



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO SCHOLARS PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY WEEK ON  
"RESOURCES AND POPULATION"**

*Friday, 22 November 1991*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I extend to each of you a cordial welcome. I greet you and I thank you for having accepted the invitation of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences to take part in a scientific discussion on a problem which is of great concern to society today: *the relationship between the accelerated increase in world population and the availability of natural resources.*

The close connection between the world's resources and its inhabitants must be evaluated, as you have opportunely done, by also taking into account the present imbalances in demographic distribution, in movements of migrants, in the allocation and consumption of resources.

The increase both of population and of available resources varies from place to place, to such an extent that different parts of the world are presently experiencing and can be expected to experience unequal trends.

The data emerging from your research and discussions will therefore prove important and very useful in enabling the Holy See to formulate and clarify - in accordance with its proper mission and responsibilities - appropriate guidelines and suggestions. The Academy's independence and scientific competence enable it to provide a valuable service to the Church. The Church in turn can then make use of the Academy's analysis of reliable data in order to develop - in the field of her own competence and autonomy - a carefully considered judgment of a religious and ethical nature.

2. Although the starting-point of your research is the current world situation, you have rightly chosen to look at the past as well. You have highlighted the causes which have produced the

earth's present situation and led to the notable growth of the world population in recent decades. You have then looked to the future, in order to make certain projections based on the connection between the dynamics of demography and the dynamics of available resources, particularly with regard to their impact on the environment.

It is a well-known fact that the availability of resources is obstructed by various social, economic and political factors, to the extent that some people fear that the point will even be reached when it will be impossible to feed all the world's people. It is important, however, not to be guided by fear; instead, what is needed is a careful evaluation of the various aspects of the problem.

3. An analysis of the different situations points to a growing diversification with regard not only to basic natural resources, but more specifically to those resources capable of actually being used by man, through the application of his intelligence, enterprise and labour. Science and its relative applications have made new resources available and hold out the promise of alternative forms of energy. But, centres of scientific research are not evenly spread, and the propagation of skills and technologies is conditioned, and at times slowed down, by various factors which make the practice of international solidarity difficult. Yes, such solidarity is the fundamental premise for full and balanced development.

What we are speaking of, then, is a problem of social organization and hence also a political problem. Various aspects of life in society are involved here, from family rights to the regulation of land ownership, from social welfare to the organization of labour, from public order to ways of establishing a consensus in society.

Human society is first and foremost a society of persons, whose inalienable rights must always be respected. No political authority, whether national or international, can ever propose, much less impose, a policy that is contrary to the good of persons and of families (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 25-26; *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3).

4. There is a widespread opinion that population control is the easiest method of solving the underlying problem, given that a worldwide reorganization of the processes of production and a redistribution of resources would require an enormous amount of time and would immediately give rise to economic complications.

The Church is aware of the complexity of the problem. It is one that must be faced without delay; but account must also be taken of the differing regional situations, some of which are the complete opposite of others: some countries show a massive population increase, while others are heading towards a dwindling, aging population. And often it is precisely the latter countries, with their high level of consumption, which are most responsible for the pollution of the environment.

The urgency of the situation must not lead into error in proposing ways of intervening. To apply

methods which are not in accord with the true nature of man actually ends up by causing tragic harm. For this reason the Church, as an "expert in humanity" (cf. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 13), upholds the principle of responsible parenthood and considers it her chief duty to draw urgent attention to the morality of the methods employed. These must always respect the person and the person's inalienable rights.

5. The increase or the forced decrease of population is partly the result of deficiencies in social institutions. Damage to the environment and the increasing scarcity of natural resources are often the result of human errors. Despite the fact that the world produces enough food for everyone, hundreds of millions of people are suffering from hunger, while elsewhere enormous quantities of food go to waste.

In view of these many different mistaken human attitudes, it is necessary to address first of all the people who are responsible for them.

6. Population growth has to be faced not only by the exercise of a responsible parenthood which respects the divine law, but also by economic means which have a profound effect on social institutions. Particularly in the developing countries, where young people represent a high percentage of the population, it is necessary to eliminate the grave shortage of adequate structures for ensuring education, the spread of culture and professional training. The condition of women must also be improved as an integral part of the modernization of society.

Thanks to advances in medicine which have reduced infant mortality and increased the average life expectancy, and thanks also to the development of technology, there has been a real change in living conditions. These new conditions must be met not only with scientific reasoning, but more importantly with recourse to all available intellectual and spiritual energies. People need to rediscover the moral significance of respecting limits; they must grow and mature in the sense of responsibility with regard to every aspect of life (cf. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 195; Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, *Gaudium et Spes*, 51-52).

By not taking steps in this direction, the human family could well fall victim to a devastating tyranny which would infringe upon a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human, namely giving life to new human beings and leading them to maturity.

It is the responsibility of the public authorities, within the limits of their legitimate competence, to issue directives which reconcile the containment of births and respect for the free and personal assumption of responsibility by individuals (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 87; Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 47). A political programme which respects the nature of the human person can influence demographic developments, but it should be accompanied by a redistribution of economic resources among the citizens. Otherwise such provisions can risk placing the heaviest burden on the poorest and weakest sectors of society, thus adding injustice to injustice.

Man, "the only creature on earth whom God willed for its own sake" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24), is the subject of primordial rights and duties, which are antecedent to those deriving from social and political life (cf. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 5, 35). The human person is "the origin, the subject and the purpose of all social institutions" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 25), and for this reason authorities must keep in mind the limits of their own competence.

For her part, the Church invites the human family to plan its future, impelled not just by material concerns but also and especially by respect for the order which God has placed within creation.

7. We all have precise duties towards future generations: this is an essential dimension of the problem, and it impels us to base our proposals on solid prospects regarding population growth and the availability of resources.

The conservation of resources presupposes peaceful coexistence, since - as is generally recognized - wars are among the worst causes of environmental damage. Peaceful coexistence in its turn presupposes solidarity, which is the result of a developed moral sense. The basic virtues of social life constitute a favourable climate for world solidarity, about which I wrote in my Encyclical Letter (cf. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39-40). It is mainly upon solidarity that the solution to the questions with which you are dealing depends.

8. Within this context a strong common commitment to institutional reform is needed, a commitment which aims at raising the level of intellectual and personal maturity by means of a satisfactory educational system. It will also aim at strengthening enterprise and the creation of jobs through adequate investments. The destruction of the environment caused by industry and industrial products must be reduced in accordance with precise plans and undertakings, also at the international level. A radical effort to change the current state of affairs is now required.

This reform must be based on personal renewal (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24). There must be action within the sphere of education and still more in the field of the all-round authentic personal development of individuals. This will be done by educating people in awareness of the values that are proper to human beings, in order to bring about a society in which they take an active part and which offers better living conditions for the whole of humanity. This is certainly not an easy undertaking. It is a task first of all for the family, the basic unit of society. The family draws moral strength from parents' sense of responsibility, about which the Council speaks (cf. *Ibid.*, 51), and which includes a balanced attitude towards procreation, an attitude which seeks to build a more united and caring society.

9. The appeal to each individual's sense of responsibility is an urgent one. So is the appeal for solidarity on the part of everyone.

The dynamics of population growth, the complexity of uncovering and distributing resources, and

their mutual connections and consequences for the environment constitute a long-term and demanding challenge. It is only through a new and more austere manner of living, one which springs from respect for the dignity of the person, that humanity will be able to meet this challenge adequately (cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3).

In short, a renewed way of life is needed, one which will spread by way of an authentic humanism and will therefore be capable of dissuading public authorities from proposing and legalizing solutions which are contrary to the true and lasting common good. It is a manner of living which, by reflecting the real interests of the individual, will help to bring about a world in which love for others is accepted as the general and normative rule.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you very much for the scientific contribution which during these days you have made to a better understanding of such pressing issues. With these sentiments, I invoke divine protection upon each of you and once more offer you a cordial greeting.

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