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# conference

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS - ROME

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Twenty-seventh Session  
Rome, 6-25 November 1993

**STATEMENT BY HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE PARTICIPANTS  
OF THE XXVII SESSION OF THE FAO CONFERENCE**

Mr Chairman,  
Mr Director-General,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am very pleased to greet the distinguished international leaders in the sector of food and agriculture taking part in the Twenty-seventh Conference of FAO. Our meeting, which has become traditional, is a sign of the cooperation existing between the Holy See and FAO. In spite of their different missions and purposes, both are committed to serving the cause of man and promoting human dignity. Human dignity requires that under no circumstances and for no cause whatsoever may people be deprived of the fundamental right to nutrition. As last year's International Conference on Nutrition sponsored by FAO and the World Health Organization recalled, the right to nutrition is a direct expression of the right to life.

Indeed, nutrition does not merely involve responding to physical necessities. It also includes providing the opportunity for every person to have access to sufficient and healthy food, and to take part in its production and distribution (cf. Address to the International Conference on Nutrition, 5 December 1992). The right to nutrition thus means being able to share fully in the harmony of creation.

2. Our meeting today is particularly significant because it is taking place forty-five years after the establishment of official relations between the Apostolic See and FAO. On 23 November 1948 the Conference, at its fourth session, decided to admit the Holy See to participation in the activity of the Organization with the status of "Permanent Observer". In according the Holy See this status, unique even with regard to other institutions of the United Nations System, the Conference recognized the specific nature of the Holy See as the central and supreme organ of government of the Catholic Church, which throughout the world carries out a mission of service to humanity, working for justice, peace, social harmony and development. As is well known, the Holy See's international activity is part of its mission of proclaiming the "Good News" to all peoples, without distinction, for the sole purpose of serving man in his dignity as a person and thus contributing to the common good of the whole human family.

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The particular status enjoyed by the Holy See continues to reflect the specific nature of its contribution to the purposes and activity of FAO. Without entering into technical and specialized matters, the Holy See wishes to provide those ethical guidelines which inspire the values which have gained ground in the life of the international community and which ought to guide all its activities, including, as in the case of FAO, those which are more technical in nature. This is the necessary basis for a determination of the conditions and the means needed for the ordered coexistence of humanity.

In forty-five years the Holy See has never failed to offer this particular cooperation, which it wishes to continue at this time of change in the direction of the Organization. I take this occasion to express my gratitude to the Director-General, Mr Edouard Saouma, who in his many years of leadership has guided FAO in meeting the challenges of changing global realities. His notable gifts of professionalism and broad experience will now benefit his native Lebanon, which today desires to rediscover in the unity of its peoples the solid basis for national reconstruction, peaceful coexistence and the recovery of its own tradition.

To the Director-General elect, Mr Jacques Diouf, I offer my good wishes for the success of his work in the years to come on behalf of FAO and the entire international community. His knowledge of the situation in the developing countries, his experience in the field of multilateral diplomacy and his commitment to international development hold out the promise of fruitful activity in favour of the whole rural world, and especially in favour of those who until now have benefited least from agricultural improvements, such as the small farmers of the poorest countries.

3. Just as at Hot Springs, fifty years ago, when the United Nations Conference on Food and Agriculture laid the foundations of FAO, the present session of the Conference is also taking place at a time when the international community has undergone profound changes and is still experiencing new developments almost daily. Now as then, there are new actors on the world scene, new international relationships are needed, new problems must be faced and appropriate responses have to be given. Such responses are called for by that universal common good which consists of making possible all the conditions needed for the development of individuals, of peoples and of the whole human family. The important decisions which you are called to make can contribute to improving the plight of millions of people who expect concrete actions which can alter their situation of underdevelopment, of poverty and of hunger.

At the Hot Springs Conference there was already an acknowledgment that "the first cause of hunger and malnutrition is poverty" (United Nations Conference on Food and Agriculture, Resolution XXIV). Today the same awareness must inspire all your work. There is an urgent need to ask why, after so many years, poverty continues to be the cause of hunger and of malnutrition. Perhaps it has too often been forgotten that "the poor - be they individuals or Nations - need to be provided with realistic opportunities" (Centesimus Annus, 52).

The present Conference, the twenty-seventh, underlines the universality of FAO in terms of the number of its Member States, with the admission of a conspicuous number of new ones. But, as you are aware, this universality should not be read only in terms of numbers, or interpreted as representing some kind of equality. Rather it should be compared to the various situations within countries and between them: the wealth of some, the extreme poverty of others. In the universality of FAO, therefore, there is reflected the reality of a world divided, in which often the selfishness of a few will not permit the weaker ones to benefit fully from resources and other goods, from commerce, scientific discoveries, the benefits of new technology; all this can help to negate the equal right of every people to "be seated at the table of the common banquet" (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 33).

Is it not also because of this selfishness, this lack of sharing and communion between countries, that a large part of humanity suffers from hunger and malnutrition, to the point of seeing its hopes for life itself compromised?

4. Your daily commitment and the varied activities of FAO testify that hunger and malnutrition are not just the result of natural disasters but also represent the consequences of individual and collective attitudes, whether active or omissive, which depend on the will and the action of man.

There is a collection of factors preventing all individuals from having sufficient food, notwithstanding that the data examined in this Conference show, yet again, that world production is sufficient to respond to the demand of the world's population considered as a whole. Indeed, the longer view which an accurate study by FAO offers on these works is precisely that of a more balanced relationship in the world between agricultural-food production and demographic growth, which at this time appears to be stationary or tending to a slowing-down with respect to today (cf. FAO Conference, Agriculture Towards 2010, Doc. C 93/94). As a consequence the solution of limiting the number of participants at the "common banquet" rather than multiplying the bread to be shared seems ever less justifiable!

The persistent imbalances between different parts of the globe - and therefore the crises or shortages of food - cannot be explained only by the different level of growth which separates the developed and the developing countries. They are rather to be attributed to the action of economic policy and in particular to the agricultural policy of individual countries or groups of countries whose effect in global terms assumes importance with regard to levels of production, sale and distribution, therefore affecting the availability of agricultural and food products.

This means that it is necessary to modify the list of priorities in the struggle against hunger and malnutrition at both the national and international levels. In fact, while food self-sufficiency remains a valid objective in the development of a given country, the adequate distribution of goods assumes greater importance, so that they will be effectively available, especially to the very poor. The adoption of criteria of solidarity and of sharing requires a proportionately stronger and disinterested readiness on the part of the richest countries and the major producers. This is a readiness more than ever necessary at a time when the criteria inspired by the latest global economic tendencies require the weaker economies to make structural adjustments which can in the short term compromise the basic rights of peoples, and even in some cases the actual availability of food commodities.

Besides this, the struggle against hunger and malnutrition requires that all countries should come together and adopt new and binding regulations responding to the changed demands of trade and international exchange and not to the interests of a small number of countries. In this way it will be possible to avoid clear symptoms of protectionism in its various forms, which constitute the principal obstacle to trade and create actual barriers to markets for the developing countries. Thus the movement towards a new world order of trade which does not penalize agricultural progress in developing countries should be put into operation as quickly as possible, thus fostering the integration of their potential into the economies of the rich countries.

The pursuit of the goal of sustainable development thus involves the need to find a proper balance between the demands of production required by the struggle against hunger and the need to safeguard the environment and preserve the great variety of the resources of creation. By means of such a criterion FAO can respond with ever greater precision to the task of putting into practice a part of the conclusions of the Rio Conference, thus offering a real service also to future generations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. It is clear that choices leading to solidarity between countries must be made concrete in the indispensable work of making goods and resources available for the immediate and future use of the most needy. The stability of international coexistence requires it, the conditions for true peace demand it.

This duty also requires a careful rereading of the aims and objectives of all the institutions of the United Nations system, so as to give full reality to the directives of the United Nations Charter, where it is affirmed that to realize "conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations... the United Nations shall promote conditions of economic, social progress and development" (Art. 55). And notwithstanding the fact that the methods and means need to be made more precise, it cannot be forgotten that even recently the imperative to guarantee sufficient food, denied by situations of conflict, has been the central motive for international humanitarian action.

Thus the idea is maturing within the international community that humanitarian action, far from being the right of the strongest, must be inspired by the conviction that intervention, or even interference when objective situations require it, is a response to a moral obligation to come to the aid of individuals, peoples or ethnic groups whose fundamental right to nutrition has been denied to the point of threatening their existence.

6. Upon your work, therefore, rest precise responsibilities, and your decisions will have not only technical consequences but also consequences filled with human implications. Strive to ensure that all people, and especially those who live and work in the rural world, can continue to have confidence in the activity of FAO.

May the Almighty Creator of the Universe strengthen your perseverance and enlighten your work.