



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING
OF THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC RURAL ASSOCIATION (ICRA)**

*Consistory Hall
Saturday, 10 December 2016*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to greet you at the conclusion of your meeting on the problems of rural life and in particular on the issues facing all those who daily work in the agricultural sector. That work is at times fatiguing, yet it is carried out in the awareness of providing a service to others. In your efforts to work the land and to ensure its fruitfulness year in and year out, you also encounter difficulties resulting from climate change, a reality which is unfortunately aggravated by human neglect.

Your concern for rural life, grounded in the vision of the Church's social doctrine, is an eloquent expression of that imperative to "till and keep the garden of the world" (*Laudato Si'*, 67) to which we have been called, if we wish to carry on God's creative activity and to protect our common home.

Paradoxically, agriculture is no longer considered a primary sector of the economy, yet it clearly continues to be important for policies of development and for addressing disparities in food security and issues in the life of rural communities. In some places, agricultural development remains the best response possible to poverty and food shortages. But this means remedying the lack of organized agencies, the unjust acquisition of lands whose productivity is taken out of the hands of its rightful beneficiaries, unjust methods of speculation, and the lack of specific national and international policies.

Looking at rural life today, we see the primacy of the market, which determines actions and

decisions. Making money, above all else! Even at the expense of sacrificing the rhythms of agricultural life, with its times of work and leisure, its weekly rest and its concern for the family. Those who live close to the land are led to conclude that development is not equal for everyone, that the life of farming communities is of lesser value. Solidarity itself, frequently invoked as a remedy, is insufficient unless it is accompanied by justice in the allotment of land, in agricultural salaries and in access to markets. For small farmers, a share in decision-making remains a distant prospect, due to the absence of local institutions and the lack of clear rules that recognize as values honesty, fairness and, above all, trustworthiness.

What can be done? The history of ICRA shows that it is possible to combine being Christians with acting as Christians in the concrete circumstances of agricultural life, where the importance of the human person, the family and community, and a sense of solidarity represent essential values, even in situations of significant underdevelopment and poverty. Your worldwide structure and your relationship with the great international organizations are the way that an NGO of Christian inspiration like your own can react to challenges and respond to needs. But this calls for an extra dose of humanity, seen above all in courageous and technically competent decisions, so as to cooperate with the state and international institutions in making technology available and in offering solution to problems, always from a humane perspective. Your role is thus one of proposing ideas that can help rural communities not to remain at the margin of political decisions, regulations or action plans in the different sectors of social and economic life.

In your training projects, you are rightly critical of models of agribusiness. Your own emphasis is on real needs, linked to individual and local situations. This enables you to avoid not only losses and waste in production, but also a rash recourse to technology that, for the sake of an abundant harvest, can eliminate the variety of species and the richness of biodiversity. We do not know its effects on human health; when we encounter so many “rare diseases” and don’t know where they come from, we have to wonder... May we never find ourselves “silent witnesses to terrible injustices”, as can happen when “we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration” (*Laudato Si'*, 36).

In contributing to the work of international institutions, your role as an NGO solidly rooted in the Church’s social doctrine is primarily one of building bridges, grounded in a deep awareness of your own roots and committed not simply to participating in processes but to working to change strategies and projects. This calls for competence and not improvisation, even one that expresses goodwill or a lofty sense of altruism. As members of ICRA, you are called to propose a sober lifestyle and a culture of agricultural work that has its foundations as well as its goals in the centrality of the person, in openness to others and in gratuitousness.

Let me add a personal story. A month ago, I was talking with a country farmer. He told me how he pruned his olive trees. An ordinary farmer with olive trees, but when he talked about how he

pruned them, it was clearly with great love; he had that relationship with nature. He pruned those trees as if he was their father, with love. May we never lose this relationship with nature, with creation. It assures dignity to us all.

I give my blessing to your efforts, and I join you in asking the Lord to watch over farm workers, rural families and all those engaged in the agricultural sector. And I ask you, please, to remember me in your prayers; I need it.