

REMEMBERING THE IRISH FAMINE

Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Ireland on the occasion of Famine Remembrance Sunday, 24 September 1995

*This shorter version of the Pastoral can be used as a homily on Famine Remembrance Sunday. Also included are a Famine Mass, Stations of the Cross and suggested activities for the day.
The September issue of Intercom contains homily notes with reflections on the readings.*

"Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you." (Isaiah 49:15)

Introduction

1. The commemoration of the Irish Famine which begins this year, and to which this Sunday is devoted, is of significance because we must remember our past so that we may move forward to a new future.
2. It is at times all too easy to forget. We may forget the beauty of creation, or the wonder of human life, or our responsibility for others, or our obligation to do good. The exiled psalmist reminds us of the urgency of remembering: "May I never speak again if I forget you" (Ps 137:6). The pain of the past must not be forgotten but it must be redeemed.
3. We have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and are called upon to make that redemption a reality in our lives by reaching out to those who suffer. We play our part in redeeming the pain of the Irish Famine by opening our eyes to famine in today's world. This is the best form of remembering - seeing the past in the present and the present in the past. As we become aware, we see that famine is due to a combination of factors, such as crop failure or war, and unjust social, political and economic structures. So it was in the 1840s and still holds true today.

History

4. In any authentic commemoration, the horrors of the Famine must be given due recognition. In the years following 1845, a million people died and millions emigrated. Nothing in our acts of remembering should obscure this devastation.
5. The need to remember is all the stronger because for a long time the pain experienced was downplayed in historical accounts. The commemorations which have begun this year present us with an opportunity to acknowledge that pain and to remember it appropriately.

The Contemporary Situation

6. We need to draw lessons from our famine experience in a world which still knows famine and hunger. There is plenty, yet over 700 million people do not have enough to eat each day; 40 million die annually from hunger and related diseases; one third of all African children are malnourished. Moreover, the presence of a sizeable Irish emigrant community, much of which arises from famine times, reminds us of refugees and displaced people in many parts of the world today.
7. That famine continues is a scandal. The natural events which lead to famine are now predictable and, consequently, preventable. Advanced technology allows

anticipation of crop failures and identification of areas of likely food scarcity. Therefore, where famine happens, it does so largely as a result of human action - and inaction.

8. Our responsibilities are clear. What is required of us is a tackling of the root causes of famine and hunger. Knowing that poverty is the important factor in contributing to hunger, we condemn political and economic systems which reduce so much of the world's population to an impoverished state. In the words of Pope John Paul: "One must denounce the existence of economic, financial and social mechanisms which accentuate the situation of wealth for some and poverty for the rest" (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis n.16).
9. We condemn also the pernicious trade in weapons which fuels conflicts in some of the world's poorest regions. As was asserted at the Vatican Council, it is grievously wrong that: "While extravagant sums are being spent in preparing ever new weapons, no adequate remedy can be found for so many present-day miseries in the world" (Gaudium et Spes n.81).

The Church's Response

10. The Irish people are noted for generosity, especially so in times of famine. Through Trócaire especially, the Irish Church works to respond to famine at three levels: through the provision of emergency relief; through long-term development projects; through challenging the political and economic structures which are part-responsible for catastrophe. In undertaking this, Trócaire is faithful to its mandate: "What is (also) required is a political response from governments aimed at solving the deep structural problems which underlie world poverty." (Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Ireland on the 21st anniversary of the founding of Trócaire, March 1994, n.13).
11. We must reject as unchristian any suggestion that it is not our business to provide for others. We must equally reject any attempted diminution of the political dimension. Good government can help avert famine: corrupt and inefficient government will exacerbate it. St Paul encourages us to pray for those in civil authority (1 Tim 2:1ff.). This is because the world needs leaders who will embrace integrity and justice.

Call for Action

12. Action on a number of key issues is needed. The burden of debt repayment on very poor countries must be denounced unequivocally. The Word of God today carries a pertinent

message from the prophet Amos who condemns those who tilt the scales against the poor, giving too little and charging too much (Amos 8:4ff). Assistance must include effective aid targeted at the elimination of the causes of hunger. In the aftermath of famine, we cannot confine ourselves to short-term relief but must engage in the long-term rehabilitation of communities.

13. Within the European Union, Ireland is in a unique position in having experienced famine on an horrific scale and with lasting consequences. In assuming the Presidency of the Community in July 1996, the Irish government should emphasise the relationship between the rich and the poor world, the well-fed and the hungry, thus becoming a prophetic voice in this arena. Speaking for the hungry is a true remembrance of our famine dead.

Remembering in the Liturgy

14. The greatest living memorial which we have is the Eucharist. Given that bread is the central symbol of our faith, and the breaking of bread our defining ritual, the reality of hunger should never be far from our minds. Let us remember the present victims of hunger so that our remembrance of the Famine may be a true Eucharistic memorial.
15. There is much that can be done at parish level. Parish liturgy teams could organise a pilgrimage to a local famine site where the Eucharist could be celebrated. Justice groups could re-awaken our ancient tradition of fasting. To fast is to challenge consumerism, a characteristic of our times.

16. The gospel of Luke alerts us to the danger of worshipping the false God of material gain (Luke 16:1ff.). Listen to the cry of the psalmist: The Lord "raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes" (Ps 113:7). The Lord God does not forget those who end up on the "ash heap" of life. It is we who forget and we who need to remember.

Conclusion

17. Fifty years ago much of the world was riven by the effects of the Second World War. The response to that war crystallised in the phrase, "Never Again", and led directly to the foundation of the United Nations and the precursors of the European Union. These institutions were to be guarantors that a comparable catastrophe would never happen again. The harvest of hunger and related diseases is a silent one but no less deadly for that. It is time that, fired by our own history and that solidarity which we have continued to express through Trócaire and other agencies, we say "Never Again" to the silent catastrophe of world hunger.

On behalf of the Irish Bishops' Conference:

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MASS IN TIME OF FAMINE OR FOR THOSE WHO WORK TO ALLEVIATE FAMINE

(See Roman Missal 28A)

Entrance Antiphon Ps 73:20-19
 Lord, be true to your covenant, forget not the life of your poor ones forever.

Opening Prayer
 All-powerful Father,
 God of goodness,
 you provide for your creation.
 Give us an effective love for our brothers and sisters who suffer from lack of food.
 Help us to do all we can to relieve hunger,
 that they may serve you with carefree hearts.
 We ask you this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

First Reading Is 58:6-11
Responsorial Psalm Ps 106: 2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
Second Reading 2 Cor 8:1-5, 9-15

Gospel Acclamation Mt 25:34

R. Alleluia
 Come, you whom my Father has blessed says the Lord; inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.
R. Alleluia

Gospel Mt 25:31-46, Mk 6: 34-44, Lk 14: 12-14

Prayer of the Faithful

For the people who live in the shadow of hunger in our world of plenty.

R. Lord hear us.

For the work of Trócaire, that the effects of famine may be relieved and its causes eradicated.

R. Lord hear us.

For world leaders, may they have the courage to make the decisions needed to eliminate famine from the earth.

R. Lord hear us.

For the Church, may we never fail in our Christian duty to share with those who are denied their basic rights by our world.

R. Lord hear us.

For the victims of famine, our brothers and sisters who have died, may they enjoy forever the love which was denied them in life.

R. Lord hear us.

Prayer over the Gifts

Lord, look upon these offerings which we make to you from the many good things which you have given us. This eucharist is a sign of your abundant life and the unity of all men in your love. May it keep us aware of our Christian

duty to give our sisters and brothers a just share in what is ours. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Communion Antiphon

Mt 11:28

Come to me, all you that labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest, says the Lord.

Prayer after Communion

God, all-powerful Father, may the living bread come down from heaven give us the courage and strength to go to the aid of our hungry brothers and sisters.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

A WAY OF THE CROSS THROUGH FAMINE

These stations are offered not as a substitute for the traditional Stations of the Cross but as an additional community prayer during this special time of Famine commemoration.

- 1. Condemned to death (Matt 27:11-14)** The Son of God was condemned to die by the political powers of his time. 150 years ago Irish people died as a result of political structures which let people go hungry while food was exported. Today the structures of injustice also condemn men, women and children throughout our world to die and so the body of Christ continues to be crucified.

Lord, our society is blighted with structures of sin. In the face of this, can we stay silent ?
- 2. Jesus takes up his cross (John 19:17)** Jesus took up his cross for others and carried it alone. People looked on helplessly. We need not feel helpless today in the face of human suffering. We can always do something.

Lord open our hearts and eyes to those who suffer so they need not carry their cross alone.
- 3. Falling the first time (Matt 4:5-7)** Jesus succumbed to pain and exhaustion and stumbled and fell by the wayside....like the million and more who stumbled and fell by the waysides of Ireland, victims of hunger, starvation and disease.

Lord, for some the path through the world is one of plenty. Let us appreciate what we have and always be mindful of the poor.
- 4. Heartbreak (Luke 2:34-35)** Jesus met his mother on that last awful journey and her heart must have been broken. Women suffer inordinately the pain of witnessing the death of the one to whom they gave life - starved to death, starved of the love and care and devotion which our world reserves for the privileged few.

Lord, no mother deserves to witness the suffering of a child. Help us really believe this.
- 5. Some help and assistance (Luke 23:26)** Simon of Cyrene was an unwilling helper but he made a difference. During the Irish famine many people and small communities abroad sent help to us from as far afield as India, north America and Australia. Today we respond to people in similar circumstances through our support for the work of Trócaire, our own Church agency.

Lord, sometimes we doubt the good we can do and that Trócaire can do. Never allow us to ignore calls for help.
- 6. An act of humanity (Matt 26:67)** In the midst of all the terror and hysteria Veronica was brave enough to break through the crowds and risk wiping the face of a condemned man. Her act of humanity contrasts starkly with the brutality which surrounded her.

Lord, we are rarely faced with a decision to risk all. Give us the same courage when faced with brutality and cruelty. Let us not forget our humanity.
- 7. Falling again (Matt 16:21-23)** Determination was not enough. Jesus fell a second time. Like the million who fell victim to famine in Ireland 150 years ago, millions more fell victim again, this time in the 20th century: Biafra, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Somalia.

Lord, each time we too are filled with resolve - never again - let us not give up trying.
- 8. Words of advice (Luke 23:27-31)** The women of Jerusalem were baffled when Jesus told them to spare their tears for themselves and their children. Today Jesus' warning is a terrible reality. It is women and children who make up most of the world's poor and are 80% of the world's refugees.

Lord, you said: "Whatever you do to the least of my sisters and brothers you do to me". May this inspire us in our dealings with others.
- 9. A third fall (John 12:23-26)** After our famine here in Ireland they said "never again". After Ethiopia we repeated the call, but it has happened again, in Somalia, and once more we say "never again".

Lord, you fell repeatedly. Help us to build a world where people can no longer become victims of famine.
- 10. Humiliation (John 19:23-24)** When Jesus was stripped of his clothes it was the final act of indignity. We remember all who have been deprived of dignity and reduced to dependency and handouts through war, hunger and abuse of human rights.

Lord, you created all people in your image and likeness. May we never belittle the dignity of another person.
- 11. Agony (Luke 23:33-34)** In the midst of his agony on the cross Jesus prayed: "Father forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing". Today millions are suffering agonies on the cross of poverty, debt, hunger and malnourishment, underdevelopment. In knowing this, our faith compels us to take action.

Lord, even in the throes of your last agony you thought of others; may we never forget the needs of others.
- 12. Death (Mark 15:33-37)** Crucifixion is a cruel way to die and Jesus pleaded with his Father to be spared. The victims of famine face a cruel and painful death. Like Jesus they should not die in such pain.

Lord, you died that we may live. Help us not to make distinctions between our brothers and sisters.

13. Mourning (Mark 15: 45-46) Jesus was taken down from the cross and placed in the arms of his mother. She grieved the loss of a son. She held with love and care the battered, unrecognisable remains of the one she loved in life and now in death. The pain of grieving is the same for all.

Lord, we are the descendants of survivors of famine. In grieving our dead may we also remember those who continue to lose loved ones through hunger.

14. Burial (John 19:40-42) When the body of Jesus was laid in the stranger's tomb no one could imagine the future. One hundred and fifty years ago the people who survived the Irish Famine could not envisage the

spirit of Ireland today. This has evolved through a spirit of generosity and compassion which has been felt throughout the world.

Lord never allow us to forget the past which has formed us and may it empower us to create a world of plenty for all.

15. Resurrection into Life (Luke 24:5) Jesus endured suffering and death but death was not the end.

Lord fill us with faith to see signs of hope and resurrection in your world. May we never become cynical or downhearted but believe in your power of love over death and the promise of your Son, "I am with you always to the end of time."

SUGGESTIONS FOR A COMMUNITY COMMEMORATION OF AN GÓRTA MÓR ON SUNDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 1995

Community groups, parishes, towns and villages all over Ireland are commemorating the events of the Great Famine on Famine Remembrance Sunday. Here are some ideas for the day and the following weeks. Tell local press and radio about any Famine event you plan to hold.

Sunday 24 September

Vigil

Plan a vigil close to Remembrance Sunday to pray for all those who died in the Famine.

Famine liturgy

Organise a prayer service of remembrance at a locality associated with the Famine.

Fast

Hold a 12 or 24 hour fast to recall the hungry 1840s and to show solidarity with today's famine victims.

Famine graves

Plant a tree or daffodil bulbs at any spot in your area believed to be a Famine grave. Placing a very large stone on the spot would also be a low cost memorial.

Follow-up activities

Famine prevention today

Contact Trócaire to find out how you can help prevent famine recurring in the Third World. We can provide resources for groups who want to know more about the causes and extent of famine today.

Exhibition of Famine records

Your local library/museum could display letters, documents, poor law union minutes and artifacts relating to the Famine and relief works.

Workhouses

Find out more about life in the workhouse. Organise a

group visit to a workhouse site or, if possible, to one still in use as a hospital or a home.

Famine relief works

Ask your local history society to locate and prepare a map of relief works in your area such as walls, roads and buildings.

Strokestown Famine Museum/Ulster Museum Famine Exhibition

Organise a group visit to either of the above museums to learn about life in Famine times. Contact Trócaire Belfast if you would like the Ulster Museum travelling exhibition to visit your area.

Famine walks

Ask a local historian to organise easy walks to localities associated with the Famine such as a green road, a deserted village or a relief work site.

Students' competition

Invite secondary students to write an essay on some aspect of the Famine in your area.

Drama

Arrange for a local drama group to present a piece of theatre based on events during the Famine.

Further reading

Remembering our past ... Remembering our future, a Famine Pack produced by Trócaire, 1995

Famine in Ireland and Overseas, Trócaire, 1995

Famine: Causes, Prevention and Relief, Trócaire, 1995.

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