



# The Holy See

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## *Address of His Holiness Paul VI to the World Food Conference\**

*Saturday, 9 November 1974*

It is a pleasure to address this World Food Conference which the United Nations has convened here at Rome. Need we say how fully we share your concerns? Our own mission, after all, is to perpetuate the teaching and activity of the Master from whom the sight of a hungry crowd drew the touching words: "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd... [They] have nothing to eat. I do not wish to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way" (Mt. 15:32).

1. In the last few years the situation we sketched in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* has become even more alarming and the description we gave then is even truer now: "Today no one can be unaware of the fact that on some continents countless men and women are ravished by hunger and countless children are undernourished. Many children die at an early age; many more of them find their physical and mental growth retarded. Thus whole populations are immersed in pitiable circumstances and lose heart" (N. 45: AAS 59(1967), 280).

The papers prepared for this conference describe the various aspects of hunger and malnutrition, analyze the causes, and attempt, with the help of statistics, market studies and data on production and consumption, to anticipate consequences. Even the cold figures speak eloquently of tragedy. How much more afflicting it is, then, to be on the scene and experience the reality! Recent catastrophes of every kind – droughts, floods, wars – have led directly to an appalling shortage of food. Less spectacular but equally painful are the difficult situations in which the impoverished classes find themselves because the price of food has risen (a sign that food is less plentiful) and because there has been a steady withdrawal of that international help in the form of food which after the last war contributed so greatly to the recovery and progress of numerous peoples.

The lack of food has long-range effects that sometimes cannot be foreseen. It has serious consequences for generations still unborn and brings with it dangers of an environmental and hygienic nature which may inflict deeper wounds on whole populations than do the more obvious

immediate ills. It is indeed painful to have to face these facts and admit that human society seems incapable as yet of tackling the problem of world hunger, even though it has achieved unprecedented technological progress in all areas of food production – for example, fertilizers, mechanization, distribution and transport.

Only a few years ago we thought that in one way or another our technological advances, as well as the speed with which we can transmit information and goods, would soon eliminate the danger of that ancient plague, famine, never again to cripple any nation or any large area of the earth for an extended period of time. The expectation has not been fulfilled. Therefore, the atmosphere of this conference is a very sobering one. Therefore, too, the peoples of the earth are filled with anxious hope as they look on. In 1965 we had occasion to address the World Assembly of Youth, which had convened for a world-wide campaign against hunger. What we said then is still relevant: "It is a dramatic question of life and death for mankind, which must unite to survive and therefore first learn how to share its daily bread" which the Lord tells us is meant for us, that is, for each of us. (Address to the Young World Assembly, 15 October 1965: AAS 57 (1965), 910)

2. As you set about your difficult but promising task, we offer two guiding principles. The first is to face the problems squarely without letting panic or discouragement keep you from seeing them as they are. The second is to be sufficiently impressed by the urgency and top priority of the present need that you will not settle for delays and half-measures. The conference will not by itself solve all problems; it is not in the nature of conferences to do that. But either it will reach clear and energetic conclusions that will be the springboard for a series of effective moves, faithfully accepted by all members, or, despite the hopes set on it and the good will of its members, it will have been held in vain. From the rostrum of the United Nations we made the appeal: "Never again a war, never again a war!". We repeat those words now, and we say to you: "Never again famine, never again famine!"

3. Ladies and gentlemen, the goal can be reached. The threat of famine and the ill effects of malnutrition are not inevitable. At this critical point in our history, nature has not turned into an unfaithful servant. Its potential for production on land and in the seas continues to be vast; indeed, that potential is still largely untapped. According to the generally accepted estimate, 50 percent of the land capable of cultivation has never been exploited. Meanwhile, we have the scandal of some countries periodically destroying a huge excess production of food because we lack a wise economic structure that would have insured the good use of such food.

These are but illustrations of a fact no one can dispute, even if some doubt that it is possible to exploit the potential of nature quickly enough to allay the hunger of an ever expanding human race. When we speak of "allaying hunger," we all agree that more must be meant than simply prolonging biological existence at a minimal level which is really subhuman. Our real aim is "to provide each individual enough to live, to live a truly human life, to be capable by his own work to guaranteeing the upkeep of his family and to be able through the exercise of his intelligence to

share in the common good of society by a commitment freely agreed to and by an activity voluntarily assumed." (Address to the Food and Agriculture Organization, 16 November 1970: AAS 62 (1970), 831)

4. The present crisis is really one of civilization and human solidarity. It is a crisis, first, of civilization and method, such as arises when the further development of man's life in society is stymied by a one-sided approach. In the present instance, there is a tendency to focus attention exclusively on the social model that led to our industrialized civilization. This means that we put our whole trust in a purely technological approach to every problem and lose sight of basic human values. The crisis has arisen because exclusive attention has been given to the kind of economic success that depends on huge profits from industry. As a result the agricultural sector has been almost totally neglected and with it the high and human spiritual values which that sector represents.

The crisis is also one of human solidarity. The imbalances between individuals, groups and people have been maintained and at times even intensified. As is increasingly evident, this state of affairs is due to an unwillingness to contribute to a better distribution of resources at hand, especially to the benefit of less favoured countries and of whole areas of the world that are essentially dependent on a still primitive kind of farming.

It is here that the paradoxical nature of the present situation comes home to us. Mankind is now capable of a hitherto unequalled mastery of the physical universe; it has at its disposal the tools for exploiting the world's resources to the full. Will those, then, who hold these tools in their hands stand paralyzed, as it were, in the face of an irrational situation in which the wealthy, relatively few in number, allow the vast majority to live in wretchedness? In which a few nations enjoying a highly enriched and varied diet are content to see all the others with only a bare minimum to meet vital needs? In which human intelligence is indeed able to change the lot of so many afflicted people, yet refuses to accept the task of guaranteeing the most vulnerable sectors of mankind an adequate nourishment?

5. We would not be in this situation if we had not seriously erred in setting our course, even if the mistake was at times one simply of negligence or omission. It is high time to find out what has gone wrong so that we may correct our mistakes or, better, set the whole situation right. The real need, in the last analysis, is to acknowledge, in an effective way, the right of every human being to eat his fill as required by his age and the kind of activities he engages in. This right is based on the fact that all earthly goods are intended, first and foremost, for the use of mankind as a whole and the maintenance of all men, and only secondarily for private appropriation by individuals. Christ bases His judgment of the life of each human being precisely on whether he has respected this right of his fellowmen (See Mt. 25:31 ff.).

If we look at our situation, certain facts are immediately clear. One of the most evident causes of

the present disorder is the increased price of foodstuffs and of materials needed for producing them; Think, for example, of fertilizer, the scarcity and high price of which are threatening to reduce the beneficial effects that were rightly expected from the green revolution." But are not scarcity and high prices connected with fluctuations in a production that is regulated with a view to profit rather than to meeting the needs of mankind? The decrease in stocks of food, another cause of our present problem, is at least partially due to commercial decisions that lead to our having no reserves for the victims of sudden and unforeseen shortages.

We are now confronted with a food crisis which, as far as we can see, will only worsen. Yet in some areas of the world that are especially capable of producing surpluses and reserves for cases of need, an astonishing amount of land has been taken out of cultivation. Here we have the kind of contradiction that shows the deep crisis through which our civilization is passing. Yet, since all these circumstances have resulted from ill-advised action on man's part, it is possible to correct and change them, provided we have the necessary wisdom and courage.

We mentioned earlier the amount of food each man needs if he is to live a genuinely human life. But the problem of quality of food is no less important and, once again, is caused by economic decisions. The problem is one chiefly for the more industrialized nations. As the atmosphere becomes more polluted and these nations devote themselves ever more eagerly to creating artificial substitutes and increasing production, how will they prudently assure a healthy diet, one that does not seriously endanger the health of those who observe it, especially children and young people? How, moreover, are these nations to break eating habits which are harmful to the eater because the food is so rich and abundant, while also leaving other people with insufficient food? Here again, alertness and courage are needed.

6. We would also like to offer some observations about the flow of those resources that could help in the present situation. All are agreed that the multilateral and bilateral help available in the agricultural sector has been inadequate. In preparation for the conference, careful estimates have been made of monetary requirements for stepping up food production in the developing countries and for carrying out measures that would guarantee a world food supply. The monies needed over the next ten years, according to these calculations, are certainly far greater than those committed to the task up to now. At the same time, however, they are small in comparison to the national budgets of the nations that are wealthy or have international assets. A recent crisis has caused a redistribution of these assets but has not reduced their volume.

As early as 1964, when we visited India, we appealed to the nations of the world to commit themselves generously – chiefly through a reduction of military budgets – to a fund that would decisively help toward the integral development of the least favoured sectors of mankind. Now the moment has come for an energetic and unambiguous move in that same direction. The sense of human solidarity, or rather of elementary social justice, which consists not only in not "stealing" but in sharing, has not had the desired effect. Will the dangers of the hour force us at last to move? Or

will men stubbornly refuse to see the real situation and look for alibis – such as, for example, an irrational, unilateral campaign against population growth – instead of doing what has to be done?

We cannot allow those who control the goods and resources of mankind to solve the problem of hunger by forbidding the birth of the poor or letting children die of starvation simply because their parents have not acted in accordance with theoretical plans based on pure hypotheses about the future of mankind. In a past which we had hoped was gone forever, men went to war in order to seize their neighbours' wealth. But is it not simply a new form of war when some nations try to impose restrictive demographic policies on others so that the latter may not claim their just share of the earth's fruits?

We reaffirm our full moral support of those who have frequently stated at international meetings that they are ready not only to acknowledge every man's right to the goods he needs in order to live but also, through free acceptance of a sacrifice in proportion to their resources and capacities, to put their own goods at the disposal of needy individuals and peoples, without excluding or discriminating against any. Our real need, therefore, is for courageous reforms to eliminate obstacles and imbalances deriving in part from outmoded structures that perpetuate unbearable injustices or hinder production and the effort to assure the adequate flow of vital goods.

7. But even the most generous international aid, a more intense research into and application of agrarian technology, and a very careful planning of food production will be almost useless unless we quickly repair a serious defect in our technological civilization. The worldwide food crisis cannot be overcome without the help of the farmers. That help will not be fully and effectively given unless we radically change the attitude of the contemporary world which attaches little importance to agriculture. Agriculture today is only too readily subordinated to the immediate interests of the other sectors of the economy, even in countries which are now attempting to achieve economic growth and independence.

Our predecessor John XXIII, in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, began a chapter on farming with the words: "Farming has become a depressed occupation. It is inadequate both in productive efficiency and in the standard of living it provides" (N. 124: AAS 53(1961), 432). We need point to only two signs of such depression: the decrease in the number of farmers and, in some cases, in the extent of the land being cultivated in industrialized countries; and the fact that in the developing countries, even though the great majority of people till the soil, agriculture is the most underdeveloped sector of the economy. It follows that, however valuable the technological means available, nothing will be accomplished without the true reform represented by the rehabilitation of agriculture and the reversal of present attitudes towards it.

We must continually assert and exalt the importance of the farmer and indeed the importance of all who through various kinds of research and its implementation work for the development of agriculture. We ourselves made this point in addressing the 1971 Conference of the Food and

Agriculture Organization: "It is no longer sufficient to check the growing discrepancy of the situation of the rural populations in the modern world. It is a question of giving them a full place in it, of seeing to it that the rising generations no longer feel the weakening sensation of being left on the shelf, so to speak, living on the fringes of society, deprived of the best elements of modern progress." (Address to the Food and Agriculture Organization, 12 November 1971: AAS 63(1971), 877)

This goal will be reached only through worldwide, balanced efforts at development, an effort sustained by the political will of governments to give agriculture its rightful place. We must put an end to the pressure exerted by stronger sectors of the economy as they strip the countryside of the human energies that could make farming a highly productive activity. We must inaugurate a policy of guaranteeing the rural young their basic right as persons to choose a worthwhile calling that will provide such advantages as are now to be secured, it seems to them, only by going into the city and industry.

Here again, there is no doubt that reforms will be effective only if individuals see the point and value of them. That is why education and training are so important if men are to be prepared. "The cooperation of the rural population is essential... Farmers must esteem and be faithful to the way of life they have chosen; they must implement the programs for crop improvement that are indispensable if farming is to escape its age-old sameness and narrowly empirical basis, and to adopt new working methods, new machines and new approaches." (Address to Italian farm workers, 13 November 1966: L'Osservatore Romano, 14-15 November 1966.)

The important thing, from the viewpoint of the world's hungry people, is that governments should make it possible for all farmers to learn how to till and improve the soil, prevent sickness in their animals and produce better crops. Once they are adequately trained, farmers must be able to get the credit they need. In short, the mass of peasants must become artisans responsible for production and progress. This brings us back to the concept of an integral development that embraces the whole man and all men. We Ourselves, as far as it has been in our power, have constantly exhorted mankind to work toward that kind of development.

9. Such, ladies and gentlemen, are the reflections we offer as our contribution to your work. They proceed from our awareness of our pastoral obligations. They are inspired by trust in the God who neglects none of His children and by trust in man who is created in God's image and capable of magnificent manifestations of intelligence and goodness. When He saw the hungry crowds, the Lord was not content simply to voice His compassion; He also bade His disciples, "You yourselves give them food," (Mt. 14:16) and then exercised His power in support of their powerlessness, not their egoism.

This account of the multiplication of the loaves evidently contains several lessons for us as we face the serious demands of the present hour. But the main lesson we want to insist on today is

the call for effective action. There must be a long-range effort to enable each people to secure for itself, in the way best suited for it, all that it needs for a truly human existence. There must also be, however, an immediate sharing that will meet the pressing need of a large part of the human race. Work and charity must go together.

Such a gradual redirecting of production and distribution implies a further effort that should not be simply a constraint accepted out of fear of scarcity, but a positive determination not to waste resources which ought to promote the good of all. After generously feeding the crowds, the Lord bade His disciples gather up what was left so that nothing might be lost (See Jn. 6: 12). What a splendid lesson in thrift, in the noblest and fullest sense of that word, to a wasteful age like our own! It condemns a whole conception of society according to which consumption is an end in itself. Such an attitude is unconcerned with those in need, but it also harms the very people who think they profit by it, for they become incapable of understanding that man is called to a higher destiny.

Our appeal, therefore, is addressed to both the clear mind and the feeling heart. If nature's potentiality is vast and if the scope of the human spirit's mastery of the universe seems almost limitless, what is it that keeps us from acting in an equitable way for the good of all our human brothers? What is lacking is the noble unrest caused by the sight of the suffering and wretched state of the poor, and the deeply rooted conviction that the whole family suffers when one of its members is in distress. What is lacking is that sense of solidarity which we would like to see prominent in your labours here and especially in the decisions you reach. We earnestly ask the Father of all light to grant you that sense of solidarity as His gift.

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\*ORa n°47, p.8, 9, 10.

*Paths to Peace* p.317-322.