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Manila archdiocese's Lenten campaign aims to feed 40,000 children

by N.J. Viehland



Nuns distribute ashes at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Shrine in Pasay City, Philippines. (John Lagman)

MANILA, PHILIPPINES -- Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila in his Ash Wednesday message appealed for donations to a campaign to raise about \$937,000 to feed 40,000 malnourished children.

His message, posted on the archdiocese's website, was reported in media and discussed by priests during Ash Wednesday Masses.

"We are called upon to support each other in solidarity by praying, fasting and giving alms to the poor as we undertake our conversion journey in preparation for Easter," Tagle wrote. He said the archdiocese's FAST2FEED 40K campaign for Hapag-asa ("Table of Hope") will benefit hungry children from around the country.

Catholics walking out of churches around Manila after services told *NCR* they would try their best to help the anti-hunger program.

Nenita Pena, a laundrywoman from the Redemptorist-run Shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Pasay City, south of Manila, said she wants to give at least 50 pesos a week inside church envelopes.

"I want to help those who don't have anything to eat and show how grateful I am that my six children are eating rice every day," she said. This is all she could aim for on her daily wages of 400 pesos from doing laundry for three families, she said.

Better-off wives and office workers at Greenhills Shopping Center chapel east of Manila said they, too, would set aside money to donate to the church.

Hapag-asa, a supplemental feeding program for undernourished children 6 to 12 months old, was launched in 2006 in partnership with Caritas Manila's Pondo ng Pinoy ("Fund of the Filipino") and Assisi Development Foundation.

Under the program, children in 36 dioceses are served meals made from local produce prepared with a lentil/rice mix containing 25 vitamins, minerals and other nutrients. Children have said joining the program helped change their eating habits and enjoy foods they previously did not enjoy, such as vegetables.

Volunteers and relatives feed the children once a day, five days a week for six months. Nurses, teachers and other trainers run sessions for family members about nutrition facts and methods for food preparation, home management and other values. Teachers from the government's agency for technical and vocational training run classes for meat processing, soap-making and other prospective sources of family income. Tagle has engaged directly with workers, beneficiaries and relatives in activities with children and parents in various Hapag areas.

"Nationwide, Hapag-asa was able to feed more than 200,000 hungry and malnourished children last year," Tagle said. A total of 2,910 children were fed in Manila archdiocese alone, he said.

This year, the program's goal is to feed 2,000 children, he announced, asking Catholics to pitch in for the feeding cost, which is 10 pesos a day per child for six months.

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When his predecessor, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, led the program launch six years ago, the Food and Nutrition Research Institute reportedly found 3 out of 10 children 0-5 years old were suffering from chronic malnutrition and were underweight and short for their age.



The 2008-2009 expanded survey of 17 regions using World Health

Organization measures found the prevalence of underweight children in the same age group was 20.7 percent, down from 27.4 percent in the 1989-90 survey. However, it remained almost the same between

2003 and 2008.

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"Generally, under-nutrition among this age group is still a public health concern," the report says.

Why are these children not getting enough to eat? Poverty has long been blamed for hunger, but a recent survey of the independent research group Social Weather Stations in Dec. 2011 found a much larger proportion of Filipinos rated themselves as hungry even though self-rated poverty fell from 52 percent in September 2011 to 45 percent in December.

Tackling the 'very big issue' of poverty

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Bishops-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development (BBC-HD) national co-chairman Meneleo Carlos Jr. said the government, the business sector and others have a role in the problem and the solution. To alleviate poverty, "inclusive growth" is key, he said.

"Poverty is a very big issue, and that is so not only for the church," Carlos said. "Government is also cognizant of poverty, and that is why its Philippine Development Plan aims for 'inclusive growth.' Seventy percent of the country cannot grow without paying attention to the 30 percent left behind."

According to the plan, poverty has prevailed because economic growth does not benefit the poor. The Philippines' population grows more than 2 percent per year, but per capita incomes on average have grown by only 20 percent in real terms from 1981-2009.

Critics have complained against an "anti-people" national budget, with \$5.1 billion allotted to health and \$8 billion for debt servicing.

High government spending, an energetic service sector and remittances from millions of overseas workers boosted development under the lead of the country's former president, Gloria Arroyo. However, the government has failed to create jobs, with unemployment rates averaging 10 percent between 1990 and 2005 and 7.5 percent in the succeeding four years.

"We should clarify what we mean by progress," said Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo of Manila, who heads the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) Commission on Social Action, Justice and Peace. "Progress should include benefits for the people."

He cited the impact of laws that do not promote "responsible development," such as the Mining Act of 1995, and "infringe on rights of people to land, water and resources from which they get their food."

The government needs to exercise stronger political will with programs like land reform that directly affect food production, Pabillo said.

He said the eviction of migrants from cities and indigenous people from their communities (and sources of food) caused the hunger. Relocation settlements assigned to those evicted are often far from work, school or their farms, aggravating poverty and hunger, he said.

On Monday and Tuesday, a group of indigenous Dumagat people from Casiguran in the Aurora province traveled almost 250 miles to Manila to present their complaints to the Commission on Human Rights and the CBCP media and to appeal for help in their fight to stop the creation of Aurora Pacific Economic Zone (APECO), which they say was implemented without public consultation.

Economic zones "are a waste of people's money because many of these ports become smuggling points,"

Carlos said. "They become political interests so you cannot move against them."

He said he thinks the church's collection of alms for food for the poor as well as the church's effort to help indigenous people is more important in alleviating poverty and hunger.

Government and business can help by adding value to the farmers' output, he said. For example, farmers lose a lot of the harvest because of the lack of post-harvest facilities. If the government built more farm-to-market roads, farmers could cut their losses, he added.

Carlos said BBC-HD does what it can to help the farmers.

"Sometimes we put in drying facilities so they can convert fruit to candies or something saleable," Carlos said. "We can also bring in the technology on how to wrap them up in very attractive packages. Basically, industry would like to help, but we have to be able to get to the countryside to do what we are supposed to do."

BBC-HD would also like to help with reforestation, but Carlos said the government needs to give businesses rights to the public land so business can provide the technology, such as the ability to grow seedlings so they become commercially viable more quickly.

"Hopefully this government's attitude is to think of the improving the lives of poor people in their quest for 'inclusive development,'" Carlos said. "And that means [government officials] will not just make money for themselves, but also for the people."

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