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Facing hunger, pope demands an end to 'opulence and waste'

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 16, 2009 NCR Today

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tCalling hunger ?the most cruel and concrete sign of poverty,? Pope Benedict XVI today told a special summit of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization that ?opulence and waste are no longer acceptable when the tragedy of hunger is assuming ever greater proportions.?

tThe pontiff called for urgent action to combat world hunger, to protect the global environment and to rethink lifestyle choices in the West in his address to the Food and Agriculture Organization, which is based in Rome.

tBenedict?s decision to visit the Rome headquarters of FAO, rather than to insist that participants in the summit travel across town to the Vatican to be received in audience, was seen as a sign of the importance the pontiff attaches both to the issue of hunger and to the institution of the United Nations.

tAccording to statistics collected by FAO, the global economic crisis and a spike in food prices in parts of the developing world have driven the number of hungry people in the world from 800,000 five years ago to more than one billion today. In his address to the FAO summit this morning, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon said that some 17,000 children die of hunger every day.

tSpeaking in French, Benedict XVI said the underlying problem isn?t a lack of food, echoing a point frequently made by development experts and anti-hunger activists.

?Sufficient food is produced on a global scale to satisfy both current demands and those in the foreseeable future,? the pope said. What?s missing, the pope said, is instead ?a network of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water.?

In particular, Benedict insisted ?there is no cause-and-effect relationship between population growth and hunger? ? an indirect reply to critics of the church?s ban on contraception, which is sometimes blamed for impeding efforts to limit population growth.

The pontiff asserted that ?food and access to water? [are] ?universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.? Those rights, the pope argued, take on meaning as part of a network of rights ?beginning with the primary one, the right to life.?

Benedict asserted a clear link between hunger and environmental degradation.

?Protection of the environment challenges the modern world to guarantee a harmonious form of development, respectful of the design of God?s creation and therefore capable of safeguarding the planet,? the pope said.

?The links between environmental security and the disturbing phenomenon of climate change need to be explored further,? Benedict said, ?focusing on the central importance of the human person, and especially of the populations most at risk from both phenomena.?

The pope also called for a change in lifestyles in rich countries, in the direction of greater simplicity, less conspicuous consumption, and more solidarity with the poor.

?Norms, legislation, development plans and investments are not enough,? he said. ?What is needed is a change in the lifestyles of individuals and communities, in habits of consumption and in perceptions of what is genuinely needed.?

Insisting that feeding hungry people is a moral imperative that ?brooks neither delay nor compromise,? the pontiff pledged that ?the Catholic Church will always be concerned for efforts to defeat hunger.?

Despite the pope?s strong words, the FAO summit does not appear likely to approve any new financial commitment from developed nations to attack hunger. Instead, the summit endorsed a five-point program this morning calling for greater ?national, regional and global coordination? of anti-hunger resources.

Given that hunger tends to be especially acute in the global South, it?s an issue destined to attract a growing share of Catholic interest. Of the roughly 1.2 billion Catholics in the world today, some 720 million, or two-thirds, live in the southern hemisphere, making hunger a top-shelf pastoral priority for Catholic bishops, clergy and lay activists in those regions of the world.

The full text of Benedict XVI's address to FAO may be found here:
http://212.77.1.245/news_services/bulletin/news/24667.php?index=24667&lang=it#TESTO%20IN%20LINGUA%20IN

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