



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 28th CONFERENCE OF THE  
UNITED NATIONS FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION**

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

1. I gladly welcome the distinguished participants in the *Twenty–eighth Conference of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization*, making your now traditional visit to the See of Peter. Because this year marks the Fiftieth Anniversary of FAO, I am especially pleased that, despite your busy schedule, you did not wish to miss this occasion—a custom which was been honoured at meetings of the Conference since FAO settled in Rome in 1951.

Through you, Mr Chairman, I offer warm good wishes to the Delegates and Representatives of the member States, and extend a special welcome to the new members of your Organization which more than ever reflects a world which, in spite of often painful divisions, has an increasing need to unite around common objectives.

I thank you, Mr Director–General, and renew my esteem for your generous commitment during the first phase of your mandate, which also involves the difficult but necessary task of restructuring the Organization.

2. It is not by chance that the beginning of FAO coincided with the formation of that broader Organization, the United Nations, whose ideals inspired FAO and with whose activity it is associated. The establishment of FAO was thus intended to emphasize the complementarity of the principles contained in the *Charter of the United Nations*: true peace and effective international security are achieved not only by preventing wars and conflicts, but also by promoting development and creating conditions which ensure that basic human rights are fully guaranteed.

3. The Fiftieth Anniversary celebration of FAO offers a suitable occasion to reflect on the international community's commitment to a fundamental good and duty: the freeing of human beings from malnutrition and the threat of starvation. As you have pointed out in the recent *Quebec Declaration*, it cannot be forgotten that at the origins of FAO there was not only a desire to strengthen effective cooperation among States in a primary sector such as agriculture but also *the intention to find ways to guarantee sufficient food for the whole world*, through sharing the fruits of the earth in a rational way. By setting up FAO on 16 October 1945, the world community hoped to eradicate the scourge of famine and starvation. The enormous difficulties still involved in this task must not be allowed to diminish the firmness of your commitment.

Even today tragic situations are unfolding before our eyes: people are dying of starvation because peace and security have not been guaranteed. The social and economic situation of the contemporary world makes us all aware of the extent to which the hunger and malnutrition of millions of people are the result of evil mechanisms within economic structures, or are the consequence of unjust criteria in the distribution of resources and production, policies formulated in order to safeguard special interest groups, or different forms of protectionism. Furthermore, the precarious situation in which whole peoples find themselves has led to *a mobility of such alarming dimensions that it cannot be dealt with by traditional humanitarian assistance alone*. The question of refugees and displaced persons gives rise to dramatic consequences at the level of agricultural production and of food security, affecting the nutrition of millions of people. FAO's action in recent years has shown that the provision of emergency help for refugees is not enough; this kind of assistance does not bring a satisfactory solution as long as conditions of extreme poverty are allowed to continue and become even more acute, conditions which lead to increased deaths due to malnutrition and hunger. The underlying causes of such situations have to be addressed.

4. Ladies and Gentlemen: the Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations furnish us with the opportunity to ask why international action, despite the existence of FAO, has been unable to alter this state of affairs. At the world-wide level sufficient food can be produced to satisfy everyone's needs. Why then are so many people threatened by starvation?

As you are well aware, there are many reasons for this paradoxical situation in which *abundance coexists with scarcity*, including policies which forcibly reduce agricultural production, widespread corruption in public life, and massive investment in sophisticated weapons systems to the detriment of people's primary needs. These and other reasons contribute to the creation of what you call "structures of famine". Here we are speaking of the mechanisms of international business by which the less favoured countries, those most in need of food, are excluded in one way or another from the market, thus preventing a just and effective distribution of agricultural products. Yet another reason is that certain forms of assistance for development are made conditional on the implementation by poorer countries of policies of structural adjustment, policies which drastically limit those countries' ability to acquire needed foodstuffs. Nor can a serious analysis of the underlying causes of hunger overlook that attitude found in the more developed countries,

where a consumerist culture tends to exalt artificial needs over real ones. This has direct consequences for the structure of the world economy, and for agriculture and food production in particular.

These many reasons have their source not only in a false sense of the values which should sustain international relations, but also in a widespread attitude which emphasizes *having* over *being*. The result is a real inability on the part of many to appreciate the needs of the poor and the starving; indeed, to appreciate the poor themselves in their inalienable human dignity. An effective campaign against hunger thus calls for more than merely indicating the proper functioning of market mechanisms or attaining higher levels of food production. It is necessary, first and foremost, *to recover a sense of the human person*. In my Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations on 5 October last, I pointed to the need to build relationships between peoples on the basis of a constant "exchange of gifts", a real "*culture of giving*" which should make every country prepared to meet the needs of the less fortunate (John Paul II, *Message to the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization*, 14).

5. In this perspective, FAO and other bodies have an essential role to play in fostering a new sense of international cooperation. During the last fifty years it has been the merit of FAO to promote people's access to land, thus favouring agricultural workers and fostering their rights as a condition for raising production levels. Food assistance, often exploited as a way of exerting political pressure, has been modified by means of a new concept: *food security*, which considers the availability of food not only in relation to the needs of a country's population, but also in relation to the productive capacity of neighbouring areas, precisely with a view to the rapid transfer or exchange of foodstuffs.

In addition, the concern which the international community shows for environmental issues is reflected in FAO's involvement in activities aimed at limiting damage to the ecosystem and safeguarding food production from phenomena such as desertification and erosion. The promotion of effective social justice in relations between peoples entails the awareness that the goods of Creation are meant for all people, and that the economic life of the world community should be oriented to sharing those goods, their use and their benefits.

Today it is more necessary than ever for the international community to recommit itself to fulfilling the primary purpose for which FAO was established. Daily bread for every person on earth – that "Fiat panis" which FAO refers to in its motto – is an essential condition of the world's peace and security. Courageous choices must be made, choices made in the light of a correct ethical vision of political and economic activity. Modifications and reforms of the international system, and of FAO in particular, need to be rooted in an *ethic of solidarity* and a *culture of sharing*. To direct the labours of this Conference to this end can be a most fruitful way of preparing for the important meeting of the *World Summit on Nutrition* which FAO has scheduled for November 1996.

6. In all these efforts the Catholic Church is close to you, as attested to by the attention with which the Holy See has followed the activity of FAO since 1948. In celebrating this Fiftieth Anniversary with you, the Holy See wishes to demonstrate its continuing support for your endeavours. A symbolic sign of this support and encouragement will be the bell to be placed in the FAO headquarters as a remembrance of the establishment, fifty years ago, of the Family of the United Nations. Bells symbolize joy; they announce an event. But bells also ring out a call to action. On this occasion, and in the context of FAO's activity, this bell is meant to call everyone – countries, different International Organizations, all men and women of goodwill – to even greater efforts to free the world from famine and malnutrition.

The words inscribed on the base of the bell evoke the very purpose of the United Nations system: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is. 2: 4). These are the words of the Prophet Isaiah, who proclaimed the dawn of universal peace. But, according to the Prophet, this peace will come about – and this has great meaning for FAO – only when "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Is. 2: 4).

For only when people consider the struggle against hunger as a priority, and are committed to providing everyone with the means of gaining their daily bread instead of amassing weapons, will conflicts and wars come to an end and humanity be able to set forth on a lasting journey of peace.

This is the sublime task to which you, the Representatives of the Nations and the leaders of FAO, are called. Upon your work and upon FAO, I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God, ever rich in mercy.

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