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HUNGER IN THE HEARTLAND

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The National Catholic Rural Life Conference was founded 77 years ago in 1923 in the library at St. Louis University. In the 1930's Monsignor Luigi Ligutti became NCRLC's President and Executive Secretary. Ligutti had founded a highly successful rural community development project in Granger, Iowa with the support of the Roosevelt administration. This project was meant to help hungry mining families in Iowa who had become displaced. It provided a solution to physical hunger, the hunger for community and the hunger for God. Monsignor Ligutti believed that ethnic and religious diversity would be a key to success. So he invited Catholics, Protestants, and mixed marriage families to participate. In addition, he invited Italians, Germans, and Croatians to become founding family members. Each family got some acreage for their own food production; a building was constructed for community meetings to cement the community together. And while the community had a mixed religious community, everyone understood that there was a spirituality informing the project at its very heart.

This community development project, a faith based initiative with federal government support, in the 1930s stands as a contrast to that advocated by the current Bush nominee for the position of undersecretary of Rural Development, Iowan Mr. Thomas Dorr who praises homogeneity as the basis for successful rural development, saw large scale hog confinement operations as the road to economic success in Iowa's pork production, and opposed Iowa state government support for sustainable agriculture at Iowa State University's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

I use Iowa's Granger Project as an example of what I consider to be the hungers in the heartland: the hunger for food, the hunger for community and the hunger for God.

In 1980 the National Catholic Rural Life Conference led in a series of listening sessions in the heartland which eventuated in a pastoral letter: "Strangers and Guests, Toward Community in the Heartland." Note the theme is similar to your overall theme: "Being Community in a Changing World." The opening paragraph of "Strangers and Guests" of 20 years ago echoes your theme of change and community: "We are witnessing profound and disturbing changes in rural America. Land ownership is being restructured, agricultural

production is becoming more heavily industrialized and concentrated in fewer hands and the earth is all too frequently is being subjected to harmful farming, mining and development practices. Such changes are adversely affecting our rural people, their way of life, their land and the wider national and international communities which depend on them to satisfy their hunger.” (Strangers and Guests, page 1, paragraph 1). Increasingly the heartland which fed itself and the world is also a place of hunger: for food, for community, and for God.

Children in the heartland increasingly require food to be provided during school hours because there is inadequate food at home. School child participation in school lunch programs averages about thirty percent. But in some locations upwards of a 400 % increase has been described. Farm families report that some parents take turns eating. From North Dakota to Texas food shortages have grown as reflected in the reports of the food banks from these areas. Food bank use has grown significantly as shown by case samples of counties in Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota, and Texas as reported in a University of Wisconsin study.

“Trampled Dreams” a recent study from the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska documents widespread poverty and hunger in agriculturally based communities of the Great Plains. Hispanic populations in the midwest have grown tremendously in the past five years. Iowa and Nebraska’s Hispanic populations, for example, grew by more than 150 percent in the last decade. Asian and Pacific Islanders grew by nearly 50 % in Iowa and 86 % in Nebraska. These are the people who process our food. They spend most of what they earn on housing, leaving little remaining to feed themselves.

A study carried out in March 1998 among Latino and Asian legal immigrants in 13 hospitals and community-based clinics and community centers found a high prevalence of food insecurity and hunger. Researchers found that, of the 682 households included in the study, 79 percent were hungry or food insecure (forced to cut back on the nutritional quality and overall quantity of food consumed due to lack of resources) — seven times the rate in the general U.S. population. More than one in three of the immigrant households surveyed reported suffering from moderate or severe hunger, meaning that adults and children were experiencing hunger caused by lack of resources. (Among households in this category, adults and children skip meals, cut the size of meals, or go without food for an entire day due to lack of resources to purchase food.) The authors report that, in each of the states covered by the survey, when food stamps were terminated for legal immigrants on a national level, temporary measures for only partial replacement of food stamps occurred at the state level. A recent study from the big-city mayors showed that food assistance for families increased almost 20 percent, more than at any time in a decade. In a recent report from Second Harvest there is talk of parents who go hungry so their kids can eat, who put off paying utility and phone bills, who insist that their children attend remedial summer-school programs simply so that they can get a meal. “Families are struggling in a way they haven’t done for a long time,” said Brian Loring, executive director of Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County, Iowa, which provides lunches to more than 200 kids at five locations during this summer. It probably is startling to hear the dimensions of physical hunger in the heartland, where the Governor of Iowa speaks of his own state as “the food capitol of the world.”

A proud generation of farmers and ranchers in the world’s most advanced agricultural society is depending on donations of food from social service agencies, church pantries and soup kitchens to feed their families.

The rural poverty rate is 23 percent higher than in urban communities and in some areas it's nearly three times the national average. Some farmers in the United States have lived below the poverty line for more than 40 years. In South Dakota, where agriculture accounts for 23 percent of the state's gross output, 17 percent of individual farming operations were eliminated in the last five years. A survey of low-income, rural people living in Minnesota found that of the respondents who experience someone in their family going to bed hungry, 53 percent must at times decide between buying food or prescription drugs, 99 percent would use free meals if they were available, and 55 percent represent households that include one to three children. The clientele at a food pantry in North Dakota includes farmers, the unemployed, couples barely earning a living on minimum wage, and the elderly on fixed incomes. In the eastern part of the state there has been an increase in emergency food requests from laid-off construction workers, telemarketers and seniors. The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma provides food and grocery products to 225 agencies in rural areas outside of Oklahoma City. Gertie Cooper, who runs a soup kitchen in Carnegie, OK, reports, "the needs are great in western Oklahoma: flood victims, farm families, loss of cattle, farmhands. We need to reach out. Utility bills keep going up. The elderly have a hard time with medicine being so expensive." Food distribution is a major challenge in rural hunger relief efforts. Some food banks serve areas as large as 5,000 square miles and most do not have reliable vehicles that can reach remote rural areas.

We are in one of the major food production, processing, and retailing centers in the world, the heartland. Yet physical hunger is not diminishing, it is increasing. The second hunger about which I speak is the hunger for community. When they are polled, heartland residents prefer to live in the heartland. But heartland communities are being displaced, places depopulated by an alternative dynamic, the hunger for profit. The heartland is the home of Monsanto, IBP, Archer Daniels Midlands, ConAgra, Cargill, Pioneer Hybred, Wal-Mart, and on and on. These are the leading food companies in the world. They and a few others control livestock, grain, and poultry processing and production. Wal-Mart is the world's leading retailer. It is the US's leading food retailer. Food is looked upon as merely a commodity, listen to the former head of ADM: Dwight Andreas: "The food business is far and away the most important business in the world. Everything else is a luxury. Food is what you need to sustain life every day. Food is fuel. You can't run a tractor without fuel, and you can't run a human being without it either. Food is the absolute beginning." (Dwayne Andreas, ADM, Reuters, 1/25/99). And each company is eating up the smaller ones. In a statement that should give all of us a reason for a great deal of reflection, Merrill Lynch food industry analyst Mark Husson said: "Once that [consolidation] process started, and it became obvious that it would be a winning strategy, then the big players decided how big they wanted to be, who they wanted to acquire. (Baking Buyer, 3/99)

Regularly the food cartels advertise over the public airwaves, on radio and television conveying their image of themselves as moral leaders trying to save wildlife, feed the starving, and take care of the poor. The biotechnology companies have a \$50 million dollar campaign to convince the public that they have only the best intentions in the world. They are promoting "golden rice" claiming it "could" cure blindness in Asian children and back up their claims with million dollar full page ads in the New York Times.

The livestock companies have their Meat Institute and the Poultry companies have the Chicken Council. Remember for years the Tobacco Institute served Tobacco companies the same way, educating the public based upon "sound science" that there were no risks to smoking cigarettes.

The problem of hunger in the heartland cannot be understood apart from the globalization goals and practices of most of the major food cartels that make their home in the heartland, extracting its wealth and exporting it for profit. Think of the story of Joseph. In circumstances of extreme need, of possible hunger, people say: "Thank you for saving our lives." "We will be your slaves." And so we have a worldwide economic El Nino which travels the globe uprooting families, devastating communities, exploiting low wage workers, extracting resources, flooding locales with capital and extracting plunder, buying politicians and disrupting democratic processes. This is the latest form of a geography of greed which was identified early on by Pope Pius XI in 1931, when he said in *Quadregesimo Anno*, "No less deadly and accursed (is) the internationalism of finance, whose country is where profit is."

Already it is doubtful that we have really free or fair markets. In current market concentration, a few heartland firms control 45 percent or more of the markets for poultry, meat, beef, pork, lamb, wheat, soybeans, and corn processing. These firms have consolidated grain, egg, poultry production; they are gaining on beef and pork production and they are rapidly closing the door on diversified seed production. Since processing firms purchase products from the farmers, this creates only a few markets for each of the major agricultural products. Farmers and farmworkers are in the same place: at the bottom of the food chain! And dramatically, rural communities are shutting down leaving the best landscapes for wealthier amenity seekers.

This globalized food system has given us such David and Goliath stories as Linn County, MO, population 14,000, being sued by Premium Standard Farms because Linn County wanted to protect its water from contamination by spills from hog waste lagoons. Humbolt County in Iowa attempted to protect its water by passing local ordinances controlling factory farms and found local control preempted by a state government willing to make that state safe for "Big Food."

Meanwhile, "Big Food" brings us increasing foodborne illnesses. The Center for Disease Control asserts an increase in foodborne diseases is linked to food industry consolidation and the decrease in effective microbe resistance in humans from the antibiotics used to industrialize animals for large confinement facilities. Hudson Foods of Nebraska went out of business due to E.Coli for which they had to recall millions of pounds of beef. Egg farms and broiler factories hold millions of chickens. One winter's Hong Kong chicken flu was attributed to densely packed poultry creating a breeding ground for a mutant flu. From Minnesota to Texas, large confinement animal operations are being constructed threatening local communities, fouling air and water, threatening human health, market access for small producers, exploiting immigrants, abusing animals.

The global economic El Nino is creating a fecal flood, a veritable deluge of animal waste on a scale such as a Noah could imagine. Predatory firms are creating Jurassic Parks out of bucolic family farm regions, they exploit immigrant labor and despoil our watersheds. They promise technological marvels. Their results are dinosaur disasters like a deadzone in the gulf, antibiotic resistance in our bodies, fishkills by the millions, the depopulation of the heartland, increases in respiratory illnesses threatening the many heartland elderly with the dangers of pneumonia and increased physical hunger in our families: Problems for which our federal government provides excuses and our state governments hide their heads in the sand, lest they lose these engines of "economic development."

So the hunger for community in the heartland is sundered by the hunger for profits of the large multinational food corporations. They are doing to us what they've always done: maximizing profits, externalizing as many costs as possible, and colonizing our lifeworlds in the same way they have countries to the south.

We would do well to choose table fellowship as the root metaphor analysis, to see the table as a pivot image for our reflections on hunger in the heartland. We each have a right to food, we all have a right to be seated at the table of the common banquet, we are all called by God to be sharers in the banquet of life.

Bishop Jacques- Begoine Bossuet in 1662 at the parish of the Louvre (my ancestral parish) interpreted the existential meaning of the Word of God for the congregation sitting before him, even when the congregation was King Louis XIV and his court. Bossuet's text is that of Luke 16:22, the parable of Lazarus and the young man:

"The rich man shows us this other furious wrath, which extends to violent deeds, possesses the hardness which closes people's ears, to complaints, their hands to assistance and their hearts to compassion.

Messeurs, it is this hardness which makes thieves who do not physically steal and murderers who do not actually pour blood...In the midst of the furious cries of imprudent and insatiable (ambition, greed, fastidiousness)...one can hear the languishing of the voice of the poor who tremble before you....They die of hunger, yes messeurs, they die of hunger on your estates, in your fields, in the yards and at the doors of your grand homes. No one goes to their aid. My God, all they ask for is what is otherwise discarded, the crumbs of your table, some leftovers from your banquets."

The intent of our table fellowship is to transform the world into a mirror of what we seek, a banquet of self-sacrificing love. Conversion of heart is needed. A heart of stone must be replaced by a heart of flesh. We need a profound change in our vision of community in the heartland. Our choices create our tables, our food, our talk. Our choices satisfy our hungers, our physical, communal, spiritual hungers.

Think about your family and the table rules. Is everyone called to the table? Is everyone's presence expected? What common courtesies are expected at your table? Do you express gratitude for what you have? Do you remember the many hands involved in bringing food to your table: the hand of God, the hands of farmers, transporters, processors, grocers, and preparers? How is food distributed and shared at your table? Are you expected to try a bit of everything? What is your family's attitude toward wasting food, toward overeating? Is special consideration given to sick members of the family, to guests? Do you take care to recycle bottles, other food containers? Do you compost? Don't you say to yourself and other family members: be polite, be considerate, be unselfish, don't talk with your mouth full, eat it, it's good for you. Where'd this come from? How are our heartland hungry faring? Our children? Our elderly? Our families?

Think about your community's table, where the community's work gets done. Think about the habitat of your community, the environmental, legal, social, economic, political life of your community—the table wider than your family table.

What is the greatest injustice in the local community? What rules ought to be enacted to enforce or counter this injustice? How are the poor treated? The earth? Those in need? What can be done to enact or enforce these rules? The aim of politics is the realization of justice and peace. Politics is the art of seeking and

fostering the common good. Politics establishes the rules whereby people work, compete, raise families, and share the benefits and burdens of society. These rules can be either just or unjust. The goods and services available or needed in the community are like the food present or lacking on a family's table. Public policy helps or hinders people as they present themselves at the common table and seek their just share of the table fare. How is the common good identified and protected? And so we say, "money talks." "What goes around, comes around." "It's not right!" "Special interests have too much power." "They never listen to us." Does our hunger for justice get satisfied at our communal tables? Are the rules written to consider the least among us, including those who do the work that brings our food to the table?

Think about the table of the Lord.

Who is called to the Lord's table? Does Christ have any expectations of his disciples when they gather at his table? How are disciples expected to treat one another? Consider the actions at the table of the Lord: assembling, singing, hungering for the Word, listening, expressing gratitude and wonder, blessing bread, breaking bread, sharing bread, eating bread, drinking the fruit of the vine, remembering the example we've been given and being sent to the world, to love it, and transform it. "We say to each other: "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Remember, as long as you did it to one of these, the little ones, you did it to me." "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall see God." "Do unto others as I have done to you." "This is my body, this is my blood." "Take and eat."

How is the heartland feeding the hunger that the Lord alone can satisfy?

Our table fellowship reminds us that we are created in God's image to be sons and daughters of God, brother and sister to one another in Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. This is a fact that becomes conscious as we live and think and move and have our being. We have personal dignity. We are called to participation in Community to seek the common good. The goods of creation are meant for all, that all might flourish. We are called to be good and just stewards of creation, lovers of the earth, its origin and destiny. Through our work, we are called to continuing participation in God's creation. Those who are weak, sick, or poor are entitled to particular attention.

Think about your tables, family tables, community tables, faith tables. Who eats? How is food prepared? How is it shared? And who gets to talk? What do they say? Tables are for eating and tables are for talking. Eating is a moral act. We shape each other and our world at our tables: family tables, community tables, faith tables. The Heartland hungers like all hunger, for family food, for civic participation, for justice, peace and love. Our choices create our tables, our food, our talk. Our choices feed our hungers, our physical, communal, spiritual hungers.

At the National Catholic Rural Life Conference we have a campaign directed at eaters, those who shape the structure of agriculture and the structure of our food system. By our choices we shape the world. Do you purchase food from retailers who support family farmers? Do you eat food that was grown by farmers who treated their animals with dignity and respect, who raised the animals humanely? Are there farmworkers, mushroom pickers, apple warehouse workers, chicken catchers, vegetable pickers, processing plant workers, immigrant laborers involved in your food preferences? Does your food habit contribute to global climate change? Is the food you eat part of a sustainable food system that contributes to the well being of unknown future generations, to a healthy environment, to a local community in a rural or urban area which

has a great deal of vitality. Or will the food you eat come from a system which depopulates the countryside and demeans farmers, farmworkers, food process workers, corporate executives and their families?

Eating is a moral act. We are what we eat!

And we can ask ourselves who is at the table? What are they saying about the food system?

This picture shows a closeup of a farmer's hands. He is wearing work gloves.

The hands are pressed together palm to palm and he holds them at waist level. You do not see the farmer's face. Only his hands.

And wrapped around his gloved hands
are strands of twisted barbed wire —like a rope—
binding them like those of a prisoner or a slave.

This photograph is part of a campaign of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

It is an informational campaign meant to stimulate thinking about issues of justice in the production of our food and the people who labor to produce it.

The campaign is called, "Eating is a Moral Act"

and it attempts to open our eyes to see what we otherwise ignore: To take note of deficiencies of justice in the midst of mounting riches. To take note of the hard work of farming, the dangerous working of food harvesting, the tedious work of processing...all those raw and unsettling realities not reflected in the soft glow of the candle light in fine restaurants; human realities blanched pale in the glaring convenience of fast food, economic oligopolies glossed over by plastic packaging by the handful of companies who control our eating at bargain prices and bargain basement wages. With annual incredible profits this is the cry of all prophetic voices throughout the history of faith: to see what is otherwise ignored!

Though it is difficult to admit, we all have this tendency to overlook essential elements of justice. Whether it is the food we eat or the clothes we wear or the services we use we all have a tendency to take our comforts for granted.

We set a fine table for our fine foods and our refined talk. And on the other side of this otherwise innocuous tendency comes the surprised reaction when we are confronted with words warning us about the long-term results of our lack of attention. This is our habit and it leads to sin, the sin of overlooking the wages paid the pollution made the plans laid by the rich and those for whom the buck never stops. Bossuet said it in the 1600s to a King at worship, so I can bring it up here and our reaction is certainly predictable.

We quickly reach for some ointment to alleviate the pain caused by these accusations. Amidst the soft glow of candle lights at our dinner tables we begin reciting the soothing mantras of neo-liberal doctrine:

"It's a global economy," we whisper to ourselves, "free markets benefit everyone." And the automatic ritual allows us to better ignore disturbing reports and pass over such facts that, since the passage of NAFTA, the working poor in Mexico has climbed from 40% to 60% of the population. Increasingly the border is everywhere.

We know many such chants. Here is another one:

"The low wages of the maquiladores simply reflect the lower standard of living in that country." It's a comforting verse. It numbs the gnawing fact that the average wage of \$5.00 a day in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico must buy food that costs the same as across the river in El Paso, Texas.

We ignore many things at home as well.

We ignore the growing poverty in rural America' We are ignorant of the loss of 300,000 family farms in the last twenty years. We ignore the fact that millions of immigrant farmworkers, meat processors, warehouse workers, are being exploited, dehumanized and treated as a commodity like the food they harvest and process. This so we can have breakfast orange juice, lunch salad with fresh mushrooms, dinner that includes our favorite "other white meat." Take a look at what we'd rather ignore!

But it's so distressing to be reminded of this, you say. It's so frustrating to be aware of injustice and not be able to do anything about it. Indeed, what is the purpose of this diatribe? What can sincere people do in a world where injustice exists and will always exist?

Why bring up these unpleasant facts?

These are valid protests.

Religious rites, worship services, keynote speeches at dinner are to be banquets of joy and peace. Eating is a moral act, and sometimes a religious act. Yet, the gratitude for holy food and the salvation it brings is fully expressed only when we remember that unleavened bread was first eaten by slaves on the run and the cup of some drink is a cup of suffering.

Just as I believe that Bread and Wine are transformed, so are we transformed...transformed into people of compassion, changing a heart of stone to a heart of flesh people who see what others overlook, people who can begin to trace the vague outlines of the prophetic vision of the Reign of God where creative public policies are pursued where justice and mercy embrace and a grand table is set. Where bankers sit next to farmers, border guards converse with the undocumented and ranchers share toasts with environmentalists. Where work gloves lie next to linen napkins, hands are scrubbed, feet are washed, thirst is quenched, hunger satisfied and there's no hint of injustice, no whisper of enslavement...no sign of barbed wire anywhere!

Eating is a moral act. Our tables need to include those who've been excluded. Our talk needs to include our farmers, their families, the rural communities, our environment, our landscape, our countryside, religious and moral values. We are what we eat. By our choices we shape our world. By our conversations, our talking, our praying, our liturgy, our justice we live the body of Christ and shape the reign of God.

Let us pray together to forge a world of justice, ecological harmony and peace. A world where the hungers for food, justice, community, ecological harmony are satisfied, in a holistic spirituality. These are the hungers of the heartland, and I suspect, represent a more universal hunger too.



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End Notes

Catholic Charities USA study available on www.catholiccharitiesusa.org
1999 Parish Social Ministry Survey

Center for Rural Affairs: www.cfra.org
Trampled Dreams

Center on Hunger & Poverty, Brandeis : www.centeronhunger.org
Household Food Security Study Summaries, 2001

Food Research and Action Center: www.frac.org
Hunger in the US

National Council of Churches : www.ncccusa.org
(click on "A to Z Index" (Welfare Reform Survey)

National Farmers Union: www.nfu.org
Concentration Studies: 1999, 2000

Second Harvest: www.secondharvest.org
Hunger 1997: The Faces & Facts

The United States Conference of Mayors: www.usmayors.org
A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 2000
December 2000