Opinion



Pope Francis greets people as he arrives to eat lunch with the poor in the Paul VI hall after celebrating Mass marking the first World Day of the Poor at the Vatican Nov. 19. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Phyllis Zagano

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Luxury predicts downfall, and when food preparation gets too fancy, the society is about to crumble. That's an idea related to the fall of the Roman republic that some credit to the Roman historian Livy (Titus Livius). Others credit Cyrus the Great. No matter who, it is something to think about as we see shows on the Food Channel or follow the latest celebrity chefs. There is something wrong with the developed world's priorities.

I've got nothing against Wolfgang Puck, or Rachael Ray, or even Martha Stewart. But intense interest in Kobe beef and fertilized duck eggs is a little over the top, especially since about 10% of the people on the planet suffer food insecurity. That means huger, malnutrition, wasting, stunting, disease, and downright misery.

Being hungry is worse than being poor, but the two so often go hand in hand that Pope Francis recently hosted lunch for about 1,500 people in the Paul VI audience hall, following his celebration of Mass at St Peter's for the first World Day of the Poor. Nearly 2,500 others were served Sunday *pranzo* at pontifical colleges around Rome.

The idea was to focus on the needs of others, especially the poor.

Around the globe, some dioceses and parishes picked up the pope's lead, but the developed world does not always see the realities of poverty. That's not to say the church doesn't kick in its fair share. It's just that we do not always see the poor among us.

Moreover, the developed world generally does not recognize the incredible food insecurity knocking at its own back door. Statistics gathered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2016 count 12.3% of American households worried about the next meal, or at least the next one after that. Africa and Asia count many more starving people, from 15% to 20% of their various national populations. Pockets of real poverty cause awful conditions in Oceana, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

So, what to do? Many years ago, I shared lunch with Sir Arthur Lewis, Nobel prize-winning economist and expert in development issues. Sir Arthur explained that there was enough food in the world, but that combined problems of transportation and politics kept individuals, even nations, starving. While things have improved since

then, it is increasingly clear that the same troubles infect the attempts of individuals, organizations, and even nations that seek to alleviate suffering.

Why? Aside from the systemic difficulties that keep bread away from starving children, the insanities of war rip it from their mouths. The U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization states that 489 million of the world's 815 million chronically food insecure people live in places torn by conflict.

That's war with all the trappings: killing, burning, looting, raping — just about any heinous crime you can think of. When the marauding army shoots your livestock, there's no milk or meat. When the bombs and rubble ruin the stream, there's no fish to be caught. When the sky is falling and you're constantly on the move, there's no time to harvest the crops.

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And that, by the way, is what is happening to the Rohingya in Myanmar, home to the world's longest-running civil war. Myanmar, where Buddhist majority forces are pushing Muslim Rohingya across to Bangladesh, happens to be the next place Pope Francis plans to visit. How many people are suffering there? The numbers range from 400,000 to 600,000 people on the move or already refugees. Horror stories abound; how about the woman, whose child was pulled from her back and tossed into the flames of her burning village, and was then raped by soldiers?

She is just one person. She is poor. She is hungry. She is homeless.

She is legion.

So, before you pass up Aunt Rose's creamed spinach this week, remember there really are people starving in China. And in Myanmar. And in Bangladesh. And maybe just next door.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. Her books include *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* and *Women Deacons?: Essays with Answers*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, the Vatican's publishing house, has just published her *The Light of the World: Daily Meditations for Advent and Christmas* in Italian.]

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