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SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

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The Holy See at the FAO: wasted food is robbed from the poor and disadvantaged

Vatican City, 31 May 2016 – Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, archbishop of Manila and president of Caritas Internationalis, spoke yesterday at the conference held at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Rome, dedicated to "concrete initiatives to reduce food loss and waste in the context of food safety. A challenge for the international community".

"The problem of food loss is very present among the concerns of the Catholic Church, as an issue that hampers availability of food for all, therefore undermining human development", said Cardinal Tagle. "In the practice of Caritas organisations, one of the challenges in the implementation of projects at all levels is the food loss that farmers and communities experience, year in year out. Food loss is occurring in all stages of agricultural value chains development after harvest, including during transport from field to the homestead, during threshing or shelling, during storage, during transport to the market and during marketing. It is especially damaging for small-scale farmers, whose food security and capacity to earn from their work can be severely threatened. The fruits of the earth are to benefit everyone. This requires to adopt a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. According to the Catholic Social Doctrine private property is subordinated to the universal destination of goods."

"The experience of Caritas organisations shows that, often, small-scale farmers lack of capacity in managing post-harvest losses", he continued. "The human right to adequate food requires equal access to resources for food: thus, apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to means of technical education, credit, insurance, and markets. This is also the kind of accompaniment Caritas provides, through the promotion of improved methods of harvest, training in proper harvest timing and storage techniques, awareness-raising on the right to food, as well as advocacy towards governments for the formulation of specific policy and strategies to guide the work of all those involved with post-harvest losses, like researchers, extension workers, private sector players, government, NGOs international aid organisations and farmers."

In this regard he provided the example of two Caritas initiatives in the United States. The first, in Maine, aims to provide nutrient-rich, organic vegetables to needy people who resort to food pantries. "Some of the produce is distributed right out of the field, while most of it is processed in partnership with small women-owned business, for distribution over the winter months", he explained. "This partnership fosters employment and cooperation, beyond allowing to keep vegetables long into the harsh Maine winter when the need is the greatest."

The other is in Washington State, and involves the distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income households. "Catholic charities of the city of Spokane have created extensive connections with over fifty farming enterprises to feed a community in which 17 per cent of residents receive food through food stamps provided by the government. A robust 'farm-to-food bank' system was built, working with multiple partners including universities to provide nutrition education programs and to build supply-chain capacity. Farmers were connected to supply routes culminating in the city, feeding distribution sites at close proximity, allowing to deliver food without substantial transportation infrastructure. Equipment like a delivery vehicle, refrigerators and coolers for storage improved the capacity of distribution sites."

"In sum, the ways Caritas addresses food losses do not consist only of technical solution. Rather, they respond to a vision based on human development that is integral and ecological: Caritas programmes are always oriented to the most vulnerable and marginalised people; they ensure sustainable development by respecting the environment, human health and well-being, and fostering employment creation; they aim at achieving social justice, by creating virtuous alliances based on solidarity and cooperation, favouring social inclusion", concluded the cardinal.

Msgr. Fernando Chica Arellano, Holy See Permanent Observer at the FAO, after recalling that the Church supports every genuine effort to nurture the goods that are the fruit of human labour, affirmed that the meeting was intended to sound "an urgent wake-up call to the conscience of humanity, so that no-one remains an observer before this scourge, and so that no person remains impassive before the many men, women and children whose sacred right to life is at risk because they have little or nothing to eat. Frequently, faced with wars, injustice, the degradation of the environment or deficiencies in healthcare we need to take urgent measures to avoid exposing the population to the serious danger of being unable to meet basic needs. This must be our conviction in inspiring action to eliminate the loss of food products. If we do not act before tragedy occurs, or if we prefer to continue in silence or ambiguity, then selfishness will win. Our paralysis will be the triumph of vested interests, that end up condemning the most vulnerable to starvation or at a high risk of malnutrition."

"Here in the FAO, today we would all like to proclaim together, seriously and with conviction: instead of wasting food, let us make sure everything is used; may no produce be thrown away because it has suffered superficial damage. If we ensure no produce is lost, we will have passed from death to life. Indeed, faced with the loss of food, which is linked symbolically to death, we must promote a culture of care and devotion, which must be linked to the promotion of life, solidarity and support for people in need. Wasted food is food stolen from the poor and the disadvantaged."
