

HUNGER - A WAR OF THE POWERFUL AGAINST THE WEAK?

By Bruce Duncan

Despite his own frailty, Pope John Paul II has vehemently called attention to the dire economic plight of the poorest people in developing countries. In October 2003 he urged bishops to be champions of social justice and human rights. In astonishingly undiplomatic language, he declared:

'The war of the powerful against the weak has, today more than ever before, created profound divisions between rich and poor. The poor are legion! Within an unjust economic system marked by significant structural inequities, the situation of the marginalized is daily becoming worse.

'How can we keep silent when confronted by the enduring drama of hunger and extreme poverty, in an age where humanity, more than ever, has the capacity for a just sharing of resources?' (#67).

He called for a globalisation based on the principles of social justice and the preferential option for the poor, and singled out the problem of impossible international debts. (#69).

John Paul has tried to highlight this message in hundreds of talks and documents during the last 25 years. But his depiction of the global struggle against hunger and poverty as a 'war of the powerful against the weak' is, as far as I can recall, unprecedented.

It reflects extreme exasperation at the current lamentable efforts, the dramatic failure of last year's trade negotiations at Cancun in Mexico, and the slow implementation of the UN Millennium Goals, with their clear strategies to cut in half the numbers of people suffering hunger and extreme poverty (living on less than \$US1 a day) by 2015.

Though 189 nations in 2000 adopted this historic project, few of the richer countries have honoured their commitments. Australia has done practically nothing to increase its aid.

In using the phrase, a 'war of the powerful against the weak', a wording almost Marxist with its overtones of class war, has John Paul overstated the situation? After all, the problems of development and global poverty are complex and arise from deep-seated and often intractable causes.

Economists insist hunger is unnecessary

Yet many leading economists and development experts agree with him very strongly, including Michael Todaro, Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, Jeffrey Sachs and James Wolfensohn, the Australian-born president of the World Bank, who warned after the September 11 2001 attacks that the response to terrorism must not detract us from the even more significant struggle against poverty and hunger.

Increasingly development thinkers have emphasised the need to bring social equity and justice into the heart of economic planning. The new consensus is reflected in Michael Todaro's standard text, *Economic Development*, now in its eighth edition.

The writings of some economic development thinkers read curiously like papal social documents, with a striking consensus on the need to focus much more on enlarging human wellbeing.

The thinking of Amartya Sen has also been significant in the development of the UN Human Development Reports since 1990. Sen won the Nobel prize for economics in 1998, with a prodigious output ranging from a critique of utilitarianism in economics, to describing the dynamics of famine prevention.

His 1999 book, *Development as Freedom*, has won a remarkable international public readership, broadening the understanding of development beyond material dimensions to situating the process in terms of humanisation, of 'capacity' to function, to allow people to enlarge their freedom and wellbeing as moral persons.

Perhaps the failure of the world trade negotiations at Cancun gave the strongest signal yet to the developing world that, despite all the hopeful pledges made at the UN Millennium conference in 2000, most richer nations were not prepared seriously to help alleviate the desperate poverty in developing countries.

Iraq war diverts resources

Moreover, the unilateralism and militarism of the US Bush Administration have polarised world opinion and destroyed the consensus that the war on global poverty was the most urgent priority for the entire human community.

Immense sums of money are being squandered on arms and defence spending, instead of funding urgent economic development. The United States is estimated to spend up to \$US400 billion on arms in 2004, compared with the \$US15 billion it has pledged to economic aid and development.

It is not melodramatic to say that millions of hungry and desperately poor people in developing countries will pay a cruel, unnecessary and deadly cost for the unprecedented arms spending. Astonishingly, there is almost total silence in our media and parliaments about these implications.

Unfortunately Australia has been complicit with this dreadful outcome, enthusiastically encouraging the US to intervene militarily in Iraq, and then joining the invading forces of Britain and the USA. In the view of the Pope and church leaders worldwide, this war was unjustified and unnecessary, and has cost tens of thousands of lives.

Though the numbers of people killed are relatively small by modern standards, very many more, perhaps millions, will die because of the resources diverted from the attack on poverty. Sometimes sins of omission are vastly more deadly than sins of commission.

Shocking though it be, it is no exaggeration to say that millions of people are dying unnecessarily and from diseases that are readily preventable. According to C. Ford Runge et al. in *Ending Hunger in our Lifetime*, every year 18 million people 'die prematurely from poverty-related causes... 50,000 every day, including 34,000 children under age five.'

As Sen wrote: 'What makes this widespread hunger even more of a tragedy is the way we have come to accept' it 'as if it is essentially unpreventable'.

Paul Streeten, another leading development economist, wrote: 'It is the fact that hunger today is unnecessary that makes its continued existence so shocking.' In his view, 'ultimately, the problem of eradicating hunger is a political problem rather than a nutritional or economic one.' The problem is not just one of production, but one of a more adequate distribution.

The good news: we can do this!

The great good news is that the eradication of hunger and the worst forms of poverty is possible within our lifetime. And it can be done comparatively cheaply. In his book, *World Hunger and Human Rights*, Thomas Pogge says that whereas 50 years ago the shift in world resources to eliminate poverty would have been enormous, today 'the required shift would be small and the opportunity cost for the developed countries barely noticeable.'

'Shifting merely 1 percent of aggregate global income - \$US312 billion annually - from the richer to the poorer countries 'would eradicate severe poverty worldwide'.

The aid needed to implement the Millennium Goals is much more modest, requiring richer countries to double their aid to \$US100 billion, a fraction of what is spent on arms (more than \$US800 billion) or agricultural subsidies (more than \$US300 billion).

The Pope is right to be absolutely angry about the continued toleration of widespread hunger and poverty. Yet Catholics and other Christians in the West seem overwhelmingly deaf, dumb and blind to the phenomenal opportunities to defeat these ancient enemies of humanity.

Need for action

Why are we not shouting this message from the rooftops? Why are we not shaking the political foundations of this country to feed the hungry and generate resources to eradicate poverty? Despite the great efforts of Caritas and other organisations, when will we translate this cause into robust political action? When will our bishops speak out more strongly? When will our lay people, with their immense expertise and resources, show skilful leadership on these issues?

Why are there not howls of outrage that Australia's overseas aid budget is so small, at 0.25% of GDP, a third of the target set by the United Nations? Do Australians realise that despite the government's lavish budget spending, we have cut our aid to Africa, to some of the most desperately impoverished people in the world?

Even aid to Iraq, which we helped devastate, has been reduced from \$40 million to a pitiful \$22 million. Have we no shame?

God, at least, is not indifferent, as Jesus insisted in his parable about the Last Judgment.

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