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Toward A
U.S. Domestic
Food Policy

Department of Social
Development and
World Peace

United States
Catholic Conference

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The Department of Social Development and World Peace of the United States Catholic Conference takes the occasion of "Food Day," April 17, 1975, to urge Catholics to deepen their understanding of the food crisis and commit themselves to continued reflection and action to feed the hungry both here and abroad. The Church has a particular responsibility with regard to the food crisis since Jesus identified himself with the poor and hungry. We recognize with the 1974 Synod of Bishops the "right to eat" as a fundamental right which flows from the basic and inalienable right to life itself. It is for this reason that we look upon feeding the hungry as a requirement of justice.

Last November the Catholic Bishops of the United States adopted a pastoral plan of action on the world food crisis. The response to the Bishops' program has been widespread and significant. Many dioceses, parishes, and other organizations instituted educational programs and raised funds for international humanitarian relief efforts.

The USCC has engaged in a sustained effort to influence public policy on food issues. Working with the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Relief Services and the National Conference of Catholic Charities, the USCC has testified before Congress on food and agricultural policy, and the Food for Peace Program. The USCC has also opposed efforts to increase the price of food stamps, and has supported increased fund-

ing for food and nutrition development in our foreign assistance programs.

The grave international consequences of food shortages must be a continuing concern of the American people. However, we must not neglect the very serious food and nutrition needs in our country. The United States has a responsibility in both domestic and international areas. These responsibilities should not be seen in conflict with each other, but viewed as different aspects of the same problem.

The development of a comprehensive food policy is an urgent priority for the nation. Our government is currently considering various food issues. It will be necessary to weigh the competing interests of consumers, producers, and middlemen in the food distribution system. Farmers seek reasonable prices for their products; food processors, retailers and distributors are concerned about adequate return on their investment; consumers worry about rising food costs. Lower income consumers have a particular concern about the future of food stamps and other federal nutrition programs. In addition, policymakers need to evaluate the interests and unique responsibilities of the United States vis-a-vis world markets and international needs.

In the midst of these competing interests, our food policy should work toward full production, equitable distribution and price stability. At a time when world food shortages mean starvation for millions, a U.S. agricultural policy of full production is absolutely essential. At the same time, U.S. food policy should not force low and middle income consumers and independent farmers to bear an unfair burden.

In view of these considerations, we shall address three areas of immediate concern: U.S. food needs and nutrition programs, ownership and control of resources, and full production and target prices.

I. U.S. FOOD NEEDS AND NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Many people in the United States continue to suffer from hunger and serious malnutrition. Rapid inflation in food prices, high levels of unemployment and a deep recession have meant a significant increase in hunger in America. While the problem is less severe in the United States than in other countries, it is no less harsh for those who endure it.

Hunger and malnutrition in this country are essentially the result of economic factors. Nutritional studies indicate that malnutrition rises as income declines and that the worst hunger is among the very poor. The consequences of malnutrition are very serious, especially for young children. It reduces productivity, motivation and educational performance, lowers resistance to disease, inhibits growth and development, and can even result in a shorter life-span.

There are over 37 million poor people in the United States. Many people lack adequate nutrition because they lack employment and income that would enable them to buy sufficient food. Their situation has worsened as the economy has declined. Public assistance and social programs have not kept pace with inflation. Jobs have become almost impossible to find as unemployment approaches nine percent. In addition, many elderly persons living on fixed incomes are also victims of serious malnutrition. Middle and working class families are victims of similar economic pressures. Caught in the web of inflation, recession, and high taxes, many of them have lost ground in their battle to provide their families an adequate diet.

In the last decade, the federal government has expanded programs aimed at providing an adequate diet for all Americans. Expenditures on domestic food programs

have risen to an estimated \$5.8 billion in the present fiscal year.

Recently it has been proposed that existing child nutrition programs be eliminated and a block grant approach be substituted which would cut \$600-700 million from nutrition assistance. The USCC opposes reductions in domestic food aid. We urge Congress to resist attempts to eliminate these nutrition programs or reduce funding for food assistance. Instead, these programs should be reformed to eliminate inequities and administrative problems that may prevent eligible persons from participating. They must be expanded to meet increasingly serious needs during this time of economic decline.

A. Families

The food stamp program is the basic form of federal nutrition assistance for American families. This program now serves more than 18 million people, although studies indicate that it reaches less than half of those who may be eligible.

The food stamp program must be maintained and improved. We strongly oppose any increase in the price of food stamps. We support the recent action of Congress to prevent the proposed food stamp price increases and commend the President for his decision to accept that action. Appropriate steps should be taken to guarantee that the benefits of the program go to those who are actually in need. In addition, modifications are required to speed up the certification process and improve the outreach effort to involve other qualified families while guaranteeing that eligibility requirements are enforced.

B. School Children

The federal government now provides nutritional assistance to nearly 25 million children through the National School Lunch Program. The program has both nutritional

and educational value and should be extended and improved. Specifically, we support efforts to include the children of unemployed parents in the free lunch program and include orphanages and day-care centers in the subsidy program. We also support proposals to provide additional subsidies to cover increased costs in school lunch programs resulting from inflation.

The School Breakfast Program serves an adequate breakfast to almost two million children every school day. A nutritional breakfast has obvious educational and health benefits for low-income children who would otherwise go to school hungry. The level of the present program does not begin to meet the overall need. Additional funding and permanent status for the breakfast program are required.

Another undertaking that merits continued support is the special milk program. Many schools, especially those without hot lunch programs, benefit from this successful effort to provide milk to school children at reduced prices.

Many Catholic school students participate in these three programs. The Congress should be commended for recognizing the nutritional needs of non-public school children. We urge all qualified Catholic schools to provide these services for their students.

C. Mothers and Young Children

Infants, young children and expectant or nursing mothers have special nutritional needs. Food assistance at these stages can have major impact on the elimination of birth defects, mental retardation, and malnutrition in newborn children. The Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) is designed to provide high protein diet supplements to low-income women, infants, and young children. We strongly support the continued existence and expansion of this unique and important program.

D. Older Americans

The nutritional problems of the elderly living alone and on fixed income are especially tragic. They often lack the financial resources or physical health necessary to provide an adequate diet. The Older Americans Act provides funds for community feeding programs for the elderly through communal dining rooms and meals-on-wheels programs along with a range of supportive services. Unfortunately, many of our senior citizens with nutritional problems are not reached by this program. In addition to its food benefits, a fully implemented program would diminish our society's reliance on institutional care for the elderly. We endorse the program and efforts to expand its availability. It is an important effort to meet the needs of our senior citizens.

E. Nutrition Education

An essential element of a national policy against hunger and malnourishment is nutrition education. Consumers need opportunities to improve their knowledge regarding foods and eating habits and to better understand the relationship between health and nutrition. Schools and other institutions should be encouraged to provide broader programs in practical nutrition education.

II. OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL OF RESOURCES

Recent food shortages have made us acutely aware that U.S. food and agricultural policies have a massive impact on the availability, quality and prices of food not only in this country but throughout the world. Because food is a unique resource, necessary to life itself, our great capacity to produce it carries with it awesome responsibilities. Our food policy must not be governed by profit considerations alone, but by the needs of hungry people.

A disturbing phenomenon in the United States is the increasing concentration occur-

ring in the food production system. We have experienced a rapid decline in the number of farms in the U.S. over the last two decades and a substantial migration of families from rural areas to already overcrowded urban centers. The high costs of land, technology and credit make it virtually impossible for young people to go into agricultural production on their own. Governmental policies have often fostered the promotion of capital intensive, corporate controlled agriculture. Our federal and local tax structures create incentives for wealthy non-farm investors in agriculture, but do little for the competent full-time farmer. We support an agricultural system based upon widespread ownership of resources and the means of production. Legislation is needed now to inhibit further encroachment upon agriculture by non-farm corporations and to insure that our land is kept in the hands of those who work it.

We are also concerned about the diminishing level of competition in the food processing and distribution system. In some sectors of the food industry fewer companies are controlling more and more of the market. This trend toward increasing concentration of control can lead to excessive profit and even higher prices for consumers. We urge a comprehensive study of non-competitive forces in the food industry and appropriate anti-trust action to eliminate monopolistic practices.

Decisions about the use of land and resources are often made without rational planning or sufficient concern for the environmental and human costs of those decisions. Suburban sprawl, surface mining, industrial development and other demands on the land are diverting over one million acres from agricultural use each year with potentially serious consequences for future food production. A more integrated and rational process for land use planning is necessary. With regard to agricultural land, the primary objective of land use legislation should be

the conservation of such land for its unique food producing value and protection of a dispersed pattern of ownership.

III. FULL PRODUCTION AND TARGET PRICES

In light of present food needs, farmers must be encouraged to produce to full capacity. To cut back on production in the face of unmet world needs would be morally and ethically untenable. Neither is it acceptable, however, to ask farmers to assume total financial responsibility for the risks involved in full production without some protection. Widely fluctuating prices for farm products mean at least uncertainty, and perhaps disaster, for small farmers. A system of equitable target prices should be established and reviewed at regular intervals to assure farmers a fair return on their investment and labor. Price supports can be set at levels that will not result in excessively high food prices for consumers, yet provide adequate protection for producers.

At the same time, we support the establishment of reserves of essential commodities to maintain price stability and to safeguard against future world food shortages. These reserves must be federally regulated in a manner that does not jeopardize a just return for farmers.

CONCLUSIONS

The debate over American food policy must be seen in a larger context. Hunger and malnutrition flow from basic failures in our society's social and economic structures. Hunger is often the result of persistent poverty, and food programs only supplement inadequate income. They cannot substitute for economic resources, jobs, decent wages, equal opportunity or the power to change economic and political institutions. These programs are not a solution to poverty, racial discrimination, inequitable taxation, or the

isolation of the elderly. Fundamentally, our nation must provide jobs for those who are able to work and a minimal income to those who cannot. The U.S. Catholic Conference has consistently supported programs that would guarantee an adequate income for all Americans. We renew that call today.

At this point, however, Church institutions, parishes, and individual church members must seek out and help those in our midst who lack food. For as Pope Paul has said, it is not enough to point to injustice and human need. "Such words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and effective action."

At the same time, the Church must also participate in a rigorous and competent analysis of structures and systems that result in poverty and hunger. We must become advocates of change so that structures are adapted to meet the serious needs of those who now go hungry. In his Apostolic Letter, *A Call to Action*, Pope Paul says Christian organizations "have to express in their own way and rising above their particular nature, the concrete demands of Christian faith for a just, and consequently, necessary, transformation of society."

The hungry of the world have voiced their cries of anguish. We must respond to them not only with words of hope, but with actions that will mobilize the energies, talents, and resources of the Catholic community to assist people not only around the world but in this nation as well.

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