Pope Leo XIV: “Defeating hunger is the path to peace”

Pope Leo XIV visits the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome to mark World Food Day and the 80th anniversary of the organization’s founding. In his address he reaffirms the Holy See’s closeness to the institution and calls for a shared global commitment to end hunger and malnutrition.

Sandwiched between the Caracalla Baths, the Aventine Hill and the Circus Maximus and the high Roman ideals they represent, the FAO headquarters in Rome is a microcosm that represents the world. Its mission to defeat hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition in a sustainable way, upholding the dignity of every human being, resonates in a world where conflict, the climate crisis, forced migration and a widening gap between the rich and poor, cast doubt on the goodwill of the international community to place the human person above profit in the name of justice and peace.

That’s what Pope Leo XIV did on Thursday morning when he addressed a star-studded audience of UN and world leaders and goodwill ambassadors gathered at FAO to mark World Food Day and the organisation’s 80th anniversary.

“We cannot be content with proclaiming values; we must embody them,” he said, calling for a renewed ethical foundation: “Slogans do not lift people from misery. We must place the human person above profit and guarantee food security, access to resources, and sustainable rural development.”

His visit, in the footsteps of all his predecessors starting with Pope Paul VI in 1970, provided him with the occasion to renew the Holy See’s long-standing support for the UN agency and to urge the international community to redouble its efforts to eradicate hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity — evils he described as “a moral wound that afflicts the whole human family.”

“Whoever suffers from hunger is my brother”

Choosing to speak both in Spanish and in English, the Pope said that the fight against hunger “is not only a political or economic task but a profoundly human and moral duty.”

“Whoever suffers from hunger is not a stranger,” he said. “He is my brother, and I must help him without delay.”

He recalled that eighty years after the FAO’s creation, millions of people still lack adequate food and nutrition.

“Ending these evils,” he said, “requires the contribution of all: governments, institutions, civil society, and every individual person.”

A collective moral failure

Citing current data that show over 673 million people go to bed hungry and 2.3 billion lack a nutritious diet, the Pope said these are not abstract numbers but “broken lives and mothers unable to feed their children.”

He denounced “an economy without a soul” and a system of resource distribution that leaves vast populations in misery, calling the persistence of hunger in an age of abundance “a collective moral failure and a historical fault.”

“Food must never be a weapon”

Pope Leo expressed deep concern that food is once again being used as a weapon of war, calling this a “cruel strategy that denies men, women, and children their most basic right — the right to life.”

Recalling the UN Security Council’s past condemnation of starvation as a war crime, he lamented that “this consensus seems to have faded.” The silence of those dying of hunger, he said, “cries out in the conscience of humanity,” urging all nations to act decisively.

“Hunger is not humanity’s destiny but its downfall,” the Pope said. “It is not just a problem to be solved; it is a cry that rises to heaven.”

An ethical vision of politics

The Pope did not neglect to reaffirm a concept that was dear to his predecessor, Pope Francis, who never tired of pointing out that to throw food away means to throw people away.

He too condemned the waste of food while others starve, and urged world leaders to end “outrageous paradoxes” and to “awaken from the lethargy that dulls our compassion.”

“Water is life, water is food”

Referring to this year’s World Food Day theme, the Pope said the message — “Water is life, water is food. Leave no one behind” — calls all people to act together.

“At a time marked by division and indifference, unity through cooperation is not just an ideal but a duty,” he said. “Only by joining hands can we build a future in which food security is a right, not a privilege.”

He paid special tribute to women, whom he described as “the silent architects of survival, the first to sow hope and the careful stewards of creation.” Recognizing their contribution, he said, is “not only a matter of justice, but a guarantee of a more humane and lasting food system.”

Renewing multilateral cooperation

Pope Leo reaffirmed the importance of multilateralism and dialogue among nations, urging that the voices of the poor be heard directly. “We must build a vision that allows every actor in the international community to respond effectively to the genuine needs of those we are called to serve,” he said.

He also made a heartfelt appeal for the many peoples suffering hunger and violence in Ukraine, Gaza, Haiti, Afghanistan, Mali, the Central African Republic, Yemen, and South Sudan, insisting that “the international community cannot look the other way.”

“Give them something to eat”

Ending his address, the Holy Father quoted Jesus’ words to His disciples, *“Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37)*. This Gospel command, he added, “remains a pressing challenge for the international community.”

“Do not tire of asking God,” he concluded, “for the courage and the energy to work for a justice that will yield lasting and beneficial results. You can always count on the solidarity of the Holy See and of the entire Church, which stands ready to serve the poorest and most disadvantaged throughout the world.”

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