



## Capitol Comments: Gratitude and Hunger

By: Jennifer Allmon, Associate Director, Texas Catholic Conference

Every November families across America gather to give thanks around a meal. A meal whose humble origins began as a simple meal of gratitude has become a classic time of excess. At my house we generally end up with at least one whole dessert for each person in attendance. Sure, many people do pause for a moment to remember those who are hungry, and some even donate food or volunteer at large thanksgiving meals for the poor. But do our prayers and actions reflect a bigger picture and do they even continue beyond this week?

For many of us, hunger is what happens around noon as we await our lunch hour. But for one in five Texans, hunger is going without lunch completely, and perhaps all three meals on a given day. Texas leads the nation in the highest rate of child hunger. Food pantries throughout the state are seeing sharp increases in clients this year due to harsh economic conditions. Compounding the problem of rapidly emptying food pantry shelves, thousands of Texans qualified to receive food stamps are delayed or denied access due to application backlogs and high error rates. Children are denied access to food stamps because of a parent's past drug conviction--a denial due to a federal ban on drug felons accessing food stamps, which clashes with our Catholic teaching on mercy and rehabilitation, and reduces the human dignity of those who are banned from receiving aid. Children also combat hunger in schools, especially those who do not begin the day with the foundation of a healthy breakfast. Last legislative session, the legislature failed to pass a bill that would expand school breakfast to assure that children in low-income schools can start their school day with a balanced breakfast.

In the 2011 Texas legislative session, there will be multiple bills filed to reduce hunger in Texas. Among other efforts, the Texas Catholic Conference will support:

- Improvements to the Texas benefits eligibility system, including outreach and application assistance, to enroll every eligible child.
- Increasing the number of students who receive breakfast through a school breakfast program by including state subsidies for the USDA universal free school breakfast programs, in keeping with every student's innate human dignity and to maximize their ability to learn in school and maintain good health; and
- Legislation to allow Texas to opt out of the federal ban on food stamps for drug felons.

On the occasion of World Food Day, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, "To guarantee people and peoples the possibility of overcoming the scourge of hunger is to assure them concrete access to adequate, healthy food. Indeed, this is a practical expression of the right to life which, although it is solemnly proclaimed, all too often remains far from being implemented fully."

This year, as you prepare the thanksgiving feast, commit to doing something more. Simple acts of charity can mean a tremendous difference to individuals and families, but remember that you can also take actions to end the cycle of hunger for our brothers and sisters. Contact your local Catholic Charities or St. Vincent de Paul Society to get involved locally and watch the Texas Catholic Conference web site ([www.TXcatholic.org](http://www.TXcatholic.org)) for action alerts on food stamps and school breakfast and lunch issues.