

On the Occasion of the First National Famine Commemoration Day
Statement from the Bishops of Ireland
17 May 2009

“The love of Christ urges us on.” (2 Cor 5:14)

We welcome the Government’s decision to institute an annual National Famine Commemoration Day, which offers us a valuable opportunity to remember the past and reflect on the themes of hunger and famine in the present day. In the pastoral letter *Remembering the Irish Famine*,¹ issued by the Irish Bishops’ Conference in 1995, we called to mind that “a million people died and approximately two million were forced to emigrate during the famine and shortly afterwards.” In addition, many people gave their lives in loving service to the sick. This event resulted in countless personal tragedies, and shaped our collective history as a people. It deserves to be remembered with due solemnity.

Fourteen years after *Remembering the Irish Famine*, we find ourselves “in a world which is still ravaged by the effects of famine and hunger.” Indeed, hunger and famine affects even more people today than in 1995: over 963 million people do not have enough to eat each day; one child dies every six seconds from malnutrition and related causes; tens of thousands of people are still forced to become refugees each year as a result of hunger.

As we affirmed in 1995, “famine is a scandal and all the more so because the natural events which lead to famine are now predictable and consequently famine is preventable in ways which were not the case in the 1840s.” We must remember that famine occurs largely as a result of human action – and inaction. Malnutrition endures whilst the world allocates increasing resources to arms and weapons of indiscriminate destruction. Famine is caused and compounded by unjust political and economic structures which are often the fruit of the sinful behaviour of individuals. In a world of plenty, people still go hungry.

Hunger and malnutrition, moreover, do not only occur in far off places. It is a growing reality in our own country as encountered by the Society of St Vincent de Paul and other caring Church agencies in their work. The Bishops’ Commission for Justice and Social Affairs has addressed this recently in its position paper on poverty in contemporary Ireland.²

In recent years, we have become increasingly conscious of the environmental dimension of hunger. Environmental destruction, and climate change in particular, is increasing the number and severity of droughts and disasters, adding to hunger and famine in the developing world.

Every person has a basic right to his or her daily bread. As a Christian community, called to respond to the Lord’s command, “Love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12), the enduring scourge of hunger and famine urges us to adopt a spirit of generous solidarity and cooperation, grounded in the values and rights inherent in the life and dignity of the human person. In addition to developing and supporting programmes which embody this spirit, the Church also seeks to promote these inalienable rights and values, thereby feeding the great spiritual hunger in the world.

Behind every statistic about hunger and malnutrition lies a suffering human person in whom we see the face of the Christ who said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40) Such suffering calls us to an ever deeper encounter and living relationship with Christ through prayer, the Eucharist and loving service. In his encyclical *God is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that “time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract

¹ Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Ireland *Remembering the Irish Famine*, 24 September 1995. All quotes in this statement are from this pastoral letter unless otherwise stated.

² Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs *In the wake of the Celtic Tiger, Poverty in Contemporary Ireland*, Position Paper, 2009

from effective and loving service to our neighbour but is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service.”³

At this time of deepening economic downturn, there is a serious risk that as a country, we could become focused exclusively on taking care of ourselves. We must do all we can to address the needs of the poor in Ireland. Crucially, in remembering the famine, we also need to recommit ourselves to addressing famine throughout the world. In fact, in *Remembering the Irish Famine* we recalled “the generosity of [the Irish people’s] response to the plight of the poor and suffering peoples of the world.” This response, which is so deeply rooted in our own experience, has been especially noteworthy in times of economic hardship. During times of famine in Ireland, many of our people and priests reached out in compassion and Gospel service to those who had almost lost hope. Today countless Irish people continue to make a real contribution through their support, both financial and otherwise, of the various relief and development agencies. Those agencies, such as Trócaire, need our support now more than ever to respond to hunger and famine throughout the world.

Action, however, is also needed by governments, who have it within their gift to address the underlying causes of hunger and famine. The Hunger Task Force report presented to the United Nations last September with its bold recommendations demonstrated Ireland’s commitment to give leadership in seeking to solve the problem of world hunger. As world leaders strive to reform the global financial and trading system in the wake of the current crisis, they need to ensure they do all they can to help the poorer countries address hunger and famine. In particular, they have a responsibility to honour their promises on overseas aid. These promises need to be translated into action.

For Christians, remembering is not simply about the past. Today’s act of remembrance calls us to a new encounter and relationship with Christ in the present, and to a renewed commitment to addressing the issues of hunger and famine in the present day.⁴ Seeking, as instruments in the Lord’s hands, to build a better future, is the best possible memorial to those who died. “The love of Christ urges us on.” (2 Cor 5:14)

³ Pope Benedict XVI *God is Love* n 36

⁴ To assist with this reflection, we have prepared separate Parish and Liturgy notes.