



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CONFEDERATION OF ITALIAN COOPERATIVES

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Saturday, 28 February 2015*

[Multimedia]

Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

This last one [referring to the choir] was the most melodic “cooperative”! My compliments!

I appreciate this encounter with you and with the organization you represent, that of cooperation. Cooperatives challenge everything, even mathematics, because in a cooperative one plus one makes three! And in a cooperative, a failure is half a failure. This is the beauty of cooperatives!

You are first of all the living memory of a great treasure of the Church in Italy. Indeed, we know that at the origins of the Italian cooperative movement are many farming and credit cooperatives which, by the 19th century, had been wisely established and promoted by priests and pastors. To this day, in various Italian dioceses, cooperation is still employed as an effective remedy to the problem of unemployment and to the various forms of social disadvantage. It is routine today, I do not say normal, customary.... but too often one sees: “Are you looking for work? Come, come to this company”. Eleven hours, 10 hours of work, 600 Euros. “Do you like it? No? Go home”. What is to be done in a world that functions like this? Because there is a line, a file of people looking for work: if you do not like it, the next one will. It is hunger, hunger makes us accept what they give us, working under the table.... To give an example, I could ask about domestic service: how many men and women who work in domestic service have a retirement pension?

All this is very well known. The Church has always recognized, appreciated and encouraged cooperatives. We read it in the Magisterium documents. We remember the appeal launched in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*: “*All proprietors and not all proletariat*”. And there are certainly the well-known pages of the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, in which Benedict XVI expresses his opinion in favour of credit unions and consumer cooperatives (cf. nn. 65-66),

highlighting the importance of the economy of communion and of non-profit sector (cf. n. 41), in order to affirm that the god-of-profit is by no means a divinity but only a compass and measuring stick for the appraisal of entrepreneurial activity. Pope Benedict also explained that our world needs an economy of giving (cf. nn. 34-39), meaning an economy capable of giving life to businesses inspired by the principle of solidarity and capable of “creating sociality”. In order to accomplish this, as Leo XIII exclaimed, in blessing the beginnings of the Italian Catholic cooperative movement: *Christianity has marvellous strength* (cf. Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, n. 15); this exclamation, therefore, resounds through you.

These and many other affirmations of recognition and encouragement addressed to co-operators on behalf of the Church are valid and timely. I also think of the extraordinary social teachings of Blessed Paul VI. We are able to confirm and consolidate these statements. Thus it is not necessary to repeat or restate them in full.

Today, I would like our dialogue to look not only at the past but above all to be directed *forward*: to *new perspectives*, to *new responsibilities*, to *new forms of initiatives of cooperative enterprises*. It is a true mission which asks us for creative imagination in order to find forms, methods, attitudes and instruments, to combat the “throw-away culture”, that we are living in today, the “throw-away culture” cultivated by the powers which uphold the economic and financial policies of the globalized world, at the centre of which is the god of money.

Today globalizing solidarity — this must be globalized, solidarity! — means thinking about the spiraling increase of unemployed people, of the unending tears of the poor, of the need to resume development that is both a true, integral progress of the person who certainly needs income, but not only income! Let us think of health needs, which traditional welfare systems no longer manage to satisfy; of the urgent need of solidarity, placing once again the dignity of the human being at the centre of the economy, as you have said. As Pope Leo XIII would still say today: *Christianity has marvellous strength* to globalize solidarity!

Therefore, do not stop to look only at what you have been able to achieve. Continue to refine, to strengthen and to update the good and solid businesses that you have already built. However, also have the courage to move outside of them, charged with experience and good methods, to carry cooperation to the new frontiers of change, to the existential peripheries where hope needs to emerge and where, unfortunately, the current socio-political system instead seems fatally destined to suffocate hope, to steal hope, increasing risks and threats.

This great leap forward which we propose the cooperatives take, will give you the confirmation that all that you have already done is not only positive and vital, but *also continues to be prophetic*. For this reason you must continue to invent — this is the word: invent — new forms of cooperation, because the maxim, “when a tree has new branches, the roots are deep and the trunk is strong”, also applies to cooperatives.

Here, today, you represent valuable experience in many sectors: from agricultural development to the promotion of building new homes for the homeless, from social cooperatives to credit unions, here broadly represented, from fishing to industry, to business, to communities, to consumption, to distribution and many other types of service. I am well aware that this list is incomplete, but it is rather useful in order to understand how precious the cooperative method is, which must go forward, creative. It has revealed itself in the face of many challenges. And it still will! However, all appreciation and all encouragement instead risks being generic. I want to offer you *some practical encouragement* instead.

The first is this: cooperatives must continue to be *the motor that lifts and develops the weakest part of your local community and of civil society*. Sentiment is not capable of this. Thus it is necessary to give first priority to the foundation of new cooperative enterprises, along with the further development of those in existence, especially in order to create new employment opportunities, which are lacking today.

My thoughts go first and foremost to *young people*, because we know that the dramatically high unemployment among the young — let us consider, in several European countries, 40, 50 percent — destroys hope in them. But let us also consider the many *women* who have the need and the will to enter the world of work. Let us not overlook the *adults* who are often prematurely out of work. “What are you?” — “I’m an engineer” — “Ah, how nice, how nice. How old are you?” — “49” — “You aren’t needed, go on”. This happens every day. In addition to new businesses, let us also look at the companies that are in difficulty, those for whose elderly owners it is more convenient to let the business die, which can instead be revived with the initiatives that you call “workers buyouts”, in my language “*empresas recuperadas*”, saved companies. And, as I said to their representatives, I am a fan of *empresas recuperadas*!

A second point of encouragement— not in order of importance — is to become active as *leaders in creating new welfare solutions*, particularly in the field of healthcare, a delicate field where so many poor people do not find adequate responses to their needs. I know what you have been doing for years with heart and with passion, in the peripheries of the cities and of our society, for families, children, the elderly, the sick and people disadvantaged and in difficulty for various reasons, bring heart and aid into their homes. *Charity is a gift! It is not a simple gesture to calm the heart, it is a gift!* When I do charity, I give myself! If I am not capable of giving myself, that is not charity. It is a gift without which one cannot enter the home of one who suffers. In the language of the social doctrine of the Church this means building on *subsidiarity* with strength and consistency: it means joining forces! How beautiful it would be if, starting in Rome, an effective network of assistance and solidarity could be created among the cooperatives, for parishes and hospitals, I am thinking of “Bambin Gesù” in particular. And the people, starting from the most needy, would be placed at the centre of all this solidary movement: the people at the centre, the neediest at the centre. This is the mission we are proposing to ourselves! It is your task to invent practical solutions, to make this network function in the actual situations of your local communities, starting

from your history, with your wealth of knowledge in order to carry out this endeavour and at the same time *not to forget that the person is at the centre of it all*.

You have done so much, and there is still so much to do! Let us forge ahead!

The third point of encouragement is in regard to the economy, its relationship to social justice, to the dignity and value of people. It is well known that a certain liberalism believes it is necessary to first produce wealth, no matter how, to then promote some policy of redistribution by the State. First fill your glass and then give to others. Others think it is the entity itself that should lavish the crumbs of accumulated wealth, thereby absolving itself of so-called “social responsibility”. One risks being deceived by doing good while, unfortunately, continuing to only market, without going outside of that fatal circuit of the selfishness of people and of companies which have the god of money at the centre.

Instead we know that establishing a new quality of economy will enable people to grow to their full potential. For example: a member of the cooperative must not be only a supplier, a worker, a well-treated user; he must always be a protagonist, he must grow, through the cooperative, grow personally, socially and professionally, in responsibility, in actualizing hope, in working together. I am not saying that one's income need not increase, but that is not enough: *it is important that the business managed by the cooperative truly grow in a cooperative way, that is by involving everyone*. One plus one makes three! This is the logic.

In Latin etymology, “*cooperari*” means to operate together, to cooperate, and therefore to work, help, contribute to achieve an end. *Never be satisfied with the word “cooperative” without having knowledge of the true substance and spirit of cooperation.*

The fourth suggestion is this: if we look around us it never happens that the economy is renewed in a society that is aging than than growing. The cooperative movement can play an important role in *sustaining, facilitating and also encouraging the life of families*. Realizing conciliation, or better perhaps, *harmonization between work and family*, is a task you have already begun and which you must increasingly achieve. Doing this also means helping women fully develop themselves within their vocation and bring their own talents to fruition. Women free to be leaders, both in business and in the family! I know well that cooperatives already offer so many services and so many organizational formulae, akin to national health services, to meet the needs of everyone, of children and the elderly in particular, from day-care centres to home care. *This is our way to manage the common goods, those goods that must not be the property of only the few and must not seek speculative purposes.*

The fifth point of encouragement may perhaps surprise you! It takes money to do all these things! Cooperatives in general are not established by large capitalists, but rather it is often said that they are structurally undercapitalized. Instead, the Pope tells you: *you must invest, and you must invest*

well! In Italy of course, but not only, it is difficult to obtain public funds to compensate for a shortage of resources. This is the solution I propose to you: *bring good means together with determination in order to accomplish good works*. Collaborate more among cooperative banks and businesses; organize resources to enable families to live with dignity and serenity; pay fair wages to workers, investing above all in initiatives that are truly necessary.

It is not easy to speak about money. It was said by Basil of Caesarea, a Church Father of the fourth century, and then taken up by St Francis of Assisi, that “*money is the devil’s dung*”! Now the Pope also repeats it: “*Money is the devil’s dung*”! When money becomes an idol, it commands the choices of man. And then it destroys man and condemns him. It renders him a servant. Money at the service of life can be managed in a just way by a cooperative, if however, it is an authentic, true cooperative, *where capital is not in command over men but men over capital*.

For this reason I tell you that you are doing well — and I also tell you to always do more of it — to counter and combat the false cooperatives, those which prostitute the very name of cooperatives, namely of a truly good organization, in order to deceive people with aims of profits contrary to those of true and authentic cooperation. Do well, I tell you, because, in the field you operate in, to take on an honourable façade but to instead pursue dishonourable and immoral aims, often directed at exploiting labour, or at manipulating the market, and even at scandalous and corrupt trafficking, is a shameful and extremely serious lie that is absolutely unacceptable. Fight against this! How do you fight? With words alone? With ideas? You fight with fair and true cooperation, the kind which always prevails.

The cooperative economy, if it is authentic, if it wants to play a powerful social function, if it wants to be a protagonist of the future of a nation and of each local community, must pursue transparent and clear aims. *The economy of honesty must be fostered!* A healing economy in the insidious sea of the global economy. A true economy supported by people who have only the *common good* in their heart and mind.

Cooperatives have a strong international tradition. In this too you have been true pioneers. Your international associations were formed well in advance of those which other businesses created in much later times. Now there is the new, great globalization, which is reducing some inequalities but creating many others. The cooperative movement, therefore, cannot remain unrelated to economic and social globalization whose effects reach every country and even into our homes.

But do cooperatives participate in globalization like other businesses? Is there *an original way* which allows cooperatives to face the new challenges of the global market? How can cooperatives participate in the development of cooperation safeguarding the principles of solidarity and justice? I say this to you in order to say it to all the world’s cooperatives: *cooperatives cannot stay locked up at home, but neither can they leave home as if they are not cooperatives*. This is the twofold principle: they cannot stay locked up at home but neither can they leave home as if they are not

cooperatives. No, we cannot consider a cooperative as double-sided. We must have courage and imagination to build the right road to integrate, in the world, development, justice and peace.

Last, do not allow *the cooperative movement's cooperation with your parishes and your dioceses* to live only in your memory. The forms of cooperation need to be different from the original forms, but the journey must always be the same! Where there are old and new existential peripheries, where people are underprivileged, where people are alone and discarded, where people are disrespected, extend a hand to them! Cooperate together, in accordance with each one's vocational identity, holding hands!

I know you have been collaborating for several years with other cooperative-type associations — even though not tied to our history and our traditions — to create an Alliance of Italian cooperatives and partners. For now it is an evolving Alliance, but you hope to arrive at a single Association, an ever expanding Alliance between partners and cooperatives. The Italian cooperative movement has a long tradition compared to that of international cooperatives in the world. The cooperative mission in Italy from its very beginnings has been strongly tied to the identities, values and social powers present in the country. Please, respect this identity! However, often the choices which separate and divide have long been stronger than the choices which instead bring together and unite everyone's efforts. Now you believe you are able to give priority instead to what unites you. And precisely around what unites you, which is the deepest, most authentic, most vital part of the Italian cooperatives, you wish to build your new associative form.

You do well to plan like this, and like this you are taking a step forward! Of course, there are Catholic cooperatives and non-Catholic cooperatives. But is faith saved if we remain closed? I ask: is faith saved if we remain closed? Remaining only among ourselves? Experience your Alliance as Christians, as a fearless response to your faith and to your identity! Faith and identity are the foundation. Go forth, therefore, and walk together with all people of good will! This is also a Christian call, a Christian call to all. Christian values are not only for us, they are for sharing! For sharing with others, with those who do not think as we do but who want the same things that we want. Go forth, have courage! Onward, be creators, "poets"!