



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF POPE PIUS PP. XII
TO THE III INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD PRODUCTS****

Aula della Benedizione - Venerdì, 22 giugno 1956

We are pleased to welcome you, gentlemen, as you prepare to draw up the conclusions of your Third International Congress on the Distribution of Food Products. We are particularly happy to express to you the keen interest which We take in your endeavors, for you represent, in the overall picture of commerce, essential element, an all-pervading one, the proper organization or the inadequacies of which immediately affect the standard of living of whole populations.

We congratulate you particularly on the notable progress achieved since 1950, the date of your first international congress, which soon resulted in the organization of the International Association of Food Distributors. This was an event of great significance for those in your business.

Undoubtedly the spirit of initiative will always be reckoned – in your affairs even more than elsewhere – among the indispensable conditions of business success. But the efforts of individuals or of local groups continued to stand in need of some incentive capable of guiding and coordinating their efforts. Each individual was working in too great an isolation, perhaps without perceiving that fixed habits, prejudices, groundless misgivings, and lack of support for undertaking desired changes were as much a hindrance to the interests of the tradesman as to those of the consumer.

And so the first congress, in 1950, was a revelation to many. The proof of this is the fact that the number of participants was doubled when they reassembled in Ostend in 1953, and that the present demonstration far exceeds the one that preceded it.

Food products are found in the greatest variety, under the most diverse forms, and with the most varied characteristics. They are generally perishable and require painstaking care for their

preservation. As a result of unforeseeable circumstances – bad weather, for instance, or transportation difficulties – supply and demand may undergo very noticeable variations.

The time factor, which is of the greatest interest to you in the case of commodities liable to rapid spoilage, is now assuming an increased importance for the customer, who prefers to be served without delay and wishes to avoid trips from one store to another. So, at each moment, at the different stages on the way from producer to consumer, there arise practical problems, often unexpected ones, which require original solutions, and you must constantly exercise ingenuity and tact in order to satisfy the expectations of your customers.

It is the constant objective of the distributor to reduce prices, guarantee quality, and multiply conveniences to the buyer through abundant choice of articles and ease in obtaining them. It is to attain this goal more effectively that you are assembled in such numbers in Rome, and that you have chosen as the theme of your endeavors: «Effective food distribution». Is it necessary to stress your theme's immediacy, and to mention the advantages which you hope to gain from this comparison of experiments and results? Your congress had already made a study of the over-all problems of your group: the evolution of forms of distribution, the advance of technical methods within the business, cooperation with producers, and relations with consumers.

Your attention is now concentrated on recent developments and the results achieved during these fast few years. It seems that one idea which was vigorously stressed at the time of your congress at Ostend is reappearing with still greater clarity, namely, the necessity of constantly increasing cooperation among the different groups working in distribution – that is, between producers and distributors, between wholesalers and retailers, and among retailers themselves.

This cooperation has become imperative as a direct consequence of the development of technical methods resulting in mass production and job specialization, and, on the other hand, as a response to the legitimate desire of private businessmen not to sink under pressure from the large companies, and to safeguard as far as possible their independence and initiative.

It appears, then, that the time has certainly passed when the merchant could consider his role in isolation, solely as a source of personal profit, and thus find himself committed to a relentless struggle of competition. Today, the notion of social usefulness, of the genuine yield of a given activity in relation to all others, rightfully prevails. As a result, the improvements brought about in the operations of distribution tend toward one and the same end: an increase of real service rendered to the community. Profit will flow from this as a normal consequence.

You have made a detailed study of how these new views are carried over into practice. The wholesaler, conscious of his function, is mindful today of the retailers' interests as well as of his own. He helps them by all the means at his disposal: advice, information, technical support, financial credit, and publicity. The retailer, on his part, perceives more clearly the advantage of

what you call «voluntary chants». Often the very existence of his business depends on them, and he will readily sacrifice part of his independence to gain increased commercial vitality.

The idea of competition tends to lose its derogatory sense – that of opposition and more or less damaging struggle – and retains only the positive and, moreover, indispensable aspect of rivalry. In many respects the interests of retailers coincide, and the establishment of shopping centers, which permit joint action for the increase of sales and the organization of collective services, furnishes a demonstration of this.

But this modern method of food distribution will require the cooperation of the customer himself. Self-service, already very popular in the United States, especially in the supermarkets, which are now being introduced to Rome in an interesting venture – invites the consumer to play a more active part and thus save himself some of the price of the merchandise.

It naturally follows that this accentuation of the principle of cooperation supposes a corresponding strengthening of the moral sense and responsibility of each individual. What is at stake is not the success or failure of one person alone, but, to a much more marked degree than before, the proper operation of the whole commercial system, and, consequently, the standard of living of populations. Thus you must stress how important it is to oppose energetically all that might impair the atmosphere of loyalty and confidence which should prevail between producers and distributors, among distributors themselves, and in their relations with consumers. Suspect or fraudulent practices must be eliminated without hesitation. The given word must be scrupulously kept. Men must also be able to rid themselves of those prejudices which hinder unduly the establishment of more reasonable, more economical methods. Open-mindedness, a taste for the calculated risk, solicitude for the common good, even if individual interests must suffer a little at first, and perfect honesty: all these qualities of a good merchant have now, more than ever, a rightful claim on you, and are clearly prime factors of success.

The total membership of your associations constitutes a very determined group, capable of exerting considerable influence on modern society because of the central place which it occupies. It is fortunate that there is developing more and more within this group a consciousness of the role which it is to play.

If the economic principles which guide you are correct and aim at the common good, if you can remain as aloof from egotistical individualism as from subjections which oppress the personality, you will contribute greatly to reinforcing the stability of the whole social structure.

We hope also that the clearest perception of your responsibilities may move you to seek in your personal life a spiritual deepening without which it would be doomed to a relative sterility. Over and above the very weighty concerns of your business, you must know how to reserve a place for meditation upon eternal truths and for the exploration of the intimate riches of the soul, which

reveal the presence of God and the abundance of His gifts.

May Divine Providence, which freely bestows upon men the goods necessary for their existence, find in you generous and prudent cooperators, faithful stewards, worthy of acting as His intermediaries, and of thus manifesting His bounty.

Such is Our keen desire; and, in token of the Divine favors which We call down upon you, your families, and all the members of your Association, We grant you, with all Our heart, Our Apostolic Blessing.

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