

Commentary

THE CHALLENGE OF HUNGER. It is one of the tragic paradoxes of our time that, despite spectacular advances in technology, the gap between the standard of living of the west and that of the undeveloped countries grows wider every year. It has been estimated that before the war 38 per cent of the world's population did not have enough to eat; today nearly 60 per cent go hungry. The simple and sad fact is that hundreds of millions have barely enough food to ensure even the minimal standards for an adequate human existence.

A book by Père Noel Drogat¹ appears at an appropriate moment, both to inform Catholic opinion on the dimensions of this problem and to encourage support for the United Nations world campaign against hunger. Writing with the authority of an agricultural economist, he makes the facts speak for themselves. Most commentators have concentrated on the 'population explosion', on the alarming increase in mouths to feed which is unmatched by a comparable increase in food production. And the panic that such a prospect creates—with the probable doubling of the world's population by the end of the century—leads at once to proposals for the artificial control of the population. To do so can mean a retreat from the primary responsibility of sharing the world's resources and of intensifying production to meet the need.

That this can be done is the opinion of many of the experts of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. In this country, Colin Clark has repeatedly questioned the assumptions (too often far from disinterested) of publicists who see no way out of the dilemma but a massive programme of contraception, sterilization and even abortion. He has indeed estimated that the earth's true resources could support 'not only the whole human race as it is now, but for any conceivable expansion of our numbers which is likely to occur for a very long time'. It is of course quite another matter to put into effect the planning on a world scale that this would require. It is a bitter commentary on the times we live in that the senseless expenditure of countless millions on armaments would, if exchanged for the purposes of peace, go far to banish the fear of starvation from the world. In the meantime the F.A.O., surely one of the most valuable of the special organizations which keep alive something of the original ideals of the United Nations, with its limited

¹*The Challenge of Hunger*, by Noel Drogat; Burns and Oates; 18s.

resources is doing all it can to encourage the basic work of education and the improvement of agricultural methods in undeveloped countries.

An issue of this kind, on a scale that seems almost beyond the individual's capacity to imagine, much less to affect, is supremely one that calls for the Church's active support. In his encyclical of last year, *Mater et Magistra*, the Pope repeatedly emphasized the need for world-wide co-operation, for 'no single state has sufficient resources at its command to solve the more important scientific, technical, economic, social, political and cultural problems which confront it at the present time. These problems are necessarily the concern of a whole group of nations, and possibly of the whole world'. And, speaking of the particular problem of the population increase and economic development, the Pope, while insisting on the need for urgent steps to be taken on an international scale, gave the necessary warning that 'no statement of the problem and no solution to it is acceptable which does violence to man's essential dignity and which is based on an utterly materialistic conception of man himself and his life'.

The Church's support for international action contains the essential proviso that an alleged economic necessity—in any case far from proved—cannot excuse an assault on man's true nature. There is much evidence that western 'progressive' solutions are bitterly resented in Asia, for instance, where 'crash programmes' to solve the population crisis can seem less humanitarian than patronizing, the continuing evidence of western moral superiority. In proclaiming her unchanging moral law the Church does no more than vindicate the truth about man and his nature, and that cannot change. But it is a truth that needs to be commended, with a sympathetic understanding of the real dilemmas that so many men of good will must feel when confronted with such problems as those that face many nations in Asia and Africa.

Within the context of the Church's ecumenical action, her share in international action to remedy social and economic wrongs has a special importance. To co-operate in such spheres is not a substitute for the even harder work of achieving unity of belief and the end of religious divisions. But in the meantime there is an immediate need to be met, and the resources of the charity that marks the Church of Christ can transform a situation which calls for compassion as well as for technical skill. Practical ways of co-operating in the present United Nations campaign are indicated in a useful *Sword of the Spirit* booklet, *Freedom from Hunger* (2s. 6d.), which contains a clear statement of the problem as it exists in Mexico, Africa and India.