



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

MASS FOR THE RURAL WORKERS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Laguna Seca, Monterey Peninsula
Thursday, 17 September 1987*

"Be careful not to forget the Lord, your God" (*Deut.* 8, 11).

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Monterey Peninsula,
Brothers and Sisters of California and other areas of the United States,

Originally these words were addressed by Moses to the Israelite people as they were on the point of entering the promised land—a land with streams of water, with springs and fountains welling up in the hills and valleys, a land producing an abundance of every fruit and food, a land where the people would lack nothing (Cfr. *ibid.* 8, 7-9). Today these words are addressed to the People of God here in Monterey, in the State of California, against the background of an extraordinary beauty of land and sea, of snow-capped mountains and deep lakes, oak groves and forests of fir and pine and mighty redwoods, a land among the richest and most fruitful of the earth. Yes, today, these words are addressed to all of us gathered here: "*Be careful not to forget the Lord, your God*". 2. These words, pronounced thousands of years ago, have still today a special meaning and relevance. Moses, the great teacher of his people, was concerned that in their future prosperity they might abandon God—the God who brought them out of the land of slavery and guided them through the desert with its parched ground, feeding them with manna along the way (Cfr. *Deut.* 8, 15-16). Moses knew the tendency of the human heart to cry out to the Lord in time of need, but easily "to neglect his commandments and decrees and statutes" (Cfr. *ibid.* 8, 11) in the time of well-being and prosperity. He knew that *God is easily forgotten*. In our own day are we not

perhaps witnesses of the fact that often in rich societies where there is an abundance of material well-being, permissiveness and moral relativism find easy acceptance? And where the moral order is undermined, God is forgotten and questions of ultimate responsibility are set aside. *In such situations a practical atheism pervades private and public living.* From the moment of *original sin*, man has been inclined to see himself in the place of God. He often thinks, just as Moses warned he might: "It is my own power and the strength of my own hand that has obtained for me this wealth" (*Ibid.* 8, 17). He acts as if the one who is the source of all life and goodness were just not there. He ignores a fundamental truth about himself: *the fact that he is a creature*, that he has been created and owes everything to his Creator, who is also his Redeemer. In these closing years of the twentieth century, on the eve of the third millennium of the Christian era, a part of the human family—the most economically and technically developed part—is being specially tempted, perhaps as never before, to imitate the ancient model of all sin—the original rebellion that expressed itself saying: "I will not serve". *The temptation today is to try to build a world for oneself*, forgetting the Creator and his design and . But sooner or later we must come to grips with this: *that to forget God, to feign the death of God, is to promote the death of man and of all civilization.* It is to threaten the existence of individuals, communities and all society. 3. Today's readings from the New Testament are in contrast to such a position. They speak of *God's presence which permeates the human heart and the whole of created reality.* Jesus teaches that the Reign of God is like the growth of the seed that a man scatters on the ground (Cfr. *Marc.* 4, 26-29). Certainly, human activity is essential. Man "goes to bed and gets up every day..." He plants. And "when the crop is ready he wields the sickle". Even the rich valleys of California would produce nothing without human ingenuity and toil. But the word of God says that *"the soil produces of itself first the blade, then the ear, finally the ripe wheat in the ear"* (*Ibid.* 4, 28). As if to say: the growth of the wheat and its maturing, which greatly depends on the fertility of the soil, comes from the nature and vitality of creation itself. Consequently there is *another source of growth*: the one who is *above nature and above the man who cultivates the earth.* In a sense, the Creator "*hides himself*" in this life-giving process of nature. It is the human person, with the help of intellect and faith, who is called to "discover" and "unveil" the presence of God and his action in all of creation: "*So may your way be known upon earth; among all nations, your salvation*" (*Ps.* 67(66), 3). If the parable of the seed indicates the growth of the Kingdom of God *in the world*, the words of Saint Paul in the second reading speak of how God's generous giving aims at drawing "good works" *from the human heart.* "God can multiply his favours among you... for good works". The whole of human activity must be finalized in works of justice, peace and love. All human work—including, in a very direct way, the noble work of agriculture in which many of you are engaged—is to be carried out at the service of man and for the glory of God. 4. *The land is God's gift.* From the beginning, God has entrusted it to the whole human race as a means of sustaining the life of all those whom he creates in his own image and likeness. We must use the land to sustain every human being in life and dignity. Against the background of the immense beauty of this region and the fertility of its soil, let us proclaim together our gratitude for this gift, with the words of the responsorial psalm: "*The earth has yielded its fruit, the Lord our God has blessed us*" (*Ps.* 67(66), 7). As we read in Genesis, human beings earn their bread by the sweat of their brows (*Gen.* 3, 17). We toil long

hours and grow weary at our tasks. Yet *work is good for us*. "Through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes 'more a human being'" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Laborem Exercens*, 9). The value of work does not end with *the individual*. The full meaning of work can only be understood in relation to *the family* and *society* as well. Work supports and gives stability to the family. Within the family, moreover, children first learn the human and positive meaning of work and responsibility in each community and in the nation as a whole, work has a fundamental social meaning. It can, moreover, either join people in the solidarity of a shared commitment, or set them at odds through exaggerated competition, exploitation and social conflict. *Work is a key to the whole social question*, when that "question" is understood to be concerned with *making life more human* (Cfr. *ibid.* 3). 5. Agricultural work exemplifies all these principles—the potential of work for the fulfilment of the human person, the "family" dimension of work, and social solidarity. *Agricultural work is* – as Pope John XXIII described it – *a vocation, a God-given mission, a noble task and a contribution to civilization* (Cfr. Ioannis XXIII *Mater et Magistra*, 149). God has blessed the United States with some of the richest *farm land* in the world. The productivity of American agriculture is a major success story. Clearly, it is a history of hard and wearying work, of courage and enterprise, and it involves the interaction of many people: growers, workers, processors, distributors and finally consumers. I know too that recently thousands of *American farmers* have been introduced to poverty and indebtedness. Many have lost their homes and their way of life. Your bishops and the whole Church in your country are deeply concerned; and they are listening to the voices of so many farmers and farmworkers as they express their anxieties over the costs and the risks of farming, the difficult working conditions, the need for a just wage and decent housing and the question of a fair price for products. On an even wider scale is heard *the voice of the poor*, who are bewildered in a land of plenty and still experience the pangs of hunger. 6. All agree that the situation of the farming community in the United States and in other parts of the world is highly complex, and that simple remedies are not at hand. The Church, on her part, while she can offer no specific technical solutions, does present a social teaching based on the primacy of the human person in every economic and social activity. At every level of the agricultural process, *the dignity, rights and well-being of people must be the central issue*. No one person in this process – grower, worker, packer, shipper, retailer or consumer – is greater than the other in the eyes of God. Giving voice therefore to the sufferings of many, I appeal to all involved to work together to find appropriate solutions to all farm questions. This can only be done in a community marked by a sincere and effective *solidarity* – and, where still necessary, *reconciliation* – among all parties to the agricultural productive process. And what of our responsibility to future generations? The earth will not continue to offer its harvest, except with *faithful stewardship*. We cannot say we love the land and then take steps to destroy it for use by future generations. I urge you to be sensitive to the many issues affecting the land and the whole environment and to unite with each other to seek the best solutions to these pressing problems. 7. *Each one of us is called to fulfil his or her respective duties before God and before society*. Since the Church is constrained by her very nature to focus her attention most strongly on those least able to defend their own legitimate interests, I appeal to landowners, growers and others in positions of power to respect

the just claims of their brothers and sisters who work the land. These claims include the right to share in decisions concerning their services and the right to free association with a view to social, cultural and economic advancement (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Laborem Exercens*, 21). I also appeal to all workers to be mindful of their own obligations of justice and to make every effort to fulfil a worthy service to mankind. New legislation in your country has made it possible for many people, especially migrant farmworkers, *to become citizens* rather than remain strangers among you. Many of these people have worked here with the same dream that your ancestors had when they first came. I ask you to welcome these new citizens into your society and to respect the human dignity of every man, woman and child. Two hundred years after the Constitution confirmed the United States as a land of opportunity and freedom, it is right to hope that there may be a general and renewed *commitment to those policies needed to ensure that within these borders equity and justice will be preserved and fostered*. This is an ever present requirement of America's historical destiny. It is also important for America at this time *to look beyond herself* and all her own needs *to see the even greater needs of the poorer nations of the world*. Even as local communities mobilize to work ever more effectively for the integral human advancement of their own members, they must not forget their brothers and sisters elsewhere. We must be careful not to forget the Lord, but we must be careful also not to forget those whom he loves. 8. The hidden attributes of the Creator are reflected in the beauty of his creation. The beauty of the Monterey Peninsula attracts a great number of visitors; as a result so many of you are involved in *the tourist industry*. I greet you and encourage you to see your specific work as a form of service and of solidarity with your fellow human beings. Work – as we have seen – is an essential aspect of our human existence, but so also is the necessary rest and recreation which permits us to recover our energies and strengthen our spirit for the tasks of life. Many worthwhile values are involved in tourism: relaxation, the widening of one's culture and the possibility of using leisure time for spiritual pursuits. These include prayer and contemplation, and pilgrimages, which have always been a part of our Catholic heritage; they also include fostering human relationships within the family and among friends. Like other human activities, tourism can be a source of good or evil, a place of grace or sin. I invite all of you who are involved in tourism *to uphold the dignity of your work* and to be always willing *to bear joyful witness to your Christian faith*. 9. Dear brothers and sisters: it is *in the Eucharist* that the fruits of our work—and all that is noble in human affairs—become an offering of the greatest value in union with the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. In fostering what is authentically human through our work and through deeds of justice and love, we set upon the altar of the Lord those elements which will be transformed into Christ: "Blessed are you Lord, God, of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. *It will become for us the bread of life*". I ask you to join with me *in praising the Most Holy Trinity* for the abundance of life and goodness with which you have been gifted: "The earth has yielded its fruit. God, our God, has blessed us" (*Ps.* 67(66), 7). But may your abundance never lead you to forget the Lord or cease to acknowledge him as the source of your peace and well-being. Your prayer for yourselves and for all your brothers and sisters must always be an echo of the psalm: "May God have pity on us and bless us; may he let his face shine on us" (*Ibid.* 2). For years to come may the Lord's face shine on this

land, on the Church in Monterey, and on all America: "From sea to shining sea". Amen.

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