

## Respect LIFE



(Campaign for Human Development photo by David Vaughn)

# Poverty Strips Its Victims Of Their Inherent Dignity

By RONALD T. KRIETEMEYER

Taking the dignity of the human person as its starting point, the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on the economy places special emphasis on human rights, and specifically economic rights. According to Catholic social teaching, human rights include not only civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech, worship and assembly, but also some rights that are of a specifically economic nature. For example, all people have a right to food, clothing, shelter, adequate income, employment, medical care and basic education.

Through legal and constitutional structures, democratic societies have developed the means to secure civil and political rights. Economic rights have not been granted a similar status in our society, however.

Catholic social teaching goes beyond abstract moral principles; it includes the concrete realities of economic life. Children living in poverty is a

specific case.

A quick look at this problem reveals that one in every four American children under the age of six is poor. Almost 60 percent of poor families with children receive no government assistance, have no health insurance and cannot pay medical bills. Less than half of all poor children are immunized against preventable diseases such as diphtheria and polio. Poor children are at much greater risk of prematurity, low birthweight and death before the age of one. Children born in poverty have a death rate three times higher than that of non-poor children.

The Catholic moral vision also prompts us to see poverty in a social or communitarian perspective. We see the poverty of 13 million American children as integrally related to the welfare of the whole community.

If part of our faith is a commitment to human dignity and human rights, then we must act on this commitment. The most important way to do so is through our daily work in the

home, the office, the factory. Beyond this there are several kinds of activities that we might consider.

First, we can deepen our knowledge and understanding of Catholic social teaching. We need a long-term commitment to learn more about Catholic social teaching and to tell others about it.

A second opportunity for action is through direct service to those in need. Experiencing the smell, the taste and the feel of poverty is one of the most effective ways to learn about economic injustice and what we can do about it.

Finally, pursuit of economic justice must take believers into the public life of the nation. In this way, we will not only be speaking for the voiceless; we will also be advancing the common good and serving as instruments of God's kingdom.

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## REFUGEES

### Reaching Out to the Stranger

By MSGR. NICHOLAS DI MARZIO

In today's world, some eight million to 12 million people are living the stateless life of the refugee.

The more fortunate refugees arrive in camps, and later to resettlement countries, in possession of life. But they arrive dispossessed of that which defined their former lives, that which made life worth living: family, friends, home, worship communities and cultural ties.

As Christ's disciples, we are called to see in each of the world's refugees, immigrants and other people on the move, a life to be respected and protected — not just a biological life, but a spiritual life, a cultural life, an entire way of life.

Today the Office of Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) of the U.S. Catholic Conference addresses the temporal needs of refugees and immigrants, while the Office of Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees (PCMR) focuses on their spiritual needs.

As the official agencies for helping diocesan offices serve newcomers to this country, MRS and PCMR assist migrants, immigrants, refugees and aliens regardless of race, religion or national origin. Through MRS and PCMR, the bishops hope to make every parish in the nation an inn, ready and willing to accept the kin of the Christ child, who was born in a stable because there was no room for him.

Today, through MRS and the U.S. Catholic Conference, American Catholics are helping to resettle nearly half of all refugees who enter the United States each year. All told,

U.S. Catholics have helped to resettle far more than a million refugees in this country.

In 1985 alone, through the Church and in cooperation with the U.S. government, professionals and volunteers in 161 dioceses welcomed some 26,000 refugees from every part of the world. From Southeast Asia came Vietnamese, Lao, Khmer. From Eastern Europe came Czechs, Poles, Rumanians. From Latin America came Cubans and a handful of Salvadorans. From the Near East came Iranians, Afghans, Lebanese.

Each of these strangers has added to the colorful mosaic of peoples and cultures that lend rich, unique diversity to the American portrait. Equally important are the values refugees and other immigrants bring to bear on their new lives: family unity and support, the value of hard work, strong religious beliefs.

As members of Christ's family, we are also called to respond to refugees who may never receive resettlement opportunities — people such as the quarter of a million Cambodians stranded along the Thai-Cambodian border. And we must respond to those who are not yet welcomed by our own government — people such as the Central Americans fleeing violence in their own countries. Through grass-roots advocacy efforts, American Catholics can convince national policy-makers of the strength of this country's Christian tradition of welcoming the world's displaced strangers.

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(Photo by Jim Whitmer)

THE NEW KID ON THE BLOCK — American Catholics help to resettle nearly half of all refugees who enter the United States each year.