

Hesburgh

# The Thin Edge of Starvation

A. N. Correspondence 9-18-74



Photo by Joe Raymond

One of the most painful burdens on the conscience of modern man is the recognition of immense human needs and the corresponding recognition of his own responsibility—without being able to see what he can do to alleviate such needs.

Among the many needs brought to our attention, none is more basic than stark hunger, people dying of starvation, infants suffering permanent retardation because of malnutrition.

In recent months all of us have been exposed to fragmentary news reports of drought and famine in Africa and Asia.

To achieve a better understanding of the real dimensions of this problem and to ask the basic question: "What can I do about it?" we turned to Father Theodore Hesburgh, President of Notre Dame. Through his work with the Rockefeller Foundation and the Overseas Development Council, Father Hesburgh has had an extraordinary opportunity to see the face of hunger and to understand the forces behind it.

jr, csc □

## Q. Father, how long have you been with the Overseas Development Council?

A. About two and a half years. The group was formed in 1969 by a group of concerned people who felt that the United States needed an institution in the private sector which would examine all the problems that flow from development and would help educate people in terms of what can be done about the problems.

The ODC started on a very high level. Henry Ford, Bob McNamara of the World Bank, David Rockefeller of Chase Manhattan and a whole group of people on that level were on the first board of directors, and the first chairman of the board was Gene Black, the former head of the World Bank. He has spent most of his life since World War II in development projects. They picked Jim Grant as president, who had been in development work with AID, had worked in Indochina, and, in fact, had grown

up in China. It is a very distinguished board, and we have a great deal of respect from many sectors of the government.

The *New York Times* said recently that the most sophisticated work on development comes out of the ODC. Our annual report has become a bible for everyone involved in foreign aid, and many of the statistics you hear in the news and in the Congress come from our reports.

## Q. Everyone has heard about the seriousness of the food situation in the regions surrounding the Sahara Desert in Africa. Could you explain some of the reasons behind this situation?

A. The short-range dimensions—why we have a problem right now—is a mixed bag; there are many factors. First of all, the world population is increasing at about 70,000 people every day. That comes out to around 75 million people a year. Very simply, every year there are 75 million more people to feed. Over the course of 10 years, you're talking about billions more people to feed.

We're not really able, as things stand now, to feed even the people who are already here. What that means is that in the future—in the next 25 years—even if we doubled the total agricultural production figure acquired by man since he first began to grow things on earth, then we would only be standing still—we wouldn't be doing any better than we are now at providing for the food needs of the world.

## Q. Is population the main factor?

A. No, there are other things which complicate the picture tremendously. One is the change in weather patterns, which is a cyclical thing.

In the regions south of the Sahara Desert, the desert is moving forward at the rate of 30 miles per year. The herds of the Tuareg peoples, which numbered six million animals a few years ago, are all dead. There was no water to drink because the patterns of rainfall changed. Everything is fundamentally altered because of changes in the weather. The Niger and the Senegal rivers—the largest rivers in that part of Africa—are barely navigable today. You

MORE

## **We have to start seeing this planet as one world, interdependent.**

can walk across them in many places—like being able to walk across the Missouri River. If you go to a place like Timbuktu, where the Niger once came up to the doorstep of the city market, you will find that you have to get in a jeep and ride for seven kilometers just to get to the present riverbank.

Fuel is another short-range factor. People don't realize that fuel and fertilizer are linked together. Nitrogenous fertilizer, which is the most commonly used fertilizer, comes mainly from natural gas or fuel. That means that when fuel gets short, the developed countries, which can make the fertilizer themselves, keep it for themselves. We do it. Europe does it. Canada does it. The United States even has a law now so that you can't export fertilizer anymore.

That's a short-range thing, but it's terribly important. It means that there's now a 900,000-ton shortage of fertilizer in India. It's doubly tragic because fertilizer has a much greater effect on the land over there, since it has not been fertilized so much in the past, like land in the United States has. So 900,000 tons less fertilizer means 10 million tons less food. In the underdeveloped countries, one ton of fertilizer gets you 10 tons more food. Here the ratio is a lot less.

Monetary problems have also aggravated the problem. People don't have money to buy oil because the price has increased fourfold. In places like India, oil is essential to work the pumps, because all the land is irrigated by wells. If the pumps can't work, there's no water, and no crops. A relatively small amount of oil or gas can make an astounding difference in how much food these people receive. One pump working in India can save a whole crop.

One-fifth of the world is now using about 80% of the world's resources. That fifth includes our part of the world, plus Europe and, to some extent, Japan. And we are not only using them, but misusing them, squandering them, using them in absolutely unnecessary affluence. This is something that cannot go on.

### **Q. What about long-range problems, two or three hundred years from now?**

A. Long-range needs will have to be handled by really large projects. In the regions around the Sahara that means controlling the waters of the Niger and Senegal rivers with dams and reservoirs and underground irrigation. You need all kinds of new grain stock, new genetic stock bred for productivity and nourishment. The whole infrastructure of the country may need to be altered. If a country is being ruled by an oligarchy which owns all the land and uses it wastefully, then some kind of land reform is called for, so that a person has to work the land to own the land.

### **Q. Are the ominous predictions about mass starvation in the next few years in Africa correct?**

A. After I went to Africa myself, I think that some of the figures are wrong. People were talking about Africans in the Sahelian countries dying like flies. That simply was not true. I didn't find a single person except newborn babies who were dying when I was there. But there were many people who were on the thin edge of starvation, who had never had enough food to eat. They were so wasted that a common cold would carry them away. Many of them were dying unnecessarily from all kinds of simple diseases which we wouldn't even lose a day's work over. Their resistance was weakened by lack of food.

Over the long run, the terrible thing is that the children, whose greatest mental development in terms of the brain and nervous system takes place in the first two years of life, will be terribly retarded if they don't get enough of the right protein at the right time. It can permanently lower their brain capacity.

### **Q. In a recent paper you stated that you feel the world's resources are able to feed the growing population. Does this conflict with the statement made by Barbara Ward that the resources of the world are simply not adequate to bring the world population up to the living level of the developed nations?**

A. I have to say two things about that. One, I wouldn't say that the world's resources are enough to support any population, no matter how much it grows. That simply wouldn't be possible. When there are finite resources, there have to be a finite number of people using them.

I'd say you can feed the world if there is better food production, which means, for example, desalination projects, so we can use the water in the oceans to irrigate the desert lands which are one-third of the earth's surface, and so on. It would be very costly, but you don't ask about cost when it is a matter of staying alive.

The second thing is that there has to be a much more equitable distribution of the world's resources. It simply isn't viable that one-fifth of the world uses four-fifths of the resources, and the other sectors of the world have to divide up the remaining fifth. That's not social justice.

### **Q. And isn't that disparity increasing?**

A. Right. It's getting worse. The five percent is becoming two and a half percent, and our part of the world is heading toward using 90 percent. That can't go on. We really have to do something about it. When you stop to think—the bill for food for the poor countries, which spend almost all of their money on food, is twice the amount of foreign assistance that all the countries of the world give to the poor. The bill is 15 billion dollars; the total foreign assistance from all sources to the

poor of the world is about 8 billion dollars.

That won't wash. And, of course, that's just food; if you want to get into other items like medicine and education and things of that sort, then you've got a really tough picture.

**Q. Barbara Ward has often said that eventually the people on the outside, who are unable to share in the luxury of the other one-fifth, simply will not tolerate the situation any longer.**

A. It's a stark picture. Let your mind run for a minute, in a science-fiction type of way, and assume that the thing just goes on the way it's going now. Let's assume that in a matter of two or three generations—that's all it takes—there are two or three billion people in Latin America. They have been greatly neglected by us in our development plans, and they look north and see the contrast in the ways we are living. What if they just decide to walk north? The Pan-American Highway is a perfectly good highway to walk on. Who would stop them? Would you kill them all? Suppose they just walked up and demanded that we share with them.

I don't think that we have to get into that situation. It's not easy and nice to think about, but we ought to think about it, and now is the time to do it, so we don't build that kind of world.

There are many short-range things that could be done, but the most important long-range project is to change people's attitudes. We need to see this planet as one world, interdependent. We can't have one part of the world living in affluence and another part not having enough food to eat; it just doesn't make any sense humanly.

**Q. Wouldn't it take a tremendous amount of leadership to accomplish this change in attitude among the people of the developed nations? I'm thinking of the kind of leadership that Martin Luther King provided on behalf of the civil rights struggle.**

A. We need that kind of leadership desperately, and we don't have it, either in Europe or here. One large problem, of course, is that there is a balance involved—in order for them to get more we have to get less. I think we are coming to a point where some of our ways of acting will begin to appear to us as absolutely obscene. You simply cannot wallow in food in one country when people are literally starving to death in others.

Even though I didn't see many people in Africa who were actually starving to death, I saw thousands of people who would be dead very quickly because of not having enough nutrition. I should also have said that over in Ethiopia, from the reports that we have received, over 100,000 people have died. In places like Bangladesh, it's very difficult to imagine today how a few million people won't be dying very soon, especially if the harvest fails because of the oil and fertilizer shortage.

But how do you get people to change? My guess is that there will be a massive amount of information handed to people by way of television. They will see people dying and it will be pretty gruesome. I think

there will be more and more of the type of information that the Overseas Development Council puts out.

There will be novels and plays and all sorts of presentations to inform people about all of this. Then there will be prophets, more people like Mother Teresa and Helder Camara, people who stand out as dramatizing something.

Many people will start privately and quietly imposing on themselves a certain number of meatless days every week. They will feel a need to link themselves to the problem, to suffer a little bit.

**Q. This brings up a question that I'm sure concerns many people. You have said that if every American gave up one hamburger per week, it would free millions of tons of grain for use elsewhere. How could such a little effort have such a large effect?**

A. To explain that I'll have to get into some statistics, and these statistics are pretty exact. Each American, on the average, consumes about a ton, 1,890 pounds, of grain a year, but only about 150 pounds of it in bread and pastry products. The rest is consumed by way of the grain which is used in the production of eggs, milk, and meat. Now some of the meat that we eat is more efficient as a source of protein than others. Fish is a very efficient source, and chicken is pretty good also. But beef is not efficient. The actual ratio is seven to one: it takes seven pounds of grain to make one pound of beef. So most of the ton of grain that each of us eats every year is consumed through the beef that we like so well.

The rest of the world eats four hundred pounds of grain per person every year. But they eat it directly, in chapattis, tortillas and breads.

Now there are many people in the United States who have meat three times a day. Most people in the world, who could really use the protein, are very lucky if they get meat once a month. So the problem is, in India, for example, where because of the fertilizer shortage there is a need for 10 million tons of wheat, the simple giving up of one quarter of a pound of beef per week by each American would liberate, in the form of the grain that it takes to make that quarter pound of beef, 10 to 13 million tons of grain, which would keep all those people from facing possible starvation or untimely and unnecessary death from simple diseases.

**Q. But there has to be some linkage. What if somebody asks, "How do I get my hamburger over to India?"**

A. That's a valid question, and it has to be answered on the level of the macrosystem, not the microsystem. We have to be able to say, in our national planning, that if we can get a pledge from a certain number of Americans that they will pass up a quarter of a pound of beef every week which they would normally eat, then the government could say that they know exactly how much grain that is going to save, and they could decide to commit that much grain overseas. But people have to keep their

**It's not a country's need, but their military importance for us which determines the amount of aid that we are willing to give them.**

word, and the whole system would have to rely on personal honesty. The beef people would certainly raise a fuss, because they wouldn't be producing the high levels of beef they have been producing.

The grain could be given or sold at concessional prices to the poor of the world. Joseph in Egypt, for example, had a food problem, and he piled up stocks for seven lean years. We don't have stocks like that. The Secretary of Agriculture does not want to replenish world food stocks, because with a good harvest we can more profitably sell food grains on the world market. These are dismal facts, but they are true. Usually the food which we do send overseas is allocated on the basis of military considerations rather than need. It is ironic, but as the cold war diminishes, our motivation for supplying food to militarily important countries also diminishes. We don't need them as much, so why send them food?

**Q. But the linkage has to go further if we want our efforts to be of genuine service. We've seen films of food rotting on the docks in Africa because of inept bureaucrats; we've heard of political corruption and the misuse of funds.**

A. Wherever there are human beings administering large amounts of money you will encounter some graft. That's an axiom. On the other hand, I must say—and I was on the lookout for this in Africa—that I saw very little food rotting on the docks. Most of it was very carefully covered up with tarps and canvas.

There was a problem getting it out to the villages. The roads are very poor; the railroad is old and can only transport about 3,000 tons of goods from the ports of Dakar and Abidjan to Bamako, where it has to be transported up a very poor road system to the villages. I went up to the end of the line, and they were getting the food, and it was being distributed fairly.

I talked to the administrator there. He was an African, a member of the army. He took me out to the warehouse, heavily padlocked, and the food was carefully stored in a dry place. He was putting out a certain amount of it every day for the villagers.

I went to the desert outside of a city in Mauritania where there had been corruption the first year. The president of Mauritania had picked the most conscientious fellow he knew, who was his Minister of Health, and had given him the job of distributing the food. The president gave him full control of the army, so every time a food convoy went out there was an armed jeep and truck in front and an armed jeep and truck in the rear with radio communication back and forth. Also, the Minister of Health had been given the right to condemn anybody to death who would cheat to get food from the people who needed it.

The moment those tough measures were put in, there was no pilfering and no fooling around. I

grant you, you can't control every person who is involved in these relief efforts. What we need is people willing to dedicate themselves to administering these programs fairly and honestly with the cooperation of the local government, which, after all, has to run its own country.

**Q. In a paper you prepared for a talk in England you stated that you were optimistic, theologically and humanly. For me, when I see the massive problems of motivation, trying to get people to act responsibly and intelligently on these problems of linkage, I tend toward a pessimistic outlook.**

A. Well, I am constantly surprised by the goodness in people. I am not too particularly surprised by their evil, because I assume that there is some evil in each of us to start with. But I am always surprised by the inherent goodness of people. Goodness often emerges in human society with a deliberate appeal. When people *understand* why they should be generous in doing something, they usually respond with generosity.

I think that the problem here is that for so long we have had our fears appealed to rather than our "better angels." We've been told we can't drive our cars every day as much as we want to, we can't have the kind of big cars we like, we can't pollute as much air as we have been, we have to conserve fuel, and so forth. But you can't just say to people that they have to do this; what you tell them is that if you act in such and such a way, this will result, and if you act in another way, you will get another result, so which result do you want? What kind of quality of life do you want in this world?

**Q. Then we should all be thinking of the world as a much smaller place?**

A. That's right. There's still an attitude around—not obviously, but still noticeable in the way we behave as a nation—which says that God is on our side and we have our blessings from him and let those other poor fellows die. Individuals just can't think that way anymore and still be human beings, or Christians or world citizens.

If people are given the inspiration, they will surprise us by what they will do to alleviate the gravity of many of these problems. Seeing a terrible situation normally brings out the best in people; they want to do something about it. Of course, Americans have recently been almost totally insensitive to what the rest of the world is like. Also, they have been brought up on greed and acquisitiveness and the philosophy of "the bigger the better," and that sort of thing.

In a way, we need first to be educated, to learn about the plight of the world. Then we need to be given some means to do something about it, which isn't all that easy. There has to be some way that the local John Doe can do something.

**Q. Can the individual directly affect the world food situation?**

A. Not directly, usually, but there is one thing he can do. He can save money by not eating certain things, and if enough people decide to save money and to give that money to people who are working on these problems, that's one simple way to help. Money makes it possible to do this, even if it's only a hundred dollars or fifty dollars.

We spend more on wristwatches and potted plants than we do on feeding a hungry world, yet we look at ourselves as being very honorable and very generous. We are generous, I suppose, compared to people who are very ungenerous, but in view of our total affluence we in the United States are very ungenerous.

**Q. What differences has your exposure to these problems made in your personal life?**

A. Well, it has to affect your life some way. For example I am terribly conscious today of the wastage of food. I find myself eating every crumb, trying not to waste what I have. But I think that it's more important for everybody to start thinking about doing something in a communal way. An individual here and there may do something, but if everybody does it together, then results really happen.

**Q. The United States is a major grain exporter. If you could dictate government policy on grain, what would you do to provide for a more equitable worldwide distribution?**

A. I think I would demand of us exactly the same thing that we demand of the oil-producing nations. We say to them, "You ought to get the price of oil down." They say, "Why should we give you oil at a third of the price it costs you to produce it in your own country? Why should we, a poor undeveloped country, subsidize the United States of America? or Western Europe? or Japan? You ought to pay a decent price for oil."

That's a hard argument to answer. But we're in exactly the same position with regard to grain as these other countries are with their oil. We have been telling them, "Listen, there are people who are starving to death because they have an absolute need for oil, while we can get along on fewer car trips and so forth. You ought to give some concessional oil to those countries—lower the price for them and extend credit." And some of them are beginning to do it. Iran, for example, has concessional oil sales to India.

Now I think we should do exactly the same thing with our food. We shouldn't worry so much what we're charging Western Europe or Japan for food—or Russia—and I think we should be ready to give concessional food grants to the poorer countries of the world—provided it's not just a giveaway program which leaves them worse off than before. The giving ought to be linked to a total concept of the ongoing development of these countries. We could try to make them eventually food-sufficient. We

can help them develop a total program whereby they won't have to depend on us. In the meantime, we won't let them starve to death.

**Q. Are you thinking of any countries in particular?**

A. We could look at three countries in Africa right now, Mauritania, Mali and Senegal, and I know them pretty well because I've just traveled through them. Together they would probably be half as big as the United States. These three countries can't make it on their own today. They can't even feed themselves. But if we were to go into a development project on the Senegal River, which borders on all three of them, we could build two dams: one upstream to store water, one downstream to keep the tides from coming in and salinating the water and spoiling it. Those two dams, plus an irrigation system, would open up a million acres of farmland which is now useless. Then that area could not only grow its own food, but could even export some.

In Africa I visited a farm in one of these water-shortage situations which was using about 12,000 cubic meters of water a day. With that water, using all native farmers, they could grow just about everything they needed in the way of food. But an American from out West was managing the farm, and he was interested in profit only. What food they raised they shipped to southern France so the Frenchmen wealthy enough to pay the high prices could have fresh vegetables in the wintertime. All around this farm people were starving, and sustenance food was being shipped in.

Another situation I found—and I would call this obscene—was this same company raising \$100,000 worth of gladiolus, which were air-shipped to France and sold at \$1 per stem. They were using this irrigated land to raise gladiolus while the people around them were starving. In spite of the obscenity involved, it proved to me that the land could support people and even make a profit. When you provide water, you can raise enormous amounts of food.

**Q. You also recently made the statement that over half of the children born in the Fourth World countries die before they are five.**

A. That's true, and I also got into a lot of flap on this in terms of the abortion issue. I said that if we're so worried about children before they are born, we should also be worried about them after they are born. At one of the Catholic Relief Service centers in Dakar, Senegal, one of the nurses in a rural dispensary told me that more than half die; a minimum figure would be 60 percent. I asked why that was, and she said that it was because of malnutrition and disease. There is so little food around.

**Q. Of all the programs and agencies with which you are familiar, which seem to be the most promising, the most effective?**

A. Well, the Catholic Relief Service does very good work all over the world, and they constantly need help and support. The Protestants have a counterpart

**If we are pressuring the Arab nations to lower their oil prices  
for poorer nations, then we ought to do the same with our grain prices.**

organization, which incidentally works very closely with the Catholic Relief Service in many countries. The Quakers have also been extremely effective and helpful wherever they have gone. CARE, as I discovered in working with the Peace Corps, is one of the most helpful organizations. They do a lot of very simple things but very good things. We could go to them and get "farmer kits," with everything from seed packages to tools, to get a garden started.

There are new organizations starting out, Food for the World, for example. On the intellectual and conceptual levels the Overseas Development Council is extremely important. We had to cut back this year on one of our most valuable programs because we were \$100,000 short in the budget. The part we cut out was a very successful part—the part which carried the story into all the elementary and secondary schools in the country, to get the young people conscious of the situation. We hated to cut it out, but we just didn't have the money. That kind of money isn't as dramatic as the money that puts food into people's mouths—the short range—but it is just as important because it is aimed more at the long-term aspects of the problems, and getting the young people involved now would go a long way toward attaining our goals in future decades.

**Q. Will social and religious agencies be able to accomplish enough on their own? Won't it be necessary for governments to become involved also?**

A. I think that the social and religious agencies have to prod the governments to do the things that only governments can do. If I were to credit the Catholic and Protestant Relief Services with giving out millions of tons of food since World War II, I would also have to credit the US Food for Peace program for making the allotment possible. Only the government has the enormous resources necessary to handle the problems. For example, religious agencies must depend on the local governments to get the food to the people, to transport the food, to arrange for the translators, the distributors and so forth. The Catholic and Protestant churches do not raise millions of tons of wheat every year. They must depend to a large extent on government surplus.

At one ecumenical meeting this past year, Bob MacNamara mentioned that IDA, the "soft loan" window of the World Bank which was established to help the poorest of the world's poor, had not been granted its appropriation in Congress. At this point this group was infuriated with the shortsightedness of their own elected officials, and they sent people to Washington. There was a tremendous flurry during May and June, and they were responsible for changing the minds of the congressmen who eventually passed the appropriation.

If people really get concerned, things can be accomplished.

There's a group of nuns in Washington who are

a very sophisticated and effective lobby. What they did in this case was essentially very simple: they got a list together of all the people that voted against this appropriation, which was about two-thirds of the House, and then they convinced the most important people in these men's lives to talk to them and ask, "Why did you do it? Don't you understand all the factors? Why can't you give this the same priority that you gave to . . . ?" And then they had a list ready of the worthwhile legislation that they voted "yes" on in the past.

I'll tell you, I wouldn't want that group on my back all the time with that kind of pressure. And there were many people all across Washington doing the same thing, and they got the bill through.

**Q. Is there a growing concern among congressmen about the extent and the importance of the world food problem?**

A. The concern grows to the extent that they get pressured. You see, people in Congress react to pressure, because they look at the bundles of mail that come into their offices every day, and if a whole year goes by without anyone writing in to show concern for foreign assistance, then they have a lot of other things that they are getting pressured on, and they let it slide, because they think that there is no constituency for it.

Now I happen to believe that there is a constituency, and research that we did in the Overseas Development Council indicates that it is there and it is growing, particularly among the younger people. They don't just want large amounts of money thrown around; they want specific programs in terms of education and health and food production.

What we have to do is to mobilize the constituency and give them some articulate voice. At the moment they are slightly disorganized.

**Q. One last question. A few years ago you were talking about the advisability about stepping down from the presidency of Notre Dame. If that were to happen, would you be attracted to this kind of work—the international development of peoples and resources?**

A. I am attracted to any reasonable way of doing good and being a priest while I do it. I recently finished a book, *The Human Imperative*, which will be appearing this month, and it gives my basic reasons for working in these kinds of international development programs. I don't spend a lot of time speculating on what I might be doing someday; the world is full of needs right now.

As long as I am at Notre Dame I will fulfill my responsibilities here, and I will also continue to work in these other directions. I want to be involved, and to do whatever I can that is worthwhile, as long as the Lord gives me power to do it. □