



The Holy See

VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE HEADQUARTERS OF WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME (WFP)

Rome
Monday, 13 June 2016

[Multimedia]

Address to the 2016 annual meeting of the Executive Board of the World Food Programme (WFP)

Address to the staff of the World Food Programme (WFP)

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis *To the Executive Board of the World Food Programme*

Rome, 13 June 2016

I thank Executive Director Ertharin Cousin for her invitation to inaugurate the 2016 annual meeting of the Executive Board of the *World Food Programme*, and for her kind words of welcome. I greet Ambassador Stephanie Hochstetter Skinner-Klée, President of this important gathering of representatives of different governments called to promote concrete initiatives in the fight against hunger. In offering a warm greeting to all of you, I express my gratitude for your many efforts and commitments in service of a cause that challenges us all: combatting the hunger from which so many of our brothers and sisters are suffering.

A few moments ago, I prayed before the Memorial Wall, a testimony to the sacrifice made by members of this organization who gave their lives so that, in complex and difficult situations, others would not go hungry. We remember them best by continuing to fight for the great goal of “zero hunger”. Those names, enshrined at the entrance of this building, are an eloquent sign that the WFP, far from a cold and anonymous institution, is an effective means for the international

community to carry out ever more robust and productive activities. The credibility of an institution is not based on its declarations, but on the work accomplished by its members. It is based on their witness.

We live in an interconnected world marked by instant communications. Geographical distances seem to be shrinking. We can immediately know what is happening on the other side of the planet. Communications technologies, by bringing us face to face with so many tragic situations, can help, and have helped, to mobilize responses of compassion and solidarity. Paradoxically though, this apparent closeness created by the information highway seems daily to be breaking down. An information overload is gradually leading to the “naturalization” – pardon the neologism – of extreme poverty. In other words, little by little we are growing immune to other people’s tragedies, seeing them as something “natural”. We are bombarded by so many images that we see pain, but do not touch it; we hear weeping, but do not comfort it; we see thirst but do not satisfy it. All those human lives turn into one more news story. While the headlines may change, the pain, the hunger and the thirst remain; they do not go away.

This tendency – or temptation – demands something more of us. It also makes us realize the fundamental role that institutions like your own play on the global scene. Today we cannot be satisfied simply with being aware of the problems faced by many of our brothers and sisters. Statistics do not satisfy us. It is not enough to offer broad reflections or engage in endless discussion, constantly repeating things everyone knows. We need to “de-naturalize” extreme poverty, to stop seeing it as a statistic rather than a reality. Why? Because poverty has a face! It has the face of a child; it has the face of a family; it has the face of people, young and old. It has the face of widespread unemployment and lack of opportunity. It has the face of forced migrations, and of empty or destroyed homes.

We cannot “naturalize” the fact that so many people are starving. We cannot simply say that their situation is the result of blind fate and that nothing can be done about it. Once poverty no longer has a face, we can yield to the temptation of discussing “hunger”, “food” and “violence” as concepts, without reference to the real people knocking on our doors today. Without faces and stories, human lives become statistics and we run the risk of bureaucratizing the sufferings of others. Bureaucracies shuffle papers; compassion – not pity, but com-passion, suffering with – deals with people.

Here I believe that we have much to do. In addition to everything already being done, we need to work at “denaturalizing” and “debureaucratizing” the poverty and hunger of our brothers and sisters. This requires us to intervene on different scales and levels, focusing on real people who are suffering and starving, while drawing upon an abundance of enthusiasm and potential that we need to help exploit.

1. *“Denaturalizing” poverty*

During [my visit to the FAO](#) for the Second International Conference on Nutrition, I spoke of the paradox that, while there is enough food for everyone, yet “not all can eat”, even as we witness “waste, excessive consumption and the use of food for other purposes” ([Address to the Plenary of the Conference](#) [20 November 2014], 3).

Let us be clear. Food shortage is not something natural, it is not a given, something obvious or self-evident. The fact that today, well into the twenty-first century, so many people suffer from this scourge is due to a selfish and wrong distribution of resources, to the “merchandizing” of food. The earth, abused and exploited, continues in many parts of the world to yield its fruits, offering us the best of itself. The faces of the starving remind us that we have foiled its purposes. We have turned a gift with a universal destination into a privilege enjoyed by a select few. We have made the fruits of the earth – a gift to humanity – *commodities* for a few, thus engendering exclusion. The consumerism in which our societies are immersed has made us grow accustomed to excess and to the daily waste of food. At times we are no longer able even to see the just value of food, which goes far beyond mere economic parameters. We need to be reminded that food discarded is, in a certain sense stolen, from the table of poor and the starving. This reality invites us to reflect on the problem of unused and wasted food, and to identify ways and means which, by taking this problem seriously, can serve as a vehicle of solidarity and sharing with those most in need (cf. [Catechesis](#), 5 June 2013).

2. “Debureaucratizing” hunger

We need to be frank: some issues have been bureaucratized. Some activities have been “shelved”. Everyone is aware of the present instability of the world situation. Lately war and the threat of war have been uppermost in our minds and our discussions. Thus, given the wide gamut of present conflicts, arms seem to have gained unprecedented importance, completely sidelining other ways of resolving the issues at hand. This approach is so deeply engrained and taken for granted that it prevents food supplies from being distributed in war zones, in violation of the most fundamental and age-old principles and rules of international law.

We thus find ourselves faced with a strange paradox. Whereas forms of aid and development projects are obstructed by involved and incomprehensible political decisions, skewed ideological visions and impenetrable customs barriers, weaponry is not. It makes no difference where arms come from; they circulate with brazen and virtually absolute freedom in many parts of the world. As a result, wars are fed, not persons. In some cases, hunger itself is used as a weapon of war. The death count multiplies because the number of people dying of hunger and thirst is added to that of battlefield casualties and the civilian victims of conflicts and attacks.

We are fully aware of this, yet we allow our conscience to be anesthetized, with the result that we become desensitized. We may come up with justifications, but in the face of tragedies like these, such anesthesia is all the more grave. Force then becomes our one way of acting, and power

becomes our only goal. Those who are most vulnerable not only suffer the effects of war but also see obstacles placed in the way of help. Hence it is urgent to debureaucratize everything that keeps humanitarian assistance projects from being realized. In this regard, you play a fundamental role, for we need true heroes capable of blazing trails, building bridges, opening channels concerned primarily with the faces of those who suffer. Initiatives of the international community must similarly be directed to this end.

It is not a question of harmonizing interests that remain linked to narrow national interests or shameful forms of selfishness. Rather, it is a matter of the member states decisively increasing their commitment to cooperate with the *World Food Program*. In this way the WFP will not only be able to respond to urgent needs, but also to carry out sound projects and promote long-term development programmes, as requested by each of the governments and consonant with the needs of peoples.

Through its mission and its activities, the World Food Programme has shown that it is possible to coordinate scientific knowledge, technical decisions and practical actions with efforts aimed at obtaining resources and distributing them impartially, that is to say, with respect for the needs of those who receive them and the will of the donors. This method, in those areas that are most depressed and poor, can and must ensure an appropriate development of local capacities and gradually eliminate external dependence, while at the same time making it possible to reduce food loss and to ensure that nothing goes to waste. In a word, the WFP is an excellent example of how one can work throughout the world to eradicate hunger through a better allotment of human and material resources, strengthening the local community. In this sense, I encourage you to move forward. Do not grow weary, for it is easy to do, or let problems dissuade you. Believe in what you are doing and pursue it enthusiastically. That is how the seed of generosity grows and bears abundant fruit. Allow yourselves the luxury of dreaming. We need dreamers to carry forward these projects.

The Catholic Church, in fidelity to her mission, wishes to cooperate with every initiative that defends and protects the dignity of persons, especially of those whose rights are violated. In implementing this urgent priority of “zero hunger”, I assure you of our complete support and encouragement for the efforts in course.

“I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink”. These words embody one of the axioms of Christianity. Independent of creeds and convictions, they can serve as a golden rule for our peoples. What is true of individual peoples is also true for humanity as a whole. Humanity plays out its future by its ability to respond to the hunger and thirst of its brothers and sisters. In that ability to come to the aid of the hungry and thirsty, we can measure the pulse of our humanity. For this reason, I desire that the fight to eradicate the hunger and thirst of our brothers and sisters, and with our brothers and sisters, will continue to challenge us not to grow weary and to keep dreaming – both of these! – in seeking creative solutions of change and

transformation.

May Almighty God sustain with his blessing the work of your hands. Thank you.

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis
To the Staff of the World Food Programme

Rome, 13 June 2016

I am supposed to give this address in Spanish, but the majority of you do not understand Spanish, you understand Italian, because you live in Italy. And speeches are so boring! So I will hand over the speech, so that it can be given to you later, and I will now say a few words spontaneously from my heart.

The first thing I want to say to you, in my poor Italian, is thank you. Thank you for doing the hidden work, the work that goes on “behind-the-scenes”, that which is not seen but makes it possible for everything to move forward. You are like the foundation of a building: without its foundation, the building cannot stand. You can do many things, many projects, and you do many things in the world, in the fight against hunger, as do many courageous people. Thank you for your support, your hidden help. Your names appear only on the list of personnel — and at the end of the month on your paycheck — but outside nobody knows your names. Yet your names make this great work possible, this great work in the fight against hunger. Due to a little work, a little sacrifice, your hidden sacrifice, be it small or large, many children can eat, a lot of hunger has been defeated. Thank you very much.

When I heard the Programme’s Director speak, I thought to myself: this is a brave woman! And I think that you all have this courage: the courage to carry forward this “behind-the-scenes” work and to help. There is the courage of those people that you see, because on the body there are feet, hands, and also the face: we see the face, but we do not see the feet because they are hidden in shoes; you are the feet and the hands, which have also supported the courage of your “martyrs”, so to speak, of your witnesses. Never, never forget the names of those who are written there, at the entrance. They were able to do those things because of they had courage, because of the faith they had in their work, but also because they were supported by your work. Thank you very much. And I ask you to pray for me, that I too can fight against hunger. Thank you!

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[Prepared speech by the Holy Father]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

Good day! I am happy to be able to meet you in this simple and familiar setting, typical of the style with which you carry out your work in the service of so many of our brothers and sisters. In you, they see reflected that face of today's world that is concerned for solidarity and mutual assistance. My thoughts also turn to your many colleagues throughout the world who cooperate with the World Food Programme. I thank all of you for your warm and friendly welcome.

The Executive Director has told me of the important work which you do with great competence, generosity and no small sacrifice, often in situations that are challenging and insecure as a result of natural or human causes. The breadth and gravity of the problems addressed by the World Food Programme demands your steady enthusiasm, unstinting commitment and constant readiness to serve. Together with continuing professional formation, great sensitivity and intuition, you are called to have a deep sense of compassion, without which everything else would lack real effectiveness and meaning.

The WFP has entrusted you with a lofty mission. The success of that mission depends in no small part on your ability not to get bogged down in bureaucratic details, but to bring initiative, imagination and professionalism to your daily work, as you seek new and effective ways to eliminate the malnutrition and hunger suffered by so many people throughout the world. They are pleading for our attention and concern. That is why it is important not to get weighed down by dossiers but to see, behind each of those papers, a real person with a real and often painful story. The secret is to see behind every dossier a human face in need of assistance. Hearing the cry of the poor will help you to avoid viewing each case in cold bureaucratic terms. We can never do enough to eliminate so terrible a phenomenon as hunger.

Hunger is one of the major threats to peace in our world. It is a threat that we cannot be content merely to deplore or to study academically. It has to be decisively faced and urgently resolved. Each of us, within his or her own area of responsibility, must do everything possible to bring about a definitive solution to this human tragedy, which degrades and shortens the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters. When it comes to helping those who are starving, none can be exempted or think they are excused because the problem is too big, or one that does not affect them.

Development – human, social, technical and economic – is the essential way to ensure that each person, family, community and people can meet its basic needs. This means that our work is not in the service of some abstract idea or the defence of some theoretical dignity, but aimed at protecting the life of each human being. In the poorest and most depressed areas, this means providing food in the case of emergencies, but also enabling access to funding and technical resources, employment and microcredit, and in this way ensuring that the local population increases its ability to respond to unexpected crises.

Here I am not referring simply to material matters. What is needed above all else is a moral commitment that makes it possible for me to feel responsibility for the person beside me, as well as for the overall goal of the programme as a whole. You are called to advance and protect this commitment through a service that might appear at first glance to be exclusively technical in nature. Instead, what you are achieving are actions that call for a great moral strength, because they help build up the common good in each country and in the entire international community.

In the face of so many challenges and crises, it might appear that the future of humanity will simply involve facing ever new and interrelated problems and threats, unpredictable both in their extent and in their complexity. This is something you know quite well from your own experience. But it should not dishearten us. Encourage and help one another to avoid the temptation of discouragement or indifference. More importantly, believe firmly that your daily efforts are helping to give our world a human face and to make it into a place whose cardinal points are compassion, solidarity, mutual assistance and gratuity. The greater your generosity, your tenacity and your faith, the more will multilateral forms of cooperation be able to devise suitable solutions to these troubling problems. The more they will succeed in expanding shortsighted and selfish visions, in opening new paths to hope, a just human development, sustainability and efforts to close the gap of unjust economic inequalities, which so greatly harm the most vulnerable members of our human family.

Upon each of you and your families, and upon your contributions to the World Food Programme, I invoke God's abundant blessings.

I ask all of you to pray for me, from the heart, or at least to wish me well. I need this very much.

Thank you.