



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 24th GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
OF THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS\***

*Friday, 13 November 1987*

*Mr Chairman,  
Mr Director-General,  
Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,*

1. It gives me great pleasure to have this opportunity of meeting you, representatives and experts of the States and Organizations associated in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. On this occasion I welcome you, participants in the Twenty-fourth General Assembly now taking place here in Rome. This Vatican encounter, many times renewed since the beginning of your Organization in 1945, has become almost a tradition of your Assemblies.

At this time I extend cordial best wishes to the Director-General, Mr Edouard Saouma, as he begins a new term of office. I assure you all of my esteem for the work being done by your Organization and I confirm the Holy See's special interest in matters related to hunger and malnutrition in the world, as indicated in the message I recently sent on the occasion of World Food Day.

2. The concerns which gave rise to FAO have not lost any of their urgency in the years since the establishment of the Organization. The member countries are pledged to raising the levels of nutrition and standards of living of their peoples, to improving the production and distribution of food and agricultural products, with particular attention to improving the conditions of rural populations. And FAO's special goal is world food security, according to which all peoples would, at all times, have physical and economic access to the food they need.

Simply to mention these aims is to recognize the global nature of the tasks being undertaken. As in other fields of human activity, the production of food, its availability and distribution, are matters which today extend beyond the frontiers of single nations and even of the continents themselves. As a result, the framework of your efforts must be one of international understanding, collaboration and good will. Unless States are willing to assume an attitude of openness and solidarity in the one human family, your efforts will meet with serious obstacles and delays.

The original ideal and inspiration that led to FAO's establishment need constantly to be upheld and strengthened. It is from the moral conviction of the goodness of the original intention that you draw the strength needed to face the technical and human tasks in hand. By sharing ever more fully in that conviction the member States will find the encouragement to work together in the great cause of banishing from the face of the earth the age-old plague of hunger.

The extent and variety of FAO's worldwide activities and technical assistance projects in so many developing countries speak clearly of the world's need for your Organization. It is to be hoped therefore that your continuing dedication and wise management will consolidate the member States regarding the goals to be achieved. The capacity of any International Organization to act effectively depends greatly on the strength of consensus and unity of purpose of its members.

3. In considering the present state of the food situation in the world, one is impressed by the contrast between the existence in some areas of large surpluses, especially of cereals, and the present state of crisis in other areas because people lack sufficient food, to the point that there exists a real danger of death through starvation. In responding to this tragic situation there is an urgent and inescapable need for international solidarity. There exists a duty, now and in the future, to make resources available to those whose lives and welfare are most threatened. This is particularly true in so far as world food production exceeds the needs of the present world population. In fact it is objectively foreseeable that in the future sufficient food can be produced even for an increased world population. scientific and technological progress in the cultivation and use of the earth's resources, resulting in new and better products, can guarantee that abundance.

While such a view is valid when considering food production as a whole, there remain immediate and acute shortages in certain countries and regions in relation to their present levels of population, shortages sometimes aggravated by social and political factors. These affected areas stand in need of expert assistance in order to develop their own resources for the benefit of their populations. But their immediate welfare depends also on the implementation of a better system of distribution, with provision for the use of food surpluses to meet the urgent needs of the victims of drought and famine. Ways need to be further developed to balance the rightful demand of the producers for a just price for their goods, and the real ability of the poorer nations to pay for urgently needed goods.

This is a complex problem which requires a re-thinking of priorities by both the developed and the

developing countries. The whole international community is called to address the question of imbalances in international trade. Above all, a new mentality is required, directed at achieving a genuine form of justice in international relations, in which the interests of the less powerful will be proportionately better defended and the excessive protection of particular interests will be replaced by a sincere pursuit of the true common good of the human family as a whole.

4. It is now more obvious than ever that problems in the area of food and agriculture have to be approached in the context of the world's overall economic situation. Concrete policies are greatly affected by the strengths and weaknesses, the oscillations and crises of the world's economy. Only in this context is it possible to formulate and implement viable economic, monetary, social and political processes of growth in individual countries and internationally.

A particularly impressive instance of this fact are the difficulties experienced by countries burdened with huge external debts. Even when other conditions are favourable to real growth, these countries see their progress halted by the immensity of their indebtedness, with the consequent drain of resources because of debt servicing.

The seriousness of the challenge which the phenomenon of international indebtedness presents to the world community recently induced the Holy See to publish a document drafted by the Pontifical Commission "Iustitia et Pax" concerning ethical aspects of the international debt question. The Church is convinced that economic relations cannot be divorced from moral and ethical concerns, for the human person is the very heart of every human activity and endeavour. In fact, as that Document's Presentation points out, "economic structures and financial mechanisms are at the service of the human person and not vice versa". It expresses the hope that "relationships of exchange and the mechanism of finance which go with them can be reformed before short-sightedness and egoisms - be they private or collective-degenerate into irremediable conflicts" (*At the Service of the Human Community: An Ethical Approach to the International Debt Question*, Presentation). The Holy See is indeed hopeful that as a result of a growing sense of responsibility and solidarity among the nations of the world greater efforts will be made to establish international relations and international assistance on principles of genuine justice and mutual respect.

5. Another serious question affecting food and agriculture which must be faced from a global perspective is the urgent matter of the protection of the environment. In this respect I had occasion a few days ago to address a meeting organized by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on the theme *A Modern Approach to the Protection of the Environment*. Of particular concern is the increase of deforestation and desertification. "In developing countries—which are generally characterized by a hostile climate and adverse weather conditions—there is the acute problem of the destruction of the forests in the wet tropics and of desertification in the dry topics, problems that threaten the feeding of the population. The findings of science must be put to use in order to ensure a high productivity of land in such a way that the local population can secure food and sustenance without destroying nature" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Allocutio ad Pontificiam Academiam*

*Scientiarum*, 2, die 6 nov. 1987: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, X/3 [1987] 1019).

However, the environment is in danger not only in the developing countries. "In the industrialized countries there is the worrying problem of waste products in gaseous, liquid, solid or radioactive form. Imprudent practices have caused very serious damage to nature. Uncontrolled discharges have resulted in acid rain, trace substances in the environment and the contamination of the seas" (*Ibid.*).

If such serious problems are to be resolved a comprehensive and worldwide effort is needed on the part of governments and industry, as well as educational and cultural forces, assisted and encouraged by international organizations, including FAO.

Likewise, advances in genetic engineering, which in some cases give rise to legitimate concerns when applied to human genetics, nevertheless offer the hope of great benefits to developing countries when applied to plant and animal genetics. Real and beneficial progress in these fields will only be effective if there is a greater sense of worldwide interdependence and solidarity.

The Holy See expresses its support of FAO in its endeavours to offer guidelines for the effective application of plant genetics, especially as regards sharing the results of scientific research in a free and open manner, and particularly for the benefit of areas most in need of such scientific and technical assistance.

6. After more than four decades of the existence of the United Nations and the intergovernmental agencies associated with it, it is desired that the spirit of hope and solidarity which inspired the founding members will be renewed and increased, thus making the international community ever more capable of reaching the goals of peace, freedom and social progress which alone offer humanity the prospect of a better future.

In this respect FAO plays an important role, and its specific contribution to the well-being of the world's peoples calls for responsible collaboration on the part of all the States which have given their support to its statutory goals. Of particular value is the factual and up-to-date documentation which you offer concerning the state of agriculture and food production in individual countries and in the world. Your Organization's assistance in devising programmes and projects on behalf of Governments and other International Organizations is needed and appreciated; so too are your efforts to find adequate financing for projects in developing countries, not only on a bilateral basis but increasingly on a wider, multilateral basis.

The growing expansion and effectiveness of the technical cooperation undertaken by FAO are a boon for many countries, especially in so far as they strengthen the capacity of Governments to analyze local situations and to formulate and embark on appropriate programmes and projects of agricultural development. One particular aspect of FAO's activity which deserves special praise is

its timely response to the grave food situation affecting the African continent.

7. In expressing the Holy See's appreciation of the positive results achieved so far, I wish to assure you, distinguished representatives and experts, of the Church's continuing interest in your Organization's goals and activities. She is concerned above all with the integral well-being of the human persons who are, in the last analysis, the beneficiaries of your service and expertise. I earnestly implore for you Almighty God's gifts of wisdom, strength and compassion in the fulfilment of the lofty tasks which are yours in the service of humanity. May the whole international community become ever more sensitive to the needs of the world's poor and hungry, and may it realize that concerted action on the part of all must not be delayed any longer.

God bless you abundantly.

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\*AAS 80 (1988), p. 651-656.

*Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. X, 3 p. 1096-1102.

*L'Osservatore Romano* 14.11.1987 p.4.

*L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English* n. 47 p. 9, 10.

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