

When Did We See You Hungry?

A statement from the Catholic Bishops of Maryland
2012



Introduction

Many years ago, a young family was compelled to travel, with uncertain transportation, to a city some distance away, to fulfill a civic duty. They were newlyweds – she was a teenager and was pregnant, but not with his child. Despite their challenging circumstances, her husband lovingly and faithfully embraced his wife and the expected child. When they arrived at their destination, they were not able to obtain lodging in the bustling city; no one would give housing to the girl who was clearly on the verge of childbirth. Eventually, they found a barn where she gave birth to her baby, a boy. Because of violence brewing in their hometown, prompted by political unrest, the young family fled shortly after the child's birth to another country to wait out the danger.

We are all familiar with the story of the Holy Family; perhaps too familiar. Although we hear this Gospel story every year, do we forget that this scenario is played out over and over, every day, in the lives of millions of people? It is now that we must ask ourselves: Like the innkeeper who failed to recognize Christ, are we failing to recognize Christ in our neighbor in need?

The Grim Statistics

Maryland is one of the wealthiest states in the nation, and yet Marylanders are struggling in ways not seen in decades to find employment, to secure housing and to feed their families.

While the recession may technically be over, unprecedented poverty, hunger and unemployment persist. Census estimates show that, in Baltimore alone, one in four residents lives in poverty – a 20 percent increase over one year.¹ One out of every five Maryland households with children reported not having enough money to feed themselves or their families at times during the 2009-10 period.² Nearly 700,000 Maryland families receive food assistance through the Food Supplement Program (formerly known as food stamps) – more than the entire population of the city of Baltimore.³ Further, more than 10,000 Marylanders are experiencing homelessness according to 2010 estimates.⁴

Thousands of our brothers and sisters who are homeless experience the daily reality of a life in crisis: not sure from where their next meal will come, not knowing when their next storm will hit, and desperately hoping to find housing or shelter by the time winter arrives. Even families who have housing live paycheck-to-paycheck, knowing that any one unexpected event – a small emergency repair, a health crisis or a car accident – could bring economic disaster.

Love through Justice

As Catholics, we encounter Christ Himself in the Eucharist – the physical Christ, just as present and real as the Christ Child in the arms of His mother. We also encounter Christ in our interactions with others. Just as we show our love for Him by spending time with Him and giving ourselves to Him, so too must we spend time and give of ourselves to those in need. As Christ constantly calls us to remember, "[A]men, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40)

Loving those among us who are struggling, poor, unemployed or homeless is not merely something that we do out of the goodness of our own hearts. Rather, it is an obligation and a requirement of true justice. Love, which we understand to be the very definition of Christian charity, is the justice that we owe to those struggling during these difficult economic times. In fact, the whole of our duty and responsibility as Catholics can be reduced to the one word – love.

To administer love through justice, we as Catholics and citizens of Maryland can give of our time, resources and voices by volunteering at soup kitchens, donating food to local food banks, contributing our monetary resources when possible to parishes, faith groups and charities that work to empower those who are suffering and participating in countless other ways to serve the needs of the poor.

The concept of subsidiarity – the principle of Catholic social teaching that individuals bear primary responsibility for attending to duties they can perform themselves – instructs that we cannot wash our hands of the work of caring for the poor by simply asking the government to do it. However, the government has a crucial role to play; and part of our responsibility is to be sure that our leaders take action when they must.

Outreach through Catholic Parishes and Institutions

Maryland's Catholic community, through the work of its parishes and institutions, has taken seriously its responsibility to empower and uplift those in need, and through its parishes and institutions comprises the state's largest non-governmental provider of social services.

Catholic Charities of Baltimore serves 160,000 individuals and families each year, and over the last four years, the agency has seen unprecedented need. For instance, there has been a 41 percent increase in meals served from 248,000 in fiscal year 2007 to 349,000 in fiscal year 2011. Catholic Charities of Washington, which serves Washington, the Maryland suburbs of D.C. and counties in Southern Maryland,

provided services last year to more than 105,000 persons at 77 programs in 53 locations. Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Wilmington served a record-breaking 120,000 individuals and families in the State of Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore in fiscal year 2011. From January through June 2010, the agency fielded 31,833 calls for help with basic needs alone.

Maryland's six Catholic hospitals provide generous outreach to those in need of healthcare, which includes more than \$62 million in charity care to the uninsured and underinsured as part of the total \$155 million they provide in community benefit funding.⁵ Hundreds of other Catholic agencies and parishes continue to work to provide food, shelter, clothing and other basic necessities to those in need.

The Role of Government

However, as private citizens, community members and parishioners, we have only a limited capacity to meet the needs of those who are poor, hungry, homeless and vulnerable. Thus, our Catholic duty requires that we, as citizens of Maryland, make a public call to our local, state and federal governments to urge them to make decisions, pass legislation and appropriate public money in a manner that is charitable, just and reflective of our shared human dignity. This is not to ignore a serious fiscal crisis faced by many local, state and federal government agencies. It is most unfortunate, however, that too often the poorest in our midst are the first to experience severe effects of such government crises.

Along with offering relief for the poor, governments at every level must take greater steps to ensure that economic and tax structures enable small business owners and others to create the jobs and increase employment opportunities so necessary to providing independence to individuals and families.

Maryland's state administrators and members of the General Assembly have a moral obligation to act justly by enacting laws, appropriating funds and executing policies in a manner that uplifts the most vulnerable. As constituents, we should encourage the women and men we elect to make decisions that reflect moral principles, especially concerning housing, hunger, medical needs and employment.

As Catholics, we must urge our lawmakers to apply the principles of justice and respect for human dignity to their moral considerations about how the state prioritizes public spending. As many faith groups have echoed nationwide during these challenging times, we Catholics also remind the Maryland General Assembly that the budget is a moral document that reflects the public's priorities. Public policymakers should make decisions that reflect a love of preference for the poor and thus should first consider how a policy affects the poor.

We encourage the Governor to propose and the General Assembly to enact a state budget that provides sufficient funding for social safety net programs for the poor and vulnerable, particularly families with children and persons with disabilities. These social safety net programs are important mechanisms for maintaining a civil society in which the vulnerable are included, cared for and loved.

So, too, the needs of the poor also require that state policymakers work to ensure adequate and affordable housing, especially in light of record foreclosures and skyrocketing homelessness. As Catholics, we are reminded that housing is a basic human right. Homelessness cannot be ignored. Housing should be made accessible to all, including those who use rental assistance and federal housing vouchers to afford housing. Unjust discrimination against these individuals – single adults, retirees, struggling families, returning veterans and persons with disabilities – creates an economic subclass of citizens who do not have equal access to housing simply because they are poor.

Call to Action

In this time of great need, we call the Catholic faithful, priests and religious, our parishes and lay faith groups, our state government and all Marylanders to provide increased time, support and resources to help the poor, to recognize the divine within them and to build a society that reflects our shared human dignity. As Catholics we are called to daily integrate our faith with our everyday world. We are called to a place where divine faith meets social action:

"The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side."
(Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*)

We must all do our part and put our faith into action, remembering that we meet Christ in each encounter we have with the poor.

The Catholic Bishops of Maryland

¹ Steve Kilar, 1 in 4 Baltimore residents living in poverty, *The Baltimore Sun* (Sept. 22, 2011).

² Maryland Hunger Solutions, New Data Show One in Eight Maryland Households Struggling with Hunger (Sept. 7, 2011).

³ Maryland Budget and Tax Policy Institute, New Figures Show Number of Recipients in Maryland's Food Supplement Program Now Exceeds the Population of Baltimore City (Sept. 22, 2011).

⁴ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD's 2010 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Pro-grams Homeless Populations and Subpopulations.

⁵ Maryland Hospital Community Benefits Report FY 2010 (June 2011).



Archdiocese of Baltimore



Archdiocese of Washington



Diocese of Wilmington