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Pope calls hunger, malnutrition 'truly scandalous'

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It is "truly scandalous" that the global level of food production is enough to feed the planet's people, yet millions of people are malnourished and millions more "must be satisfied with the crumbs falling from the table," Pope Francis said.

Addressing the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization conference Thursday, Pope Francis said the global financial crisis obviously has made the situation worse, but it cannot continue "to be used as an alibi."

Food is not simply a commodity but is a human necessity and right, he told 400 delegates from about 200 countries.

"The human person and human dignity risk turning into vague abstractions in the face of issues such as the use of force, war, malnutrition, marginalization, the violation of basic liberties and financial speculation, which presently affects the price of food, treating it like any other merchandise and overlooking its primary function," the pope told the delegates.

But the problems affecting agriculture, forestry and fisheries in both developed and developing countries, he said, are not simply technical and any solutions must recognize that "the human person and human dignity are not simply catchwords, but pillars for creating shared rules and structures."

The current crisis was not just caused by financial factors, Pope Francis said, it also "is a consequence of a crisis of convictions and values, including those which are the basis of international life," particularly the value of solidarity.

Addressing the conference on what was World Refugee Day, Pope Francis also spoke about how "grave food crises" lead to the uprooting of individuals, families and entire communities.

FAO is dedicating its work in the coming year to rural families, which the pope said is an important opportunity "to reaffirm the conviction that every family is the principal setting for the growth of each individual, since it is through the family that human beings become open to live and the natural need for relationships with others."

"Over and over again," he said, "we see that family bonds are essential for the stability of relationships in society, for the work of education and for integral human development, for they are inspired by love, responsible intergenerational solidarity and mutual trust."

Archbishop Luigi Travaglino, head of the Vatican delegation to the FAO conference, addressed the delegates Wednesday and called for the adoption of "specific instruments" aimed at improving food security for the poor. He also urged delegates to favor "a change in lifestyles marked by excessive consumption, the waste of food and the non-food use of agricultural products."

In particular, he said, rural communities must be involved in developing strategies that increase food production and distribution in a way that recognizes the needs of individuals and communities now and in the future.

If production criteria focus only on profit, he said, "they risk creating greater price volatility with negative impacts on food security and nutrition."

International and national policies in agriculture, forestry and fisheries also must recognize the need to preserve biodiversity, not only because it is an environmental imperative, but also because the reduction of species has serious harmful impacts on available food and on employment.

Rural communities and indigenous peoples, he said, "in many cases are the only custodians of the resources of creation."

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