



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
FOR REPRESENTATIVES OF TRADE UNIONS**

*Hall of Popes  
Monday, December 2, 1996*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I extend to you a heartfelt welcome and thank you for having accepted the invitation of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace to take part in this meeting which is reflecting on the reality of the economy and *the role of labour associations and unions in the defence and promotion of the dignity of workers*. I am grateful to Cardinal Roger Etchegaray and his staff for the generous willingness with which they follow the complex social and economic questions of our day. This meeting with you, distinguished union representatives from many parts of the world, gives me the opportunity to encourage you in your commitment, with the conviction that "work is a fundamental dimension of man's existence on earth" (John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 4).

2. Today we are witnessing, with a mixture of hope and concern, *a widespread restructuring of the world economy*. This is taking place against the background of a profound transformation of productive systems, due to the introduction of new and sophisticated technologies on the one hand, and to the globalization of financial and commercial relations on the other. Technological innovations are leading to increased productivity, but this reorganization of the production process is having serious negative consequences for employment.

The demand for greater efficiency is inevitable and legitimate, on condition however that it is not motivated only by the quest for profit, but *respects work itself as a good to be promoted and shared*. The tragic and often unjust situation of those who do not find work, or have lost it, must be *a major concern when seeking greater efficiency in economic and productive systems*.

At the same time, how can we not recall the ways in which workers in some parts of the world are made the object of shameless exploitation, often as a result of ideas of the economy which disregard every moral value? How can we not condemn the unacceptable behaviour of those who, even in some regions with a solid industrial base, exploit the work of women, and especially of children?

3. In the dynamic and changing context of today's economy, the *right to work* has to be reaffirmed as a fundamental right, corresponding to people's fundamental responsibility to support themselves and their families. We are speaking not only of the right to subsistence, but of making it possible for workers to achieve fulfilment and to play an active part in the communities to which they belong (cf. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 9-10, 16-18).

Your organizations were established with the purpose of affirming the value of work and the dignity of the worker. Today, that same purpose calls you to undertake fresh initiatives in order to help build a society whose guiding light will be the integral good of all its members. The new questions being raised by the globalization of the economy and by the introduction of new technologies require a re-thinking of the union's role and a renewal of the way in which it represents the labour force in different situations. This renewal should not compromise the right which workers have to assemble freely in associations in order to protect their rights and those of others. From this point of view, labour unions will continue in the future to play an important role in representing the interests of workers.

4. The road to follow is undoubtedly the road of solidarity—a solidarity which goes counter to the dangerous trends towards social fragmentation. A shared commitment to the virtue of solidarity is the necessary pre-condition for determining policies which, in the final analysis, will point to a new kind of economy, one which never fails to recall that "*man's principle resource is man himself*" (John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 32). Unions ought to be effective instruments of such a solidarity, which can be achieved only by means of *dialogue*, *cooperation* and a correct and long-range *convergence* among the different sectors of society. Along with other social bodies, unions have a direct part to play in building a truly just and democratic world, a world enriched by everyone's responsible and active participation in the economy, as in other important areas of life (cf. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 8, 14). Everyone has a duty to work for the good of the whole community, national and international.

I encourage you therefore to continue to represent your fellow workers with all your professional skills and in a spirit of service to the whole human family. Upon the workers of the world, upon all of you, your organizations and your countries, I invoke God's abundant blessings.

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