

Blessed Is the Full Plate

A terrible shortage of food for the poor grips the country. Where is the political will to do the right thing for the hungry?

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One of the most majestic dining rooms in New York City is in the Church of the Holy Apostles. After the landmark building was nearly destroyed by fire in 1990, the Episcopal parish made the decision not to replace the pews so that the nave could become a place of various uses. There are traditional Sunday services, of course, and the gay and lesbian synagogue on Friday evenings. And every weekday more than a thousand people eat lunch at round tables beneath 12-foot stained-glass windows and a priceless Dutch pipe organ.

"You can't get more Biblical than feeding the hungry," says the Rev. William Greenlaw, the rector.

Holy Apostles has fed the hungry for 25 years now without missing a single weekday, including the morning after the fire, when the church lay in ruins, still smoldering, and 943 meals were served by candlelight. There's a queue on Ninth Avenue by midmorning; sometimes tourists think there's a wait for some exclusive New York happening until they notice the shabby clothes, piles of shopping bags and unshaven faces that are the small unmistakable markers of poverty.

The poor could be forgiven for feeling somewhat poorer nowadays. The share of the nation's income going to the top 1 percent of its citizens is at its highest level since 1928, just before the big boom went bust. But poverty is not a subject that's been discussed much by the current administration, who were wild to bring freedom to the Iraqis but not bread to the South Bronx. "Hunger is hard for us as a nation to admit," says Clyde Kuemmerle, who oversees the volunteers at Holy Apostles. "That makes it hard to talk about and impossible to run on."

At Holy Apostles the issue is measured in mouthfuls. Pasta, collard greens, bread, cling peaches. But in this anniversary year the storage shelves are less full, the pipeline less predictable. The worst emergency food shortage in years is plaguing charities from Maine to California, even while the number of those who need help grows. The director of City Harvest in New York, Jilly Stephens, has told her staff they have to find another million pounds of food over the next few months to make up the shortfall. "Half as many pantry bags" is the mantra heard now that the city receives half the amount of emergency food than it once did from the Feds. In Los Angeles 24 million pounds of food in 2002 became 15 million in 2006; in Oregon 13 million pounds dwindled to six. It's a cockamamie new math that denies the reality of hunger amid affluence.

There are many reasons why. An agriculture bill that would have increased aid and the food-stamp allotment has been knocking around Congress, where no one ever goes hungry. Donations from a federal program that buys excess crops from farmers and gives them to food banks has shrunk alarmingly. Even the environment and corporate efficiency have contributed to empty pantries: more farmers are producing corn for ethanol, and more companies have conquered quality control, cutting down on those irregular cans and battered boxes that once went to the needy.

What hasn't shrunk is the size of the human stomach. At lunchtime at Holy Apostles, Ernest is hungry, his hand bandaged because he got in a fight, even though he is sober now and has his own place in the Bronx. Janice is hungry, too, she of the beautiful manners and carefully knotted headscarf, who sleeps on the train on winter nights and walks with a cane since being hit by a car. There are the two veterans, both Marines, with the raddled faces and slightly unfocused eyes of those who sleep outdoors, which means mostly always being half-awake, and that group of Chinese women who don't speak English, and the Muslim couple who sit alone. Mostly it's single men at Holy Apostles. Some are mentally ill, and some are addicts, and to repair their lives would take a lot of help. But at the moment they have an immediate problem with an immediate answer: pasta, collard greens, bread, cling peaches.

This place is a blessing, and an outrage. "We call these people our guests," says the rector. "They are the children of God." That's real God talk. The political arena has been lousy with the talk-show variety in recent years: worrying about whether children could pray in school instead of whether they'd eaten before they got there, obsessing about the beginning of life instead of the end of poverty, concerned with private behavior instead of public generosity.

There's a miracle in which an enormous crowd comes to hear Jesus and he feeds them all by turning a bit of bread and fish into enough to serve the multitudes. The truth is that America is so rich that political leaders could actually produce some variant of that miracle if they had the will. And, I suppose, if they thought there were votes in it. Enough with the pious sanctimony about gay marriage and abortion. If elected officials want to bring God talk into public life, let it be the bedrock stuff, about charity and mercy and the least of our brethren. Instead of the performance art of the presidential debate, the candidates should come to Holy Apostles and do what good people, people of faith, do there every day—feed the hungry, comfort the weary, soothe the afflicted. And wipe down the tables after each seating. Here's a prayer for every politician: pasta, collard greens, bread, cling peaches. Amen.

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