washington (NC) — The U.S. bishops have described the right to eat as "essential to the right to life itself."

That belief was cited by Msgr. Francis J. Lally, U.S. Catholic Conference secretary of the Department of Social Development and World Peace, in a letter urging senators to support anti-hunger legislation, including the Women, Infant and Children nutrition program, whose clients include pregnant women.

Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago, in his recent discussions of a consistent ethic of life, included hunger among pro-life issues. "Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us — the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker," said the cardinal, chairman of the bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities.

But there has been a continuing debate over the relationship between the politics of hunger and other pro-life concerns.

At least two pro-life groups, the National Right to Life Committee and American Citizens Concerned for Life, back such programs as WIC. Supporting WIC is "something that fits into the philosophy of the organization," said Jan Carroll, associate legislative director of the Washington-based NRLC.

The ACCL takes a similar stance. "Our organization

believes any of these issues that affect a woman's pregnancy or her child are certainly part of the larger picture," said Carol Kiddle, staff director of the Minneapolis-based ACCL.

She said there is a "very definite correlation" between good nutrition and a pro-life attitude because a poor woman, sickly from lack of proper nutrition or distraught with worry about her next meal, may be inclined to choose abortion over carrying her child to term. The ACCL has supported WIC since proposals for it first surfaced in the 1970s, Ms. Kiddle said.

But on Capitol Hill, the hunger issue and its relationship to pro-life concerns gets complicated.

Some members of Congress known for their work to alleviate hunger also have voted, according to an NRLC tally, in favor of abortion at various times.

And Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., considered by some pro-lifers to be one of their leading voices on the Hill, has introduced proposed revisions in the WIC program that are staunchly opposed by spokesmen for the bishops.

The USCC, the bishops' public policy arm, says Helms' bill could weaken the WIC program. Helms says the bill would gear aid to the most needy, including pregnant women, breastfeeding women and babies.

Another example of the way the hunger issue crosses both sides of the abortion debate is in the awards given to senators and representatives by Bread for the World, a major church-based anti-hunger organization. Its leader-

ship includes Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Chabert of Detroit, president, and its board members, Fr. Peter William J. Byrne, president of the Catholic University of America, and Fr. J. Bryan Hehir, USCC secretary designate for social development and world peace.

In announcing its congressional Distinguished Service Awards, Bread for the World said of the recipients: "While the (Reagan) administration and many in Congress were calling for dramatic cuts in food and nutrition programs and a reversal of foreign aid reforms directed to benefit the poorest people, these people stood their ground."

Three recipients of the awards, Sen. Walter Huddleston, D-Ky., Jennings Randolph, D-W.Va., and Rudy Boechwiler, R-Ill., have been highly rated by NRLC for their votes against abortion. But two other recipients of the anti-hunger award, Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., and Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., opposed the right-to-life group position each time they voted on abortion-related issues during 1983.

Likewise, the 11 House recipients of the anti-hunger award were also split on abortion. Seven supported abortion rights in their voting records while four showed pro-life records.

Perhaps a day will come when pro-life and anti-hunger votes will be synonymous. Until then, those who see a connection between fighting hunger and fighting abortion as part of a consistent ethic of life will have much to do.

USCC Urges Rejection Of Helms Cutbacks

Washington (NC) — A U.S. Catholic Conference official has urged the Senate Agriculture Committee to reject legislation sponsored by the committee chairman, Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., to cut funds for federal nutrition programs that aid pregnant women and children.

In an April 30 letter to committee members, Msgr. Francis J. Lally, secretary of the USCC Department of Social Development and World Peace, termed the right to eat part of the "right to life."

Helms' bill, S.2545, had been scheduled for committee discussion May 2 but was postponed until May 16.

The USCC said that Helms' bill in fiscal 1985 would authorize \$1.25 billion for the federal Women, Infants and Children nutrition program, approximately 15 percent less than the \$1.47 billion the Congressional Budget Office has said is needed to serve current recipients.

Msgr. Lally said the WIC program now serves only one-third of those believed eligible.

Cuts in the program, he said, would not only "endanger the basic rights of poor families" but lead to higher costs from infant mortality and health care problems due to insufficient nutrition.

He said bishops around the world "have called the right to eat a fundamental human right, one essential to the right to life itself."

Msgr. Lally also urged the committee to oppose another proposal by Helms to incorporate the nutrition programs into block grants, sums allocated the states to dispense as they see fit in a given area.

He said the WIC program "has achieved remarkable success" in preventing low birth weights, "one of the primary causes for infant mortality."

A USCC staff adviser on health and welfare issues, Sharon Mooers, said adequate nutrition for pregnant women can reduce chances women will miscarry their unborn children.

Other proposals in the legislation cited by Msgr. Lally as "particularly objectionable" included those to:

- Deny benefits to children enrolled in day care centers or home care programs that receive support under a separate Child Care Food Program. Most WIC agencies already adjust support levels to take into account participation in the other program, and "both programs are needed if eligible children are to receive adequate nutrition," Msgr. Lally stated.

- "Make optional the current mandatory expedited processing of certain categories of persons at especially high risk, such as pregnant women suffering from medical problems."

- Allow the Department of Agriculture to set required minimum levels of WIC participation and terminate involvement by state agencies whose programs draw less participation. If this provision is invoked, "many of the existing Indian state WIC agencies would be abolished," the letter said.

Helms said in introducing his bill that S.2545 is "consistent with the congressional mandate to insure that federal tax dollars are directed to those in greatest need."

He said that WIC should assist the most needy, "such as those below 100 percent of poverty and those at greatest nutritional risk." Currently, those at 185 percent of the federal level for poverty are eligible. Under that standard, a family of four with an income of about \$18,315 would be eligible, Helms said.

Amend Immigrant Bill, Msgr. Higgins Advises

Washington (NC) — Amend the immigration reform bill to protect agricultural workers, Msgr. George G. Higgins told a House subcommittee May 3.

Testifying for the U.S. Catholic Conference before the labor standards subcommittee of the House Committee on Education and Labor, Msgr. Higgins warned against expanding the current H-2 temporary worker program into the large-scale "bracero" program of the 1950s and 1960s which brought in hundreds of thousands of foreign workers.

Msgr. Higgins, former USCC secretary for research, is now a theology professor at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

Many problems that confronted Congress during the years of the bracero program remain unsolved, according to Msgr. Higgins. He cited:

- "The adverse effect the use of temporary workers has on the wages and working conditions of domestic workers;"

- The restriction on employment opportunities and impediments on unionizing those domestic workers, and

- The lack of what he called even minimal standards for housing and sanitary facilities.

There continues to exist "an atmosphere within the agricultural industry conducive to the exploitation of those workers whose blood, sweat and tears produce the food and fiber of this nation," Msgr. Higgins said.

The objectives of the bracero legislation had been to obtain agricultural workers from Mexico to meet seasonal labor shortages while at the same time insuring that the country's own domestic farm workers would not be adversely affected by the employment of the Mexicans.

Msgr. Higgins said an amendment to the proposed immigration reform bill, H.R. 1510, recognizes the need "for a broad interpretation of the 'adverse effect' concept."

The amendment would mandate that fair labor standards be maintained and the provision of housing, at no cost to the worker, is adequate and safe, Msgr. Higgins said. The amendment also would mandate accurate payroll records, the provision of meals and the benefit of health insurance.

Msgr. Higgins said there is "a glaring inconsistency in H.R. 1510's whole approach to the problems of aliens unlawfully in the United States."

On the one hand, he said, the bill calls for sanctions against the employment of aliens who are seeking work in the United States without authorization.

On the other hand, he said, it would help the importation of foreign workers where there is an alleged shortage of domestic labor.

Msgr. Higgins questioned the shortage of workers, given the present unemployment rate of about 8 percent. "There would be no shortage of workers willing and able to perform the jobs in question if they were offered adequate wages and working conditions," he said.

"If employers and growers in a given occupation or locality claim to be short on domestic labor, when millions of American workers are walking the streets, it may well be that that is a problem in great part of their own making. They ought not to expect the government to bail them out at the expense of our own domestic labor force — and, the government ought not to oblige them," Msgr. Higgins said.

John Paul II: Robots Threat To Workers

Vatican City (NC) — Pope John Paul II said May 1 that robots and computers were contributing to unemployment and cautioned that humans risk becoming slaves to machines.

The church has always sought to help workers and to protect their rights, especially since the start of the industrial age, the pope said.

May 1 is the feast of St. Joseph the Worker and a labor day holiday in many countries.

The pope spoke at his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square attended by 30,000 people. The audience, normally held on Wednesdays, was held on a Tuesday because of a papal plan to have May 2 for a trip to the Pacific and the Far East.

The most serious problem for workers today, he said, is unemployment.

"It is caused by many factors, such as the introduction of automation on a vast scale, which through 'robots' and computers eliminates much labor," the pope said.

Among other causes of unemployment, the pope cited the saturation of the market by some products, inflation, competition, and the need to reconstruct machines and production techniques.

"Another problem is the danger that man may become a slave of these machines that he himself has invented and constructed. It is necessary, in fact, to control and guide technology, which otherwise is placed against man," the pope said.

Pope John Paul also criticized "professional alienation," when work loses its significance and becomes "mere merchandise." The pope blamed such alienation on "a cold logic of earnings in order to acquire

goods, consume and then produce again."

Those alienated, he said, are tempted to give in to discouragement and abandonment. The resulting "existential void" is a victim of technology, advertising and production, he said.

The value of work and the civilization founded on work is opposed to ideologies that support the "Christianization of pleasure" or of indifference, he added.

To resolve such problems, "there is a need for a human and Christian solidarity" at a national and universal level," the pope said.

The fundamental aspects of work that the church has always pronounced include serving a living, positively engaging oneself and contributing to the common good, he added.