



The Holy See

Opening of the International Conference on Nutrition

*ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II**

Saturday, 5 December 1992

1. It gives me great pleasure to accept your invitation to speak at the opening of the International Conference on Nutrition which brings together the highest world authorities in this most important sector. You come from very different countries and your cultures too are very different, but it is in essence the same service that motivates you each day in your struggle to ensure that every human being enjoys a standard of living compatible with his dignity as a person; in the present circumstances, I am sure that you will not fail to progress together towards this goal. I would like to pay homage to the two great intergovernmental organizations which have taken this initiative and have brought it to fruition, thanks to their joint efforts and the experience they have gained in the service of humanity: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization. The personal commitment of their Directors-General, Mr. Saouma and Mr. Nakajima, shows their common desire not to make this conference a formal event, but the starting point for a fresh, more vigorous action inspired by the mottos of the two organizations: "Food for all" and "Health for all". The dynamism of your organizations has made nutrition and health priorities for the international community, which is trying to ensure that nobody lacks them. The Church will always show her sympathy for these efforts, supporting them by word and deed, faithful to the teaching of her Founder, the one who, faced with a hungry multitude, showed generous understanding (cf. Mt 15:32).

2. The theme of your conference reminds us that whether it is a question of food supply or health care, nutrition is a basic element in the life of each person, each group, each people on the earth. Your conference, however, also shows that despite the efforts already made by the international community, there are frequently worsening obstacles and imbalances that prevent millions of men and women from providing adequately for their own nutrition. This is a serious warning for the common conscience of humanity. The multitudes who are deprived of a suitable healthy diet, even to the point of death, are counting on your work today to decide on bold interventions to ward off the spectre of starvation and malnutrition that haunts humanity. These brothers and sisters ask you to consider as a duty of justice your determined commitment to the cause of an increasingly active solidarity, the only means by which everyone can have an equitable share in the benefits of creation. They expect from this conference that the necessary ethical appeals will lead to resolutions that will be legally enforced, in conformity with international law. Here you should listen to the cries of suffering millions faced with the scandal caused by the "paradox of abundance" that has become the main obstacle to solving humanity's nutritional problems. World food production – as you well know – is easily sufficient to satisfy the needs of even an increasing population, on the condition that the resources which allow access to proper nutrition are shared according to real needs. I can only subscribe to the opening lines of your project for a World Declaration on Nutrition: "Hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable in a world with both the necessary

knowledge and resources to put an end to this human catastrophe" (n. 1). However, the paradox continues to yield dramatic consequences every day. On the one hand, we are stricken by the images of a part of humanity condemned to die of hunger because of natural calamities that are aggravated by man made disasters, by obstacles put in the way of the distribution of food supplies, by restrictions imposed on the trade of local produce, depriving the poorest countries of their market benefits. Moreover, we are witnessing the disintegration of solidarity: the destruction of whole harvests, the selfish demands inherent in current economic models, the rejection of the exchange of technology and conditions imposed on the allocation of food aid, even in cases of obvious emergency. The causes and effects of this paradox, with their multiple contradictory elements, are once again being brought to your attention in the framework of this conference: it is enough here to recall the unacceptable facts: every day hunger causes the death of thousands of children, elderly people and members of the more vulnerable groups; a considerable part of the world population is unable to obtain its essential basic daily food ration masses of people are heavily burdened by poverty, ignorance and political conditions which oblige them to leave their homes by the millions in search of a land where they can find enough to eat.³ Today, ladies and gentlemen, yours is a weightily responsibility. After thorough research, the International Conference on Nutrition will present a clear analysis of the situation of health and nutrition throughout the world, and will also propose a legal and political framework for necessary and viable interventions. Thanks to this conference, all humanity will know what measures governments and international institutions have chosen on behalf of the neediest. It is up to you to shed new light on the basic right to nutrition that properly belongs to each human person. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has already declared the right to sufficient food. For the application of this right, we must now assure everyone access to nourishment, food security, a healthy diet, and training in nutrition techniques. Briefly, everyone should benefit from personal and community living conditions that allow the full development of every human being at every moment of his or her existence. All too often, situations in which peace is lacking, where justice is not taken seriously, or where the natural environment is destroyed, dangerously threaten entire populations with the inability to satisfy their basic food needs. Wars between nations and domestic conflicts should not sentence defenceless civilians to death from hunger for selfish or partisan motives. In these cases, food aid and health care must in all circumstances be guaranteed, and all obstacles must be removed, including those stemming from an arbitrary appeal to the principle of non-interference in a country's domestic affairs. The conscience of humanity, henceforth backed by measures of international humanitarian law, makes human involvement in situations that seriously jeopardize the survival of peoples and whole ethnic groups obligatory. This is a duty for nations and the international community, as we are reminded by the guidelines proposed at this conference.⁴ Humanity realizes today that the problem of hunger cannot be solved at the local level, but only by global development. Access to available resources should be guaranteed; the training of the most underprivileged and their participation in the responsibilities involved should be ensured. To achieve these goals, it is increasingly necessary to spread a concept of economic relations that goes beyond the existing boundaries between countries and which is based on true solidarity and the sharing of resources and goods produced. As regards food resources, one should insist on the need not so much to increase their overall production, but rather to assure their effective distribution by giving priority to areas at risk. It is also important for the populations burdened by the effects of malnutrition and hunger to receive an education that prepares them to provide healthy and sufficient foodstuffs on their own. The Declaration and the Plan of Action that your conference is called to approve place the family nucleus at the heart of this programme for education and training. I note this with pleasure. Likewise, it is right to state that it is impossible to provide serious training in nutrition and more generally, to prepare a world free from divisions and suffering, without a common commitment to recognizing the proper rights of the family and its members, and without guaranteeing them the indispensable means to reinforce their essential role in society. As regards nutrition, consideration will be focused on how to give better support to

women because of the vital tasks they perform in rural areas at risk from the nutritional point of view: the woman is mother and teacher, breadwinner and primarily responsible for managing the household. Special attention will also be paid to children, so that their basic right to life and nutrition, a right that was recently proclaimed by the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" may be safeguarded. Nor can one fail to recognize the right of the couple to decide on procreation and the spacing of births. It is obvious that only living conditions that remove the extreme forms of poverty for millions of people will be able to foster responsible parenthood and guarantee the free exercise of this basic right of the couple.⁵ As you know, when the Church fulfils her mission to proclaim the "Good News to all nations", she desires to be especially close to poor, suffering or hungry humanity. It is not up to her to suggest technical solutions, but she is always ready to give wholehearted support to those who are working to reinforce international solidarity and to promote justice among peoples. On her part, the Church does so by proclaiming that the law of love of God and neighbour is the basis of social life. She is also well aware that her "social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions" (*Centesimus annus*, n. 57). It is in seeking to act according to the law of love that her institutions and her various organizations take numerous initiatives to be of direct service to the poor, the hungry, the sick, these "lowly ones" who are the object of God's special favour. We cannot forget that at the end of history we shall have to answer, before the Lord for our actions regarding the welfare of our brothers and sisters (cf. Mt 25:31-46). This is why the Pope is asking you, the participants in the International Conference on Nutrition, to strive to ensure that no person will be refused his or her daily bread and necessary health care. Individual calculations and interests must therefore be overcome; the initiatives of the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization meant to guarantee a minimum level of nutrition to all the peoples of the world, must be supported and developed. By such a commitment, it will be possible to give this conference the necessary authority for the principles of the World Declaration on Nutrition to be put into practice. It is above all necessary that States, intergovernmental organizations, humanitarian institutions and private associations everywhere be convinced that no political criteria or economic law should harm man, his life, his dignity, or his freedom. All peoples should learn to share the lives of others and to see that the earth's resources which the Creator entrusted to humanity are shared. In this spirit, I express my fervent best wishes for the success of your work, and I invoke the blessing of the Most High on you and on all the peoples of the earth.

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