



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS AT THE THIRTIETH CONFERENCE
OF THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION**

18 November 1999

*Mr President,
Mr Director General,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I am very pleased to welcome you to the Vatican on the occasion of the Thirtieth Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization. I pay tribute to your work and the work of all who are part of the United Nations' efforts to promote the well-being of the human family, particularly by ensuring that everyone has an adequate share in the food resources of the earth.

At a moment like this, our concerns are broad, as we survey the entire planet and the multitude of the human family. Millions of human beings are denied the most basic necessities of life – food, water, shelter. Diseases both new and old continue to affect countless lives. The scourge of violence and war is unceasing. The gap between rich and poor increases alarmingly. Scientific and technological progress is not always accompanied by attention to the moral and ethical values which alone can ensure its correct application for the genuine good of people today and tomorrow. In so many ways, life itself is under assault, with the weak inevitably suffering the most. Faced with facts such as these, many people are overcome by a kind of moral paralysis, believing that little or nothing can be done to address these great problems at their roots. The best we can manage – they claim – is a palliative approach which may relieve the symptoms but can do nothing to tackle the causes.

2. Yet what is required is not paralysis, but action – which is why the work of your Organization is so important. This century is strewn with examples of programmes and actions which have aggravated rather than relieved human suffering. It should now be clear that ideologically motivated action is not the solution to hunger, to land-reform and to all the other issues involved in bringing about greater justice in the use of the world's resources. What is needed is the more

profound and infinitely more creative power of hope. This is the word I speak to you today – hope; and it is the word which the Church never ceases to speak in all her efforts to go to the roots of suffering in the world.

This hope is something more than the shallow optimism which comes only when we refuse to admit the darkness in our midst. It is rather a realistic and confident vision which belongs to those who have seen the darkness as it is and discovered light at its heart.

3. The hope of which the Church speaks entails a vision of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:26). It engages the fundamental question of the truth about man and the meaning of our human existence. In this respect, in this last part of the twentieth century a positive sign is the fact that, through the efforts of many, including organizations like your own, there is a growing sense of the human person's worth and dignity, and of the inviolable rights which flow from it. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is an example of this, even if the discrepancy between word and action at times remains very great. Yet it is a cause for satisfaction that people are recognizing more and more that there are certain innate and inviolable rights which do not depend on any human authority or consensus. As demonstrated in the collapse of the various totalitarian systems of our time, the attempt of the State to place itself above such rights wreaks havoc on society and, in the end, is self-defeating.

4. In the view of Christians and other believers, fundamental rights are rooted in the dignity of the human being, endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility (cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2). To speak of hope, therefore, is to acknowledge the transcendent character of the person and to respect its practical implications. When this transcendence is denied or ignored, the vacuum is filled by some form of authoritarianism or by the exaggerated notion of the completely autonomous individual, which leads to a slavery of another kind. Without openness to the unique and inviolable value of every human being, our vision of the world will be distorted or incomplete, and our efforts to relieve suffering and redress injustices will be doomed to failure.

In the search for hope at the dawn of the third millennium, we must look to the positive ideas and structures which have emerged in the international community's continuing endeavours to improve the conditions of life of the world's peoples. With the means available today, poverty, hunger and disease can no longer be regarded as either normal or inevitable. Much can be done to defeat them, and the human family looks expectantly to the United Nations, and in particular the Food and Agriculture Organization, to take the lead in helping to build a world in which people are no longer denied the most basic necessities.

5. I renew the wish so often expressed that in the new millennium the United Nations itself may become a more effective instrument of development, solidarity and peace in the world. A strong United Nations Organization would ensure the recognition that there are human rights which

transcend the will of individuals and nations. The effective recognition of these rights would in fact be the best guarantee of individual freedom and national sovereignty within the family of peoples.

With profound appreciation of all that your Organization has done to help the poorest in our midst and looking confidently to the future that lies before you, I entrust the work of your Conference to the guiding hand of him who, in biblical terms, “fills the hungry with good things” (*Lk 1:52*). Upon you, your loved ones and all involved in the noble work of the Food and Agriculture Organization I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.