



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

HOLY MASS AT THE LIVING HISTORY FARMS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Des Moines

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Here in the heartland of America, in the middle of the bountiful fields at harvest time, I come to celebrate the Eucharist. As I stand in your presence in this period of autumn harvest, those words which are repeated whenever people gather for the Eucharist seem to be so appropriate: "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".

As one who has always been close to nature, let me speak to you today about the land, the earth, and that "which earth has given and human hands have made".

1. The land is God's gift entrusted to people from the very beginning. It is God's gift, given by a loving Creator as a means of sustaining the life which he had created. But the land is not only God's gift; it is also man's responsibility. Man, himself created from the dust of the earth (cf. *Gen 3 :7*), was made its master (cf. *Gen 1 :26*).

In order to bring forth fruit, the land would depend upon the genius and skillfulness, the sweat and the toil of the people to whom God would entrust it. Thus the food which would sustain life on earth is willed by God to be both that "which earth has given and human hands have made".

To all of you who are farmers and all who are associated with agricultural production I want to say

this: the Church highly esteems your work. Christ himself showed his esteem for agricultural life when he described God his Father as the "vinedresser" (*Jn 15 :1*). You cooperate with the Creator, the "vinedresser", in sustaining and nurturing life. You fulfill the command of God given at the very beginning: "Fill the earth and subdue it" (*Gen 1 :28*). Here in the heartland of America, the valleys and hills have been blanketed with grain, the herds and the flocks have multiplied many times over. By hard work you have become masters of the earth and you have subdued it. By reason of the abundant fruitfulness which modern agricultural advances have made possible, you support the lives of millions who themselves do not work on the land, but who live because of what you produce. Mindful of this, I make my own the words of my beloved predecessor Paul VI : "It is the dignity of those who work on the land and of all those engaged in different levels of research and action in the field of agricultural development which must be unceasingly proclaimed and promoted" (*Address to the World Food Conference, November 9, 1974, no. 4*).

What then are the attitudes that should pervade man's relationship to the land? As always we must look for the answer beginning with Jesus, for, as Saint Paul says : "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus" (*Phil 2 :5*). In the life of Jesus, we see a real closeness to the land. In his teaching, he referred to the "birds of the air" (*Mt 6 :26*), the "lilies of the field" (*Mt 7 :17*). He talked about the farmer who went out to sow the seed (*Mt 13 :4 ff*); and he referred to his heavenly father as the "vinedresser" (*Jn 15 :1*), and to himself as the "good shepherd" (*Jn 10 :14*). This closeness to nature, this spontaneous awareness of creation as a gift from God, as well as the blessing of a close-knit family—characteristics of farm life in every age including our own—these were part of the life of Jesus. Therefore I invite you to let your attitudes always be the same as those of Christ Jesus.

2. Three attitudes in particular are appropriate for rural life. In the first place : gratitude. Recall the first words of Jesus in the Gospel we have just heard, words of gratitude to his heavenly father: "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise". Let this be your attitude as well. Every day the farmer is reminded of how much he depends upon God. From the heavens come the rain, the wind and the sunshine. They occur without the farmer's command or control. The farmer prepares the soil, plants the seed, and cultivates the crop. But God makes it grow; he alone is the source of life. Even the natural disasters, such as hailstorms and drought, tornadoes or floods, remind the farmer of his dependance upon God. Surely it was this awareness that prompted the early pilgrims to America to establish the feast which you call "Thanksgiving". After every harvest, whatever it may have been that year, with humility and thankfulness the farmer makes his own the prayer of Jesus: "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise".

Secondly, the land must be conserved with care since it is intended to be fruitful for generation upon generation. You who live in the heartland of America have been entrusted with some of the earth's best land : the soil so rich in minerals, the climate so favorable for producing bountiful crops, with fresh water and unpolluted air available all around you. You are stewards of some of the most important resources God has given to the world. Therefore conserve the land well, so

that your children's children and generations after them will inherit an even richer land than was entrusted to you. But also remember what the heart of your vocation is. While it is true here that farming today provides an economic livelihood for the farmer, still it will always be more than an enterprise of profit-making. In farming, you cooperate with the Creator in the very sustenance of life on earth.

In the third place, I want to speak about generosity, a generosity which arises from the fact that "God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 69). You who are farmers today are stewards of a gift from God which was intended for the good of all humanity. You have the potential to provide food for the millions who have nothing to eat and thus help to rid the world of famine. To you I direct the same question asked by Paul VI five years ago: "if the potential of nature is immense, if that of the mastery of the human genius over the universe seems almost unlimited, what is it that is too often missing ... except that generosity, that anxiety which is stimulated by the sight of the sufferings and the miseries of the poor, that deep conviction that the whole family suffers when one of its members is in distress?" (*Address to the World Food Conference*, November 9, 1974, no. 9).

Recall the time when Jesus saw the hungry crowd gathered on the hillside. What was his response? He did not content himself with expressing his compassion. He gave his disciples the command: "Give them something to eat yourselves" (*Mt* 14 :16). Did he not intend those same words for us today, for us who live at the closing of the twentieth century, for us who have the means available to feed the hungry of the world? Let us respond generously to his command by sharing the fruit of our labor, by contributing to others the knowledge we have gained, by being the promoters of rural development everywhere and by defending the right to work of the rural population, since every person has a right to useful employment.

3. Farmers everywhere provide bread for all humanity, but it is Christ alone who is the bread of life. He alone satisfies the deepest hunger of humanity. As Saint Augustine said : "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (*Confessions* I, 1). While we are mindful of the physical hunger of millions of our brothers and sisters on all continents, at this Eucharist we are reminded that the deepest hunger lies in the human soul. To all who acknowledge this hunger within them Jesus says: "Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you". My brothers and sisters in Christ: let us listen to these words with all our heart. They are directed to everyone of us. To all who till the soil, to all who benefit from the fruit of their labors, to every man and woman on earth, Jesus says : "Come to me ... and I will refresh you". Even if all the physical hunger of the world were satisfied, even if everyone who is hungry were fed by his or her own labor or by the generosity of others, the deepest hunger of man would still exist.

We are reminded in the letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians : "All that matters is that one is created anew". Only Christ can create one anew; and this new creation finds its beginning only in his

Cross and Resurrection. In Christ alone all creation is restored to its proper order. Therefore, I say: Come, all of you, to Christ. He is the bread of life. Come to Christ and you will never be hungry again.

Bring with you to Christ the products of your hands, the fruit of the land, that "which earth has given and human hands have made". At this altar these gifts will be transformed into the Eucharist of the Lord.

Bring with you your efforts to make the land fruitful, your labour and your weariness. At this altar, because of the life, death and Resurrection of Christ, all human activity is sanctified, lifted up and fulfilled.

Bring with you the poor, the sick, the exiled and the hungry; bring all who are weary and find life burdensome. At this altar they will be refreshed, for his yoke is easy and his burden light.

Above all, bring your families and dedicate them anew to Christ, so that they may continue to be the working, living and loving community where nature is revered, where burdens are shared and where the Lord is praised in gratitude.

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