

Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness

The Saints Peter and Paul Peace and Social Justice Committee invites you to explore the relationships between food and social justice

As often as they fail, and as clichéd as they have become, it is striking that New Year's resolutions never seem to go out of style, particularly those that go something like, "I'm going to eat less sugar," or "salt," or "frosting directly out of the can with my bare fingers" (not that anyone does that last one). If you have such a New Year's resolution, we wish you God's blessing for success, but we understand how terribly tempting certain foods can be. Lack of will power is often the reason we make unhealthy food choices, but millions of Americans are constrained to unhealthy food choices by factors beyond their control. These individuals may be able to obtain enough food to meet their daily caloric requirements, but due to one or more, often interrelated factors, such as location, financial constraints, disability, limited transportation, and/or limited information and exposure, they cannot choose and/or obtain the food that truly nourishes them. We have become very good at creating and promoting low-cost food products that contain a lot of empty calories and have extensive shelf-lives, but we have yet to figure out how to provide and promote healthy, nutritious food to all. As a result of this imbalance, the health—and thus the livelihood, quality, and length of life—of our most vulnerable neighbors is compromised.

In 2013, The Food Trust and PolicyLink reviewed and assessed over 300 studies related to healthy food access published between 1990 and 2013. From this mass of data, they came to three over-arching conclusions: 1) Accessing healthy food is challenging for many families, especially those living in low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, and rural areas; 2) Living closer to healthy food retail is associated with better eating habits and decreased risk for obesity and diet-related diseases; and 3) Healthy food retail stimulates economic activity.

More specifically, and quite close to home, The Mari Gallagher Research & Consulting Group (MG) has studied the relationships between health and food deserts in Chicago. A working group comprised of members from the United States Departments of Agriculture (USDA), Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Treasury has defined a food desert as "a low-income census tract where either a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store." The USDA estimates that 23.5 million people live in food deserts, 13.5 million of whom are low-income. Organizations vary in their definitions of a food desert and in the specific measures they use to identify one. Working with a highly nuanced and informed definition, and examining communities at the smallest possible levels (the census tract or city block) MG found that communities that are out of balance regarding healthy food options—i.e. communities with no or distant grocery stores but nearby fringe food (such as liquor stores, gas stations, convenience stores, and fast food restaurants) "will likely have increased premature death and chronic health conditions, holding other influences constant."

However, "other influences" like income, education and race are still important factors. In other communities, they may have a greater impact on healthy food access than location and built environment, and even in Chicago they matter. Indeed, MG also reported that "African Americans are the most disadvantaged when it comes to balanced food choices," that "Chicago's food deserts, for the most part, are exclusively African American," and that "mothers, children,

the disabled and the elderly are the most vulnerable residents of the food desert.” In October 2011, following MG’s 2006 study, the Illinois Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights presented the issue of food deserts in Chicago as “not simply a public health issue, but an urgent civil rights issue.” That same month, MG reported that in the five years since their initial study, the population of Chicago’s food deserts had been reduced by nearly 40% (from 632,974 to 383,954), but that the problem remained significant.

As the prevalence and consequences of diet-related diseases become more apparent, healthy food access (or lack thereof) is gaining more attention. Governmental and nongovernmental organizations, as well as concerned citizens are working together to achieve balanced access to a balance of options. In 2010, The Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) brought together the USDA, HHS, and the Treasury to make financial and technical assistance available to community-based institutions, empowering them to develop and deliver local solutions to local problems. This is blessedly in line with the Catholic social teaching on subsidiarity, which holds that those closest to a problem are the ones best equipped to solve that problem. Today, the HFFI has helped create and/or sustain and/or expand healthy food access projects all over the country, including in Illinois and the surrounding states. These projects employ a wide range of interventions, from retail development to nutrition education—it all depends on what those in the community have determined will be most effective. The benefits extend beyond improving diets to stimulating economies, creating jobs, and revitalizing communities. In addition, the USDA, Treasury, and HHS each have provided assistance to healthy food access projects outside of the HFFI.

Everyone has a role to play in ensuring just, equitable access to healthy food. Those of us who do not live or work in a community that lacks healthy food access will probably not be in a position to work directly on a community-based project, especially given the teaching on subsidiarity. However, we can do two very important things: The first involves a conversion of heart. We must root out any tendencies within ourselves, our families, and our communities to stigmatize those who suffer from conditions associated with lack of access to healthy food, especially diet-related diseases like obesity. Often, when we assign blame and shame, we do so unconsciously. We must therefore make a conscious effort to appreciate that there are cumulative differences in exposure, opportunity, and access that disadvantage some in ways that may not be easily understood by others.

The second flows naturally from the first, and calls us to bring about a conversion of public policy. We can help usher in God’s kingdom by being informed about and advocating for policies that promote healthy food access for all. The Peace and Social Justice Committee hopes to provide you with more information regarding the policies that govern our food system in future bulletin articles. In the meantime, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (povertyusa.org) is among the many organizations that devote portions of their websites to informing the public about these and other policies, and making it easier for us to communicate with our government leaders about them. There are also many other organizations working to promote healthy food access in a variety of ways that do not explicitly identify with the Church. While we are not in a position to favor any one of these with a specific mention, we encourage you to explore the internet with an informed conscience.

Heaven is often depicted as a wedding banquet, and food is essential to who we are as Catholics. It only makes sense that our theology would impel us to seek social justice through the things that nourish us. Healthy food access is simply one of the many, interrelated areas in which food intersects with social justice. Over the next several months, the Peace and Social Justice Committee looks forward to providing you with information about other food-related social justice issues, including ways you can get a foretaste of the heavenly kingdom by bringing the Gospel home for dinner and your faith out into the world. How about *that* for a New Year's resolution?