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Hunger: The Biggest Problem That Can Be Fixed

Archbishop Luigi Travaglino Talks of the Holy See at FAO

By H. Sergio Mora

ROME, JUNE 29, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Natural disasters cannot be avoided, but world hunger can be -- and 1 billion people shouldn't be suffering from it, says the Holy See's observer at the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

Archbishop Luigi Travaglino said this when he spoke with ZENIT as the FAO is having its 37th session in Rome through July 2. The Pope will receive the participants in audience Friday.

ZENIT: Archbishop, FAO's 37th session has begun and the Holy See is among the participants. Why does the Holy See take part?

Archbishop Travaglino: The nature of the Holy See's participation in FAO and the reason its action is a priority, must be linked to the vast presence of the Apostolic See in multilateral diplomatic activity, in the desire to affirm the fundamental value of human coexistence. Respect for man's dignity is made concrete by ensuring that each person is guaranteed the right to food security. And, to accomplish this, not only is technical action needed, but also a vision open to sharing, and even more so to concrete solidarity.

ZENIT: When did the Holy See's work in FAO begin?

Archbishop Travaglino: The Holy See has been a permanent observer at the FAO since 1948.

It is important to note that it was the first U.N. inter-governmental organization that had a Holy See presence. Moreover, it is telling that Pope Paul VI visited the FAO once, on Nov. 13, 1970, for its 25th anniversary; Pope John Paul II visited three times, on Nov. 12, 1979, on the occasion of the 21st session; on Dec. 5, 1992, on the occasion of the International Nutrition Conference, and on

Nov. 13, 1996, on the occasion of the opening of the World Summit on Food. The present Pontiff, Benedict XVI made a visit to the organization on Nov. 14, 2009, during the World Summit on Food Security.

ZENIT: What is the Holy See's task in this entity of the United Nations?

Archbishop Travaglino: The Holy See has always worked in FAO to create occasions for reflection that concur with political decisions, or to specify technical interventions that correspond to the needs of those who do not have their daily bread.

Specifically, it means to work for agricultural development, to adapt production to needs, to distribute foods with special attention to the rural world and its needs and components, beginning with the family enterprise, which finds space in the reflections of Church social teaching.

Because of this, as well as for other genuine aims dealing with the service of the person, the Holy See gives its moral support and readiness for action, and makes an effective contribution through the structures of the Church, which are present throughout various areas and operate with direct knowledge of persons' real needs.

ZENIT: In 1996, FAO indicated an objective: to halve hunger by 2015. Why are we so far from this objective?

Archbishop Travaglino: Recent data indicates that approximately 1 billion people suffer hunger and malnutrition, in different situations and degrees. Meanwhile we are all aware that the lack of food security is not a natural event or calamity that is beyond control.

Worse yet, data consistently show us that we are before a governable phenomenon. Especially now that recent episodes have brought to light how hunger has a de-stabilizing effect as it is placed in the widest context of poverty, which is the cause that most conditions the life of persons and of whole communities.

To understand in depth the causes of this situation and the distancing from the objective to halve the number of hungry people by 2015 we are all invited to reflect, not only FAO but all the member states, civil society and all of us.

Indeed, in face of specific cyclical crises caused by environmental factors or caused by man, we know how important it is to address the immediate and remote causes.

ZENIT: Indeed, but what is to be done, concretely?

Archbishop Travaglino: Suffice it to recall that it is necessary to stop the lack of access to the food market that developing countries suffer, or the difficulty with trading local products without being penalized by difficult barriers at customs; and, more than that, to review advanced countries' tendencies to allocate subsidies to the production and exportation of agriculture.

Thus, the battle against hunger and malnutrition meets with unjustified and egotistical walls, with attitudes almost of indifference or with daily gestures that lead to excessive consumption and that, worse still, destroy resources, or allocate agricultural products to non-nutritional uses.

The efforts of the international community are supported and fostered concretely because as the daily news shows, they affect relations between peoples, the common good, and cooperation with countries that have a food deficit.

On Nov. 16, 2009, addressing the heads of state and government present in FAO for the World Summit on Food Security, the Pope said that it is not enough to talk of cooperation and aid, but that it is necessary to put concrete solidarity in motion.

ZENIT What are the most appropriate strategies to combat hunger in the world today?

Archbishop Travaglino: At present FAO insists on the need to give new vigor to the significance of agricultural work and its central role in the economy, in stability and in the social order.

To work in this direction means to avoid the negative results of progress, beginning with the abandonment of agricultural work that has among its effects a diminution of production and aggravation of misery in rural areas. I think this is the first strategy that must be implemented.

Then there is the need for commitment by governments, international institutions and civil society to understand the importance of a sustainable use of natural resources, beginning with biodiversity, which is the manifold richness of creation, considered necessary for agricultural work, techniques and methods of production. In fact, to preserve vegetable and animal species, we must not only avoid the extinction of some varieties, but also foster a search geared to perfecting the ability to adapt oneself to climatic or environmental changes in order to respond to food needs or to agricultural activity in particular regions.

Moreover, food security requires guaranteeing a correct protection of human health and evaluating carefully the risks of eventual damage derived from natural agents or contamination determined by human activity. The search for new methods and types of production cannot be separated from the "approach of precaution" that, not limiting resources or elaboration techniques connected to biotechnologies, calls for a diffusion of information and knowledge to avoid risks of a different sort.

On Nov. 12, 2000, the occasion of the Jubilee of the Agricultural World, Blessed John Paul II said that a principle must be recalled in agricultural production itself, when it is a question of promoting it with biotechnologies, which is that it cannot be evaluated on the basis of immediate economic interests. It is necessary to subject them to a rigorous scientific control to avoid their ending up by causing disasters for man's health and the future of the Earth.

ZENIT: What are the prospects or desires for FAO's future?

Archbishop Travaglino: Among the first fundamental rights is the right to nutrition, which not only is an integral part of the right to life of each human being, but is an essential condition that cannot be limited because of demographic considerations according to which the increase of the population would cause a lack of food. It is useless to state that "to be numerous means to be poor." Instead we need to make the necessary efforts to guarantee an adequate distribution, shared rules and mechanisms for just trade.

I think this prospect is perceived by FAO's action. It is reflected in its strategies for the future, the first changes in the structure determined by the implementation of the reform and, specifically, in the hunger emergency, the role assumed by the Food Security Committee called to give answers in terms of prevention and policies, such as aid, with the participation of the different governmental and non-governmental institutions that operate to guarantee the right to food, taking to heart the future of the human family.

These are the lines that should also guide the future of the organization so that it will be able to respond to the expectations of the member states and to implement solutions in favor of those who suffer hunger and malnutrition.

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