

Food for the Poor Sunday

Sermon by The Rev. Barry Thiering

www.foodforthe poor.org

April 20, 2008

Your young people at St. Thomas prepared an exciting pancake breakfast for us all on behalf of Food for the Poor. Can you imagine a world where the children have no breakfast? In El Salvador recently the electric grid broke down so the shop keepers were giving away food from the freezers before it spoiled. One man gave some patties to a little boy called Carlos, and encouraged him to eat them saying, "Now let me see you eat them!" The little boy said, "Thank you, Sir, but I need to take them home to my brothers and sisters. You see, in my house, today is not my day to eat." This is poverty, this is devastation. This is a permanent devastation and long term deprivation.

During and after Hurricane Katrina, everyone in this area experienced devastation. Food for the Poor usually focuses on the Caribbean and Central America, but we were happy to stop and help in this national emergency at home, just as we had following 9/11 when we sent 3 tractor-trailers of nutritious rehydration packs for the workers demoralized by the cleanup who could no longer face food because of the stench of ground zero. (We also paused from our usual labors to airlift relief supplies immediately to tsunami victims in Indonesia, due to several generous large contributions.)

Within a week of Katrina, we at Food for the Poor began sending what became over 200 tractor-trailer loads of assistance, including food, water tablets, and emergency relief supplies. We organized over 50 sites manned by more than 7,500 volunteers throughout the Gulf Coast area, centered at Yankee Stadium in Biloxi, including relief to churches of all denominations in the Biloxi area. Specifically, at 6 sites, 15,000 hot meals were served per day, and 3 medical clinics saw 330 patients per day. A naval officer at one of my speaking engagements at the Episcopal Church at Annapolis called us "the Navy Seals of charitable relief work." We see the need, go in quickly, and then move on. We are flexible and efficient.

So your devastation and suffering was great. It was both physical and mental. It was gnawing. I agonized with you at the great loss you experienced here. I had seen the beauty of the area and your historic buildings on the coast during 2 previous visits to Trinity Church at Pass Christian for Food for the Poor. Your suffering was raw, but it is passing with time. You had hope. You trusted things would get better, and they have. You are resilient.

Imagine for a minute, continuing to live in Carlos' world, where devastation is chronic, goes on day after day, with no end in sight--no hope. Imagine a world where the light at the end of the tunnel is, in fact, the oncoming train. Remember, every year the Caribbean endures hurricane season. Usually before a hurricane makes landfall here on US soil, it has already swept through one or more of the islands in the Caribbean. So Food for the Poor must work with these yearly emergencies, while still continuing the routine relief work of feeding 4,000,000 per day, building over 200 clean water wells per year, and building over 7,000 houses for truly homeless, deserving families, with their help.

The constant cry of parents and children in the 17 countries of the Caribbean and Central America where Food for the Poor serves is "Lord, help us" as in today's Psalm 31. "Lord, deliver us. We need shelter. Oh, Lord, bow down and hear us. Come quickly to keep us safe. Be my rock of refuge, a stronghold above the flood waters that seek to submerge us." We too share the cry of the human heart. We too know we have need, and we thank God for meeting our needs. The wonderful thing I have found is when we have given food, or a well, or a school, or a house, or a medical clinic to the poorest of the poor, they fall on their knees and thank God first for hearing their cries. Then they thank us for bringing the love of Christians from America to them. They know where the gifts come from, and they know why they have come. They always say, "God has heard our cries. God has heard our prayers. Gracias."

I've come to thank you for past help, Fr. Bill and Richard Park, the Sr. Warden, for allowing me to come, and Susan and Darlene for their graciousness and Southern hospitality to me and my wife, Linda.

I ask you to look at the brochure in your bulletins which describes our work. The envelope has your church's number for accountability. I invite you, even plead with you in the name of the Lord, to pray over this opportunity to help those in real, continuing need. Then give it to Debbie or the Rector, or send it directly to Food for the Poor to the address on the envelope: 6401 Lyons Road, Coconut Creek, Florida 33073.

You can go on the Internet, also, at www.foodforthe poor.org to find out about the wide scope of our service. There you will find another reason to support Food for the Poor. We send over 96% of all contributions directly to projects and people in countries we serve. We have continued to cut administrative costs over our 25 years until now they are less than 3.9%, which includes bringing me to speak to you, all mailings, and the cost of distributing all aid and relief. This kind of efficiency, coupled with effectiveness, is almost unheard of in charitable groups.

Because we also start training programs in the countries we serve, and demand accountability of recipients, we work to help individuals and communities become self sufficient. Our Angels of Hope orphan sponsorship for \$34 per month is in line with this goal also. Our Starfish boxes allow children and families of the first world to save allowance money and pocket change for children and families of the 3rd world. So there really is a level of giving suitable for almost all of us, from young to old, and all levels of budget. The youth group's outpouring of love by dedicating \$80 of their proceeds today from the pancake breakfast is an example of the creative kinds of home-grown projects we benefit from all around the US. This will feed a meal to over 2,000 needy children. Thanks, kids, for your generosity of spirit. And the pancakes did taste good! And the waitresses were spectacular!

Ricardo's Story: I know when I traveled to Haiti on a pilgrimage soon after I began working with Food for the Poor, the need was overwhelming, just like it must have been here following Katrina. I went with a group of priests and pastors, and we were taken into Citi Soleil, the refugee camp for the poorest city in the poorest nation in the world. Over a half million people live there, if one can call it living. The children ran to us with joy, and draped themselves over us priests, crying "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord (my French isn't that good now, so it may have been "Wow! Food's here!")"

A little boy grabbed my finger and walked everywhere with us, singing thank you songs in French. When it came time to return to the bus, little Ricardo would not let my finger go, but looked deeply into my eyes, not smiling any more. He said, "Mister, be my Daddy—will you take me with you?" I was stuck by the thought, "Is God speaking to me? Is there anything I can do to help?" In agony, I said to him, "I really can't take you. The government won't let me; I haven't got a visa for you. (I like to blame the government for everything.) And even worse, I haven't asked my wife. (I was saying to myself, Lord, aren't my 5 children enough??!)"

Then I asked myself, "What's the real criterion to apply here?" So I said to him, "Ricardo, I really can't take you with me. It is probably best for you to stay here with your Mother. You see, I work with Food for the Poor, and every Sunday I speak to a church and they give me money, some a little, some a lot. We put it all together, and I promise you, we will keep the Food Bank open for you to continue to fill your bucket to take back to Momma and your little brother and sister. You're the big boy of the family and they depend on you. And we will keep this school open so you can come next year because you are big now. You are 9, and as you learn to read and write you can become someone to help your people. I promise I will go back and tell people about you."

And I've done this for 7 years now since I met Ricardo. When I got back on the bus, I felt I should become an advocate for Ricardo, and for the tens of thousands of Ricardo's in Central America and the Caribbean who cannot ask you for themselves. So, I have become a beggar for Ricardo, a beggar for Christ. The brochure with its envelope is my begging sheet. Please help me keep my promise to Ricardo.

As Mother Teresa once said while visiting our headquarters in Kingston, Jamaica, " You know, if you can't feed 100 people, just feed one...Kindness has converted more people than zeal, science, or eloquence." So please hear the cry of the poor and become God's answer for these children and families.