

OZANAM ON WORLD HUNGER AND POVERTY?

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If Ozanam were to visit us today, he would undoubtedly be shocked by the extent of hunger and poverty in so many countries. The words of Pope John Paul II on 15 December 2003 would resonate profoundly in him: ‘Solidarity must be fomented, avoiding the evils that stem from capitalism’ and make people victims ‘of so many injustices.’

‘The struggle against poverty must not be reduced simply to improving their conditions of life, but to removing them from this situation... and adopting their cause as one’s own.’

Ozanam would certainly make their cause his own. But how? Like us, he would have felt overwhelmed by the enormous size of the problem, and wondered how one person could make any sort of difference. He would also have wanted to concentrate his energies on problems closer to home, where he felt he could do something practical.

Yet he would also have deeply disturbed that the lives of many millions of people were at risk, and with the world ‘shrinking’ as it is, we cannot turn our eyes from this great drama. He would have realised that Australia is a very rich country, but has adopted a very parsimonious approach to the plight of the poorest countries.

The problem for Ozanam, as it is for us, was how to respond to a complex and sometimes tumultuous pattern of events. Yet he was able to combine his concern for needy people with a keen eye for the larger picture. Hence he was a key actor in the social and political debates of his day, and one of the leading intellectuals as well.

It is a rare combination of gifts, and difficult for us as individuals to emulate. Though personally we may perhaps feel able to make a practical contribution to the wellbeing of the needy in modest and local ways, the vision of Ozanam encompasses a wider social concern.

I think Ozanam would be tremendously excited to hear that today it is possible to eliminate hunger and the worst forms of poverty entirely from our world. This is the first time in human history that we have been able to say this.

Nor is this a pipe-dream. Many leading economists have been saying this for some time. And the United Nations has consolidated such efforts in the Millennium Goals that were endorsed in 2000 by practically every nation, including Australia. The Millennium Goals set out clear targets and strategies to raise living standards in poor countries, and aimed to reduce by half the extent of hunger and the most acute poverty by 2015.

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Unfortunately, the message has not been getting out, and despite pledges to expand their efforts to support development in the third world, many rich countries, including Australia, have failed to honour their commitments.

The development task is of course complex and difficult, but it is not at all impossible. Many commentators tell us we have the resources and know-how to lift living standards everywhere, and to transform the worst social conditions within a matter of decades. But what is lacking is the political will to direct those resources well.

As we saw in the recent election campaign, Australia's responsibility in helping remove poverty and hunger in developing countries is not on the political agenda at all. Yet in Britain, for instance, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have made such concern a major focus of government, and have cultivated a strong political constituency on the issue. This is the type of political leadership that is desperately needed in Australia too.

Concern about the fate of millions of desperately poor people overseas is perhaps the most significant conversation we are *not* having in Australia. Despite the striking lead given by Pope John Paul II and Vatican officials, the Catholic Church in Australia has in practice given this range of issues a low political profile, and instead concentrated on direct giving through Caritas and other organisations.

Ozanam would never have been satisfied with that, despite the good such organisations do. He would be striving to lift the range of development issues on to the Australian political agenda. He would be encouraging people to develop the skills and expertise to take part in this debate, and to support networks and groups already working at the task. He would be forming alliances across the social and political spectrum to generate more informed and committed public opinion, since politicians are unlikely to pursue this cause unless there is significant community support.

As Vatican officials have warned recently, the whole magnificent project of the Millennium Goals is in danger of collapse, and this historic opportunity to reduce hunger and poverty might be lost. It is deeply troubling that Australia has shown so little concern about this global struggle against hunger.

Unless Catholics and other people of conscience can help mobilise a vigorous constituency of opinion on this matter, historians will likely judge us harshly, as a generation that was perversely blind to one of the most momentous and hopeful opportunities in history.

Those inspired by the spirit of Ozanam would certainly be moved by the Pope's invitation to adopt the cause of world development as their own.