

## A REFLECTION

# Encountering Hunger

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*“Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?”*

— James 2: 15-16

It is never possible to forget the gaze of a child who is hungry or the desperation of a mother trying to secure her child’s next meal. The need for food to sustain one’s life is primal yet the ability to do so depends on many complex factors beyond oneself.

Today, more than ever, we are continually exposed and aware of hunger in the world, whether it is in Yemen, Cambodia, Congo, Haiti or South Sudan. Yet, the ability to affect the reality of those who are suffering seems like it can be far from our reach.

We hear the indignation, anger and desperation of those who are directly impacted, yet some of us are frozen in place when we reflect on how to help. Many of our brothers and sisters all over the world are surviving on just one cup of rice per day.

Intellectually, we understand the common drivers of food insecurity: conflict, displacement, poverty and climate change. We understand the basic human right to life and a basic standard of living, including food. We understand, and we are outraged. But is it enough?

The passage in James 2:15-16 reminds us that faith must be accompanied with action. It is not simply enough to send good wishes with the hopes that words will suffice to alleviate someone’s condition. While being empathetic is necessary, it must also be translated into good deeds.

### **“TENEMOS HAMBRE! WE ARE HUNGRY!”**

I am reminded of a roadside protest in my home country of Venezuela; a crowd of mostly women were gathered near a roadblock chanting “tenemos hambre!” which means “we are hungry!” in Spanish. The women were demanding that the government of Nicolas Maduro provide much needed food for their children. One woman said that she cries herself to sleep at night because she

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has nothing to give her children to eat. Her reality is the reality of many parents, families and children across the world. Undernourished children look significantly younger than their biological age because they lack the proper nutrients for growth. Children play pretend in the dirt making patty cakes for dinner. Grandmothers beg for food



to survive. Each day it is about survival, nothing else.

As psychologist Abraham Maslow introduced in his “Hierarchy of Needs” concept, human beings will be stuck in the most basic physiological level until those needs are fully met. If a person can’t secure basic physical requirements, they will never transcend into the highest levels of self-actualization. Maslow’s depiction of personal motivation is also a reflection of a country’s development potential. If most of the population is struggling to feed themselves, then the potential for a country’s full development will equally be lagging.

The latest United Nations World Food Programme *Global Report on Food Crises* estimates that there are “over 124 million people living in crisis food security or worse,” which means at risk of starvation or famine.<sup>1</sup> In addition, there are over 800 million people worldwide who are undernourished, which amounts to 10 percent of the entire global population. As an example, in 2017 South Sudan experienced famine affecting over 5 million people. That is about the size of 50 large football stadiums full of people. Therefore, it is normal for any one of us to feel like we can’t possibly do anything. It is normal to feel frozen because 5 million people to feed appears insurmountable. Yet, there lies the calling of the Catholic faith.

#### ENCOUNTERING HUNGER

In Matthew 25:35, “... I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” the capacity to help our brothers and sisters in need is a measure of our humanity. Hunger is not abstract; it has a human face. In order to tackle what seems insurmountable, we must encounter the face of those who are hungry in the most tangible way. To encounter hunger and to work to alleviate it does not require flying thousands of miles. In the developed world, it might be as easy as visiting the local food pantry, supporting migrant families or help-

ing to transform food deserts. As Pope Francis says, when confronting hunger humanity “cannot remain merely preoccupied or, worse, resigned.”<sup>2</sup>

In the developing world, food security might be determined by inflation, drought, conflict or

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political repression. Responding to hunger might take the shape of learning about, and getting involved in, development aid. For some expats, it might take the shape of getting involved in their home country economically, politically or socially.

There is certainly not one single or uniform formula to tackle hunger in the world. If we are so fortunate to encounter someone that we can help in our path, and affect their lives even if it is for one moment, then hopefully we will inch closer into a more equitable world. We live in a global community and it has become more common to encounter the face of human suffering. What actions will we take when we encounter a brother or sister without clothes or daily food? Will we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty and welcome the stranger?

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#### NOTES

1. World Food Programme, “2018 Global Report on Food Crises,” <https://www.wfp.org/content/global-report-food-crises-2018>.
2. Francis, message to 40th General Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, July 3, 2017, [w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170703\\_messaggio-fao.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170703_messaggio-fao.html).

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