



The Holy See

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF UNESCO ON THE OCCASION OF THE WORLD LITERACY DAY 1983

1. On 8 September, for the seventeenth consecutive year, you invite us to celebrate International Literacy Day. The way in which the leaders and members of UNESCO, year after year, without discouragement, but rather with firm determination tackle this problem which is so difficult to overcome shows the strength of their conviction that the elimination of illiteracy is essential for the promotion of human dignity, that it is possible to do much more in this field, and that greater awareness of the situation must be developed so as to produce new, generous and wise commitments.

2. The many and varied aspects of this problem of illiteracy have already been widely studied and debated, and the programmes set in motion have produced tangible results which will get even better, thanks to public and private efforts. And this will happen especially if everyone, both the contributors to these efforts and the recipients, understand that the dignity of man is at stake here, since it is a question of a right and of a duty.

One naturally thinks of the right of the disadvantaged to receive schooling, education, culture and preparation for the world in which they must play a full and active role. And there is also the duty of the more fortunate to share what they have received, in reality, largely through personal good luck and the efforts of their predecessors.

But the illiterate also have the duty to require of themselves first and of others also, that the initial steps be taken in this basic education and to take an active part in it.

Should not this International Literacy Day make men even more convinced of the great principles which order their rights and duties?

3. For example, all rights are indissolubly linked together; and, in so far as this right to literacy is still neglected, it is the struggle for other human rights which is equally delayed or minimized.

Moreover, all men are brothers; and, in so far as some of them, somewhere in the world or in some aspect of their lives, see their rights flouted, it is the dignity of the entire human race which is wounded.

Finally, all rights are linked to duties, and, if a duty is not carried out, the corresponding right is left begging: if there is a

right to life, there is a duty to favour and protect life; if there is a right to peace, there is a duty to make peace; if there is a right to freedom, there is a duty to make men free; if there is a right to literacy, there is a duty to eliminate illiteracy and to seek this basic education .

4. It is to be hoped, Mr. Director General, that nations will widely react to the celebration of the seventeenth International Literacy Day of your Organization, for which I offer wishes of success. May they find the means of making public opinion aware of the enormous suffering which illiteracy represents for adults and children alike, much like malnutrition is in terms of bodily health, and equally dramatic! May people commit themselves to seek and develop at home and in the least favoured countries adequate national and international initiatives.

I would hope that this day and that such efforts will help to enable a large number of people to overcome the handicap of not being able to read or write, so as to allow them to participate more fully in the culture and life of society, and also to find better access to the spiritual realities which are themselves so well expressed in the sacred writings. I know that such progress is part of God's

plan.

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