



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 21st SESSION
OF THE FAO CONFERENCE****

Friday, 13 November 1981

*Mr. Chairman,
Mr. Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization,
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,*

1. In keeping with a happy tradition established in previous years, I am pleased today to extend a warm welcome to all of you who make up the XXI Session of the FAO Conference. The importance of your Organization is self-evident, since its objective is to promote agricultural development and the provision of sufficient food for every human being. In this respect, the world situation today is far from satisfactory even though there are factors of hope. Famine and malnutrition are still all too real for millions of people.

The fight against hunger and malnutrition can and must be continued through the tenacious and harmonious efforts of all: of individuals, groups and volunteer associations, of private and public institutions, of governments and international organizations, especially those that carry out programmes and activities which are multilateral or even totally altruistic, for the sake of those countries which are the weakest and most in need of help.

As the absolute priority, the strenuous efforts of all should be directed to the elimination of "absolute poverty", that poverty which afflicts the populations of many developing countries.

Absolute poverty is a condition in which life is so limited by lack of food, malnutrition, illiteracy, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be beneath any rational definition of human decency. The persistence of such degrading poverty, and especially the lack of the absolutely basic minimum of food, is a scandal of the modern world, in which one finds enormous contrasts of

income and standards of living between rich countries and countries that are materially poor.

The conditions of under-development and real dependence which characterize developing countries cannot be attributed solely to a lack of will and commitment on the part of the populations concerned, nor to corruption and undue enrichment on the part of a few people within communities which have recently attained independence. For these conditions are also maintained and fostered by rigid and backward economic and social structures, both national and international, structures which cannot be changed suddenly, but which need to be changed through a long and gradual process, the fruit of a sustained and united effort following the criteria of justice in the relationships between the peoples of the entire world.

2. It should never be forgotten that the true purpose of every economic, social and political system and of every model of development is the integral advancement of the human person.

Development is clearly something much more fundamental than merely economic progress measured in terms of the gross national product. True development takes as its criterion the human person with all the needs, just expectations and fundamental rights that are his or hers.

This is the central idea that I presented in my recently published Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. Its purpose is to highlight “the man who works” and who thus contributes to the economic development and the civil progress of his own country and of the whole world. Human work constitutes in fact the “essential key” of the whole social question. It is a fundamental criterion for a critical evaluation of the choices of internal and international politics which you are called upon to carry out at this General Conference of FAO. It is a criterion for the reform of economic relationships and systems at the worldwide level, always from the point of view of the good of man[1].

3. The present XXI Session of the Conference of FAO, among other agenda items, is examining and striving to put into effect the concluding resolutions of the World Conference on Land Reform and Rural Development. I have already had the opportunity of expressing my thoughts in this regard during a meeting held on that occasion[2].

At this moment I wish only to confirm, with the words of *Laborem Exercens*, that “In many situations radical and urgent changes are... needed in order to restore to agriculture – and to rural people – their just value as the basis for a healthy economy, within the social community’s development as a whole”[3].

Therefore I appreciate in a particular way the call which your Assembly intends to make for the recognition of the primacy of agricultural development and food production on a national, regional and worldwide level. This is particularly important at the present time, when we are seeking to devise a strategy for worldwide development in the Eighties.

Furthermore, great importance must be attached to present political planning for worldwide development, whereby it is desired to encourage developing countries to become self-reliant, and to define and put into effect their own national strategy for development, with a model adapted to actual conditions, capacities and the unique culture of each country. But this should not provide a convenient excuse for more prosperous countries to evade their responsibilities, as though they could leave the burden of development to the needy countries alone: on the contrary, these latter must be guaranteed adequate external support, of a kind which respects their dignity and autonomy of initiative.

4. There can be no doubt that the developing countries stand in need of technical and financial assistance in order to become self-sufficient in agricultural production and so be able to feed their own people.

A few developing countries are beginning to reach a level of self-sufficiency, at least in some basic products, often thanks to their own efforts aided by more prosperous countries. This is an encouraging sign; but there are many other countries with small resources and with serious food shortages, which need large-scale and urgent help in order to overcome their poverty.

The ever more obvious interdependence among the different countries of this world demands that differences of economic and political interests be overcome and that greater expression be given to the solidarity which binds all peoples in the one family.

But the demands of justice in world solidarity cannot be satisfied merely by the distribution of "surpluses", even if these are adequate and timely. For the demands of solidarity call for an ever greater and more effective willingness to place at the disposal of all people, especially those most in need of help for their development, "the various riches of nature: those beneath the ground, those in the sea, on land or in space"^[4]. The primary destination of the resources of the earth to the common good demands that the necessities of life be provided for all human beings before individuals or groups appropriate for themselves the riches of nature or the products of human skill.

Hence the need to bring about effective cooperation between highly advanced countries and countries that need their limited capacities and resources to be supplemented from outside.

Therefore forms of help must be sought which avoid a continuous recourse to investments obtained through burdensome loans from private sources, or from sources not as sufficiently disinterested as the multilateral methods of the Intergovernmental Organizations.

5. I wish above all to make the most earnest appeal possible to people's moral conscience for the concrete affirmation of the objective criteria of justice which must govern relationships between the subjects of the civil community, whether they be individuals, or groups and enterprises, or

sovereign countries. In this sense recognition must be given to the obligations which bind, in the first place from the ethical point of view, the more advanced countries such as those of the so-called “North” to the developing countries of the so-called “South”. Justice demands that each nation should assume its part of responsibility for the development of the needy nations in true international solidarity, aware that all peoples have equal dignity, and that, together, all the nations constitute a worldwide community. Hard decisions must be taken, with regard to the share that the economically rich nations will have to the structures that must jointly be set up in order to create new and just relationships in all areas of development. All nations have a claim on the solidarity of all others, but the nations that see the very existence and dignity of their people threatened have a priority claim. Responding to this claim is not a luxury. It is a duty.

In offering these thoughts to your reflection, I wish to assure you once again of my esteem for your persons and of my total support for your work. As one whose entire ministry is to represent Christ on earth – the historical compassionate Christ who was solicitous for the needy and who fed the hungry – I cannot but testify to my profound admiration for the contribution that you are making, through concerted efforts, to the cause of humanity. May Almighty God sustain you in your mission.

With reference to the agenda item dealing with energy in agriculture and for rural development, I have pleasure in offering to the Chairman of this Conference and to the Director General of FAO a copy of the preceding of the Study Conference convened by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in November 1980 on “Mankind and Energy”.

[1] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Laborem Exercens*, 3.

[2] Eiusdem *Allocutio, die 14 iul. 1979: Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2 (1979) 50 ss.

[3] Eiusdem *Laborem Exercens*, 21.

[4] *Ibid.*, 12.

*AAS 74 (1982), p. 35-39.

Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, vol. IV, 2 p. 622-627.

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