



# The Holy See

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*ADDRESS OF CARDINAL SODANO  
ON BEHALF OF POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO FAO\**

*Saturday, 8 November 1997*

*Mr President,  
Mr Director General,  
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

In the first place I wish to thank you, Mr President, for allowing me to speak to this worthy assembly, which brings together representatives of all the world's countries and is therefore a sign of the real universal character of FAO and of practical adherence to the ideals which from the beginning have sustained it.

To you, Mr Director General, go my heartfelt thanks for the welcome given me, but above all for having permitted this meeting at the moment of the solemn opening of the 29th Conference of FAO.

The words you have just spoken to illustrate to the conference the lines of action of the Organization for the next two years are a guarantee of continuity in its meritorious work and a powerful call to the tasks and responsibilities of each member.

1. My presence here is part of the consistent tradition which, since 1951, the year of FAO's arrival in Rome, has seen a meeting with the Successor of Peter during each conference.

Circumstances this year do not permit the Pope to repeat that personal meeting in order to support your efforts through his word and encouragement. His Holiness has therefore charged me with bringing you his greetings and expressing his esteem.

In His Holiness' name I would therefore offer some points of reflection, in the light of the Church's teachings.

2. There can be no doubt that through the creation of FAO the international community is giving expression to the duty to act in order to achieve the important goal of freeing human beings from malnutrition and the threat of suffering from hunger.

At the same time the action undertaken by the Organization, including recently, has marked a significant evolution, and not only conceptual, in the whole *culture of international relations*. This culture has been too often neglected, leaving room for a pragmatism which lacks a solid ethical and moral foundation.

In the conclusions of the World Food Conference, in fact, it was emphasized that hunger and malnutrition are not phenomena that are natural or even an endemic evil in certain parts of the world. The truth is that they are the result of a more complex situation of underdevelopment, poverty, degradation. Hunger is an aspect of a certain structural condition — economic, social and cultural — strongly opposed to the full realization of human dignity.

As a matter of fact, this is the perspective which is summarized in the Preamble of *FAO's Constitution*, which proclaims each country's commitment to raise its own nutritional level, to better the conditions of agricultural work and of rural populations, so as to increase food production and set in motion an efficacious distribution of food in every part of the globe.

3. *The right to nutrition* rightly figures among the first and fundamental rights of the person, not only as an integral part of the right to life of each individual, but, I would dare to say, as an essential condition of that right to life.

How can we forget this fact at the moment when the international community is preparing to give due attention to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 50 years after its proclamation? Likewise, the commitments subscribed to at the conclusion of the recent Food Summit have appropriately identified the community dimension of that fundamental right in the right to food security on the part of peoples, groups and States.

Hence FAO's objective remains a primary one and has become all the more necessary to attain in our day. It is tangibly clear that underdevelopment, poverty and hunger, which undermine the normal co-existence of peoples and nations, can become causes of tension and hence threaten international peace and security.

We see sad situations in which people are dying of hunger because peace has been forgotten and security is not guaranteed, or in which people fight one another in order to satisfy their hunger to the point of forgetting their own humanity.

The daily bread of every person on earth, that *Fiat panis* which FAO chose as its motto, is an instrument of peace and a guarantee of security. This is the objective to be attained, and the task

of working out the paths to be taken has been entrusted to the work of this conference.

4. I believe it necessary to direct attention to a significant element which emerges from the documentation prepared for your discussion: the world situation must be changed if we wish to guarantee a balanced agricultural activity and hence an effective struggle against hunger. The present socio-economic situation makes us all aware of how much the hunger and malnutrition of millions of human beings is the result of unjust mechanisms of economic organization, of unequal criteria regarding the distribution of resources, of policies exclusively designed to safeguard specific interests, or of various forms of protectionism involving particular areas.

This reality, when analyzed in terms of moral categories, can be related to certain views, such as utilitarianism and, even more radically, selfishness, and consequently to the negation in practice of the principle of solidarity.

Solidarity is in fact a choice of life, made in the full freedom of those who give and of those who receive. This freedom however must be authentic, and therefore capable of spontaneous exercise because it is able to grasp needs, express necessities and point out practical ways of becoming involved.

To bring about solidarity in international relations in a concrete way requires the overcoming of the narrow limits dictated by an uneven affirmation of the principle of reciprocity, an affirmation which seeks at all costs to consider on the same level countries which are in fact unequal because of their different levels of human, social and economic development.

5. It is necessary to understand the causes of such a complex situation, in order to modify the attitude of each one of us, especially our interior attitude. If we desire the world to be free of hunger and malnutrition, we must ask ourselves about our deepest convictions, about what inspires our action, about how our talent is used for the benefit of the present and future of the human family.

There are many paradoxes underlying the causes of hunger, starting with that of "abundance" (cf. John Paul II, *Address to the International Conference on Nutrition*, 5 December 1992). I believe I am expressing the feelings also of those who acquaint themselves with your documentation, particularly with the finding, which continues to amaze us, that at present *the planet with its resources is capable of feeding all the earth's inhabitants*. Despite oscillating levels of production and the consequent parameters of food security in certain regions, at the global level enough food is produced. Why then, in the context of such potential availability, are there so many who suffer hunger?

The causes which you well know, although diversified, are rooted in a culture lacking ethical motivation and a moral foundation. This culture is then reflected in the way international relations are pursued and in the values which guide them.

In his recent *Message for World Food Day*, on 16 October last, Pope John Paul II highlighted the priority of establishing relations among peoples on the basis of a continuous "exchange of gifts".

Underlying this approach is the view that the human person is the foundation and end of all activity, that giving is supreme over having, involving a readiness to help and to practise policies of assistance, and a closeness to the situation of every "neighbour": persons, communities, nations. These are the different elements which alone can inspire a true and effective "culture of giving" which will make every country ready to share the needs of others (cf. John Paul II, [\*Address on the 50th Anniversary of FAO\*](#), 23 October 1995).

6. For an effective campaign against hunger, then, it is not enough to aim at a correct evaluation of market forces or to attain higher and more functional levels of production. Certainly, an adequate place needs to be given to agricultural work through an ever better use of the human resources which play a fundamental role in this activity, but it is necessary to recover the true *value of the human person* and the person's central role as the foundation and primary objective of every action undertaken.

A concrete example in this regard is to be found in the agenda of this conference, with its attention to the environmental question, understood as the safeguarding of the "*human environment*". FAO is thereby committed to containing the damage done to the agricultural ecosystem, preserving it from phenomena such as desertification and erosion, and from careless human activity. This also involves a more rational and reduced use of strongly toxic substances through specific "Codes of Conduct"; these latter appear to be an effective instrument received in the policies of the member States.

Tomorrow's challenge in this sensitive sphere lies above all in the commitments assumed on the international level for the defence of the natural environment. These bring out FAO's central role in the implementation of the many programmes of Rio de Janeiro's "Action 21" and in the preservation of the different biological species.

This last area requires further efforts in order to assume a needed ethical and conceptual approach which would see as a question of international justice the universal availability of the natural genetic pool.

Access to biological resources is a property of the whole of humanity, inasmuch as those resources form part of the latter's common patrimony, as FAO emphasized in 1982 when it adopted the specific "International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources".

Bringing about effective justice in relations between peoples involves an awareness of the universal destination of goods and an awareness that the criterion towards which economic and international life must be guided remains the sharing of those same goods.

7. The Catholic Church is close to you in your efforts. This is also testified by the attention and involvement with which the Holy See, for its part, has been following the activity of FAO since 1947 — 50 years now — when FAO was the first of the intergovernmental organizations of the United Nations System with which the Holy See established formal relations.

In the pursuit of her specific mission of bringing the Good News to all peoples, the Church does not fail to recall Christ's injunction that we should ask our heavenly Father for our "daily bread". Consequently she is close to the situation of the least ones, the forgotten ones; so too she is familiar with the lives of those who till the land with toil and trepidation, and she is ready to support the initiatives of those who work to ensure that all people receive their daily bread. For they are co-operating in a work which, in the Christian message and understanding, is the first of the works of mercy. Indeed, the measure of human activity remains a ready response to the words "I was hungry" (Mt 25:42).

This is the impulse which seems to accompany all FAO's activity, marked by a properly realistic and at the same time a serenely optimistic outreach. As your presence and your commitment testify, FAO does not appear to be discouraged in the face of the numerous obstacles along its path, nor does it halt before objective difficulties, but prefers instead to confront them directly.

The Church, in fidelity to her message, cannot fail to praise this positive spirit marked by disinterested service and well-founded audacity, a spirit buoyed up by confidence in the possibility that one of the great problems of the human family is capable of being resolved.

May almighty God, who is rich in mercy, bestow his gracious blessing on you and your labours. This is the message which I have been charged to bring to you from His Holiness Pope John Paul II

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