



# The Holy See

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*Giovedì, 10 novembre 1955*

Address of His Holiness to the 8th Session of the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization.

The Eighth session of the Conference of the FAO in which you, gentlemen, are taking part carries this year a very special meaning, since this organization celebrates at the same time the tenth anniversary of its founding. It was in effect on the 16th of October 1945, that the representatives of twenty States were invited to sign the Constitutive Act of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. At the end of the first session of the Conference, forty-two countries had given their official adherence to the new institution. Since then the number has steadily grown and today it stands at seventy-one. In wishing you welcome, we are particularly happy to congratulate you on the progress made during these ten years.

The objectives which you were proposing for yourselves were and remain primordial: to raise the level of nutrition and the conditions of life of the populations; to increase the yields of production; to facilitate the distribution of food and agricultural products; and to contribute to the expansion of the world economy. The Holy See could not be uninterested in an enterprise so necessary and so beneficial; since 1948 its observer has been at the regional meetings in Rome, and in the following year at a session of the Council; in 1950 the Washington Conference admitted the Holy See as a permanent observer, a status of which, up to now, it is the sole beneficiary.

You know, gentlemen, with what interest we have followed the various phases of your activity since the day when the FAO was founded. It was, at that time, a case of looking squarely at this terrible fact: more than half of the world's population was undernourished; to satisfy the needs of humanity, it was necessary to double food production. FAO went to work energetically: it set up

the International Food Crisis Committee, undertook a world agriculture census, and proposed the creation of a World Food Council; it took charge of the work started in vine war-devastated countries to restore their agriculture. Mentioning only some of the most characteristic results, let us recall that in 1947 the «European Forest Commission» was set up; in 1948 there took place the first regional conference on the problems of nutrition; also starting in 1949 a mixed Committee of experts in these matters has met annually at various points of the globe. Since the increase of productivity and the raising of the standard of living of rural populations are tied to the social conditions in which farmers work, the FAO has been working since 1951 on the problems of reforming agrarian structures and on questions related to farm credit; at the same time, numerous meetings on diverse continents are supporting the agricultural co-operative movement.

Without any doubt boldness was needed to envisage so varied a campaign which extends to such great areas. But these efforts have not been in vain. The report which you published on the situation of agriculture in 1955 notes that world agricultural production reached in 1954 an increase of 25% compared with that of 1946. During this decade the under-developed countries have rapidly improved their land and water resources; thanks to technical assistance they have applied to their animal and plant production new methods tested and developed in more advanced regions. But alongside the positive results it is necessary to note the current shortcomings and the unrests in order to attract the attention of all those responsible and to focus their efforts. You have pointed out among other things the rigidity of productive structures and the difficulty they have in responding adequately to the demand; the stagnation of world commerce in agricultural products, and the inadequate level of farm income compared with other activities. In vast areas of the world we have not succeeded in furnishing to the people the means of acquiring all the nourishment they need. This fact remains, it must be said, the primary motive which stimulates you to pursue your efforts.

Among the particular studies to which your specialists have given themselves, we should like to point out some particularly indicative ones and first of all, those which concern the very basis of all agriculture, the soil. In the past the utilization, conservation, and improvement of the soil were left to the practical good sense of the farmers; an experience acquired at the price of prolonged labor and not without disappointments showed them how to proceed without ruining the earth from which they drew their living. It is known that if some spared no pains to safeguard this resource, others, pushed by the lure of a quick gain or victims of their own incompetence, caused damage to the soil that quickly became irreparable. In order to understand the consequences of these errors and to prevent their recurrence; and in order also to use to the maximum all the possibilities of these terrains, it was necessary to acquire a rational knowledge of the different soils, of their structure, of their properties, and to set up a map of their geographic distribution. It thus became possible to determine exactly what sorts of planting are best suited for a particular region, what modifications the area should eventually undergo by drainage or by the addition of fertilizers. In particular, it was impossible to neglect the fight against the erosion caused by natural elements but in many cases accelerated by the intervention of persons who, so as to make sloping fields arable,

despoiled them of all protective vegetation. It has been found in the United States that the loss of phosphates through erosion was greater than that from harvesting. The publications devoted to this question, such as, for example, that which concerns the map of erosion in Latin America, will contribute much to prevent further damage.

But soil conservation does not depend solely on erosion control. It is preferable today to see the subject in a larger frame, taking into account modern systems for improving fertility, and economic and social factors capable of raising the well-being of rural populations, of aiding the colonization of waste ground, of slowing the exodus from the countryside and the depopulation of mountain regions in favor of the towns. The impoverishment of the earth can be the result of inadequate land laws, of excessive concentration or subdivision of property, of inadequate value for farm products; hard living conditions discourage the growers and push them to seek to earn their living otherwise. You have not overlooked this aspect, since as we just pointed out you have envisaged a campaign in the field of agrarian reform, as also in the domain of credit and of farm co-operatives.

Because of the essential part the forests play in the circulation of surface and subterranean water, they men serious attention; they slow the run-off of water, they assist its penetration in depth and the feeding of springs; they retain the snows, and even if they can not prevent exceptional flooding they regulate river levels. The public authorities, concerned with the development of agriculture, thus have an interest in exercising their vigilance over the manner in which forests are exploited.

Let us mention again, among many others, the research done on the possibility of using marine algae for human nourishment; until now, however, the exploitation of these resources appears still difficult. These brief reflections make rather clear that the initial program prepared by the Conference at Hot Springs and formulated in the Constitutive Act, is well on its way to execution. Where once the problem of hunger seemed insoluble, it is today possible to confront it squarely, and to count, for its resolution, on the collaboration of governments. The monographs on soil studies have drawn attention to the physical unity of diverse regions, which brings together in solidarity the plains and the mountains. The one who would safeguard the fertility of his fields should carefully note what is going on well beyond their limits. This truth, it seems to Us, has symbolic value; the peoples favored by nature or by the progress of civilization risk hard awakenings if they do not take pains at once to assure to the less fortunate the means of living humanly, with dignity, and the means for them, too, to develop themselves. To arouse further in a large number of individuals and of nations this feeling of collective responsibility, and above all to provoke thereby enlightened and generous intervention, that is a high and noble task; in these times of suspicion, of division, of revolt, the moral force of such a result surpasses by far its material consequences.

We are pleased above all to recognize, in this worldwide campaign aimed at reaching not a privileged few but the immense mass, often powerless and without defense, an authentic aspect of

the charity which Christ illustrated by His life and by His death, and which He wished to make into the distinctive mark of His disciples; this charity – universal, disinterested, demanding to the point of sacrifice – can take root only in the love which God Himself brings to mankind. Such charity makes that love visible and is the most solid proof of it.

This is why we do not doubt that the Divine Master blesses all that you do for those who belong to Him; it is to Himself that these benefits are addressed; He will know how to recompense them, as He solemnly promised and as we ardently pray Him to do. May the favors of Heaven descend on you and on your work, on your families and on those who are dear to you. We give you, as a token, our Apostolic Blessing.

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*\*Paths to Peace p.297-299.*