



# Fruit of the Earth

*and Work of Human Hands*

*A 25th Anniversary Reflection on the Ontario Bishops' 1989 Pastoral Letter, The People and the Land*



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Lent 2014



Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in his 2010 World Day of Peace message, wrote: “if you want to cultivate peace protect creation”. His New Year’s Day plea for peace continued with these challenging words: “Can we remain indifferent before such a reality as the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas?”

Our new Holy Father, Francis, returns to this theme in his January 1, 2014 World Day of Peace message where he notes: “the agricultural sector is the primary productive sector with the crucial vocation of cultivating and protecting natural resources in order to feed humanity.” Pope Francis asks us: “How are we using the earth’s resources to feed our world?”

In 1989 the Social Affairs Commission of the Ontario Catholic Bishops offered a document about the agricultural community entitled “The People and the Land”. Now, twenty five years later, we bring to our Ontario Catholic faithful an early 21st century look at Ontario’s farming issues in the reflection “Fruit of the Earth and Work of Human Hands “ so that we can learn and better understand what our Creator has blessed us with, and carefully consider the questions and challenges that Catholic social teaching has to offer concerning Ontario’s farming community.

Most Rev. John Pazak, C.Ss.R  
Chair, Social Affairs Commission  
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“As bishops, let us be clear. We believe in the family farm for a host of reasons: the preservation and enhancement of family values, stability and shared prosperity for society, assured food productivity, stewardship of the land, long-term environmental protection, national food security, and the building up of community.”

*-The People and the Land, 1989*

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# Introduction

As Catholics our traditions, and particularly the Eucharist, the source and summit of our faith, put us always in touch with our rootedness in the earth. We bring to the sacrifice of the mass an offering that is “fruit of the vine and work of human hands”.

Farmers witness the benevolence of God in the field, literally providing the bread and wine for the Lord’s Table. While we may be aware of God’s presence, and of the powerful symbolism linking our nourishment around the family table to that nourishment received at the Table of the Lord, we are often less aware of this connection in our everyday life. Today, farmers and consumers alike have almost forgotten that everything we have is gift from God, and they lack the understanding of food as Divine Providence, expressed in the Eucharist as “fruit of the vine and work of human hands”. When this is understood and remembered, the Eucharistic response of thanksgiving will overflow in a deep and abiding respect for Creation, and for the whole people of God.

Twenty five years after Ontario bishops in “The People and the Land” proclaimed the need for sustainable food production by support for both the people and the land, it is ironic perhaps that consumers have never been more aware of the issues connected with food, but the land, the fruits and people of the land have never been more vulnerable.

As a reading of the signs of the times, “People and the Land”

was a prophetic document, applying to the agricultural crisis of the day such principles of Catholic social teaching as dignity of labour, environmental stewardship and the primacy of family and community.

Twenty five years later there is urgency for all community members to bear with farmers the cost of food security and environmental stewardship so that our land of milk and honey will be able to continue to sustain the lives of future generations. Many of the topics raised by the Bishops in “People and the Land” twenty five years ago were complex and controversial. So today, the production of food, and stewardship of the land and water are dual roles of the farmer and these roles cause farming to intersect with nearly every aspect of modern life. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict noted that “It is good for people to realize that purchasing is always a moral – and not simply economic – act. Hence the consumer has a specific social responsibility, which goes hand-in-hand with the social responsibility of the enterprise.”<sup>vi</sup> (#66) As such it behoves every person to understand some of the challenges in agriculture today and the ethical considerations for consumers and farmers when making lifestyle choices that promote safe, sustainable Ontario agriculture.

The Catholic Church, in our social teaching, has provided a lens through which to examine these issues.

# Food Security and Community Health

Today, farmers comprise only 1.5% of the Ontario population. Many people do not personally know a farmer, or are unaware of the issues affecting farming today.<sup>ii</sup> Nevertheless, agriculture and the “agri-business” that farming supports is one of Ontario’s biggest employers.<sup>iii</sup>

Our province has Canada’s greatest agricultural diversity. The combination of soil and climate conditions provides crop yields that are often more than double that of the prairies. Ontario grows the widest varieties of crops - at least 200 commodities.<sup>iv</sup>

Southern Ontario produces an astonishing array of foods, from sweet corn and peanuts to okra to peaches and tomatoes. But why do green beans imported from countries such as China and red meat from the United States and elsewhere dominate grocery store shelves, especially in the midst of the Ontario harvest season?

Every nation has the right to produce whatever it needs to meet its subsistence goals, and to develop policies to ensure that those goals are met.<sup>v</sup> Under these policies, it should be expected that dumping of agricultural products from other nations would not be commonplace.<sup>vi</sup> Our own domestic producers have a prior right in the marketplace to supply products to the people of Ontario. Currently, Ontario does not have a sovereignty policy, and actively promotes exporting their goods. This has resulted in Ontario exporting most of its red meat, grain, pulse and other crops while importing the very produce which is commonly grown here. This situation comes at the expense of rural communities and the environment.



Food security ensures that all residents have access to nutritious, affordable and safe food. The Church teaches that it is “necessary to cultivate a public consciousness that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.”<sup>vii</sup>

Urbanites increasingly recognize the value of a countryside dotted with family farms and the marketing infrastructure needed to sustain them. They see the link between personal and environmental health and the food they eat. Farmers become protectors of human health; they and their distribution systems are essential to Ontario food security. Everyone who purchases food can promote the value of agriculture in their purchase choices.

We laud current food security movements that directly support area farmers. For instance, the Foodland Ontario campaign helps citizens identify Ontario-grown produce; this government program should be expanded to other sectors, notably to red meat producers. Likewise, we must challenge the purchasing policies of the large grocery chains that dominate our food system. Let us remember the Church’s admonition on consumerism that “purchasing is always a moral -- and not just an economic—act).<sup>viii</sup>

Also encouraging are the increasing manifestations of “Eat Local” movements such as farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) gardens, where residents invest in a weekly “share” of a farmer’s seasonal production. Likewise, some communities created “Food Charters” that promote food security for all, especially for their most impoverished citizens. Similarly, some farmers collectively auction their produce to area restaurants and other commercial buyers, providing a regional alternative to imported vegetables. Other producers have found “niche markets”, selling value-added farm products such as artisan cheese, “traditionally raised” meat, lavender, hazelnuts, or produce geared to ethnic groups living in urban areas.

But most Ontario farmers sell their produce to the industrial model, to feed-processors, factories, livestock or export; they do not benefit directly from “buy local” initiatives. This creates an ongoing divide in developing good food policy.

“ Food security ensures that all residents have access to nutritious, affordable and safe food. ”

## A Strong Farm Economy

The 2011 Census of Agriculture reveals that farm sizes are increasing while the total number of farms is decreasing. The movement towards larger farms, tractors and more labour-saving technologies has changed rural communities. With fewer farmers, many rural community services from local schools to farm equipment dealers have decreased. The rural community, shaped by the traditional farm, is dying. Also, “farm communities” close to cities are being populated by urbanites whose values and demand for services may conflict with those of farmers. We must ask, “What can society do to make farming and farm family life more sustainable?”<sup>x</sup>

The nature of farming today requires farming families to assume a substantial indebtedness, with their land, equipment, buildings and their home as security. The unpredictability of farm commodity prices, crop disasters and livestock illness, production problems and financial obligations often make payment of this debt unmanageable.<sup>x</sup>

International speculation in food commodities, fertilizers, fuels and farmland, fluctuating world prices and the high cost of inputs make Ontario’s farmers among the most highly leveraged in this hemisphere.

Farmers’ indebtedness ultimately filters through the overall economic system and the community. Society should not expect farm families to carry disproportionate burdens of risk and anxiety without adequate remuneration.<sup>xi</sup> We deplore an economic system that allows such pressures to build up without producing any corresponding compensation for farm labour and investment.

While many farm men and women seek off-farm careers, or choose to enjoy the lifestyle of living and operating a small farm, farm debt forces many to seek employment in nearby towns. Or they are forced to farm in ways that are less sustainable.

There remains a critical need to attract new farmers, and to encourage farm youth to take over the family farm.<sup>xii</sup> Agriculture’s high input costs and the difficulty of obtaining financing discourage some from entering farming.

## Supply Management

Ontario’s milk, egg, broiler hatching and poultry producers enjoy greater income security as they are protected by supply-management, a marketing system where the amount of product is supplied according to demand, ensuring their cost of production. But the cost of “quota”, the license which determines how much a given farmer can produce, is often prohibitive. Then, some existing producers expand their farm size and wealth by buying additional quota. These operations become so enlarged that they have more non-family employees working on them than family members. Are these still “family farms”?<sup>xvi</sup> We laud farm organizations such as the Dairy Farmers of Ontario who capped the price of milk quota which permits the entry of new farmers in to milk production.

The preservation of our supply-management system is critical: it guarantees that an adequate supply of food is produced within Ontario. It protects producers from fluctuating world prices. This system benefits Ontarians by ensuring stable prices for foods produced by these farmers, unlike the cost of “free market commodities” such as coffee, sugar and grain. We continue to believe that this system must be protected during the creation of bilateral or multilateral trade agreements, especially with the United States of America, a huge producer of agricultural products.<sup>xvii</sup> While there are legitimate questions about aspects of supply management, such as the capitalization of quota, these problems must be resolved according to the interests of the producers and the public, rather than the speculators, processors, consumer “advocates” and politicians eager to bargain away farmers’ rights for increased “free trade”.

In *The People and the Land* we supported farmers’ right to such structures. We recommend that this right be extended to all farmers. Indeed, farmers should actively participate in farm organizations to work together for sustainable agriculture.<sup>xviii</sup> We remind everyone that prices and supplies of free-traded commodities are managed; the question is *who* manages these, *how*, and for *whom*. Typically, such foods are “traded” as “commodities” by corporations whose interests lie strictly in profit, and not at all in the common good.

### Positive Actions to Promote the Value of Agriculture

What is needed are innovative financial assistance, training in creating business plans, and more educational opportunities, including mentorships and intern programs to learn from established farmers.<sup>xiii</sup>

The Church’s social doctrine recognizes the proper role of profit as the first indicator that a business is doing well. But it also recognizes that the procurement of profit by businesses must not cloud the common good.<sup>xiv</sup> It calls for international trade to be done in a just and equitable manner that can benefit everyone, from suppliers to customers, while guaranteeing farmers’ short and long term survival.<sup>xv</sup>

“On a clear day, more than one-third of Canada’s best agricultural land can be seen from the top of Toronto’s CN Tower.”<sup>xxiii</sup>



## Migrant Workers

In *The People and the Land* we spoke of the rights of farm families to dignity, a fair rate of return on their labour and a decent standard of living.<sup>xix</sup> Today temporary foreign workers provide much of the labour in the greenhouse, mushroom, fruit and vegetable and other labour-intensive agricultural sectors.

Currently, governments and communities act as if “temporary” foreign workers are an inconsequential part of the rural Ontario reality and sometimes sadly, workers meet with indifference or even prejudice. Foreign workers’ “temporary” status makes them ineligible for most government-funded settlement services that are routinely provided to other newcomers. They cannot collect Employment Insurance, even though they contribute. Many basic services including non-emergency health care can be inaccessible due to a lack of translation services. Workers are also separated from their families for months on end.<sup>xx</sup> Moreover, the threat of repatriation deters workers from speaking up for their own rights, even the right to refuse dangerous work or to secure decent living conditions.

As bishops, we commend those families who respect their workers’ dignity and treat them as more than an “input”. However, we acknowledge that sometimes, workers endure systemic injustices. We believe farmers alone cannot solve the problems that developed within temporary migrant worker programs. All levels of government need to be vigilant to enforce regulations that provide protection for migrant workers while they continue to work with farmers to ensure sufficient labour for agricultural production.

The Pontifical Council on Migrant and Itinerant Peoples directs local parishes to include them as “parishioners”. We are encouraged that some faith groups, as John Paul II noted, work to ensure “migrants should find a homeland everywhere in the church.”<sup>xxi</sup>

We commend those who currently work for systemic change, such as the inclusion of agricultural workers in the Health and Safety Act. Ultimately, governments and society must address the essential question: “Why temporary?” As long as workers are “permanently temporary”, they will remain vulnerable to exploitation, be perceived as “not belonging” and struggle to secure rights we take for granted as citizens or as landed immigrants. The Church calls all of us to be “neighbours”, to ensure workers are welcomed and supported, and that their human and civil rights are not violated.<sup>xxii</sup> Parishes need to work with farmers to ensure necessary pastoral care for migrant workers.

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## Stewardship of the Land: Controlling Urban Sprawl

Ontario contains Canada’s best climatic zones and agricultural soils. The province contains 56% of Canada’s best farmland. However, southern Ontario’s farmland is being lost to other uses at an alarming rate.<sup>xxiv</sup> Urban sprawl remains a major threat to the survival of Ontario family farms. Escalating farmland prices often prohibit new farmers from entering. Farmland loss also impacts wildlife, including endangered species, by destroying their habitats.

Farmland is a finite resource, with only five per cent of Canada’s land mass being free from severe physical limitations for farming.<sup>xxv</sup> Under current provincial policy agricultural land is simply seen as another component of local official plans and zoning bylaws, to eventually be converted to meet a host of non-agricultural interests. Provincial population is expected to grow to as much as 20 million by 2036.<sup>xxvi</sup> This means that farmers must grow more food on less land.

## Stewardship of the Land: A healthy eco-system

Climate change is a major driver that impacts farms. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects average warming of 1-3 degrees Celsius across much of North America between 2010 and 2039. Such changes will test farmers' capacity to push beyond the threshold of "normal" adaptation. This is critical as Ontario agriculture has lost much of its previous biodiversity, with large tracts of land having been converted to monocultures of one or two crops, and thus a greater inability for farmers to cope with extreme weather conditions.

Improvements in cultivation practices resulted in increased soil conservation measures since 1989.<sup>xxvii</sup> Back then, those who called for farmers to be paid for protecting natural features on their farms were lone voices in the wilderness. Today more people understand the value of paying farmers to protect their farms' waterways, woodlands and other marginalized areas. However, with the exception of a couple of outstanding examples <sup>xxviii</sup>, the cost of protecting waterways, woodlands and other marginalized areas is largely borne by the farmer, even though the benefit extends to everyone. Farmers own and manage a large percentage of the rural, arable land in Ontario. This area includes water courses, meadows and other natural areas that are rich in wildlife and plant species. These areas preserve plant and animal biodiversity, and serve as natural water filter systems for nearby communities. Farmers must be stewards of land, water and air.

Although organic farms represent only 1.5% of all farming in Ontario (2011 census), their practices and the involvement of some organic farmers in on-farm research deserves some recognition. Their use of alternative crops, crop rotations and natural weed suppression allows them to farm with less off-farm inputs, and enhances Ontario's biodiversity, crop varieties, and animal breeds. We do not know what we need for the future. While society needs more reflection around the advantage of organic foods, their costs and health benefits, the existence of organic farming calls for conventional agricultural to continue to examine and adapt practices based on the ecological effects of long-term chemical use.<sup>xxix</sup> Farmers' individual choices on whether to use or not use a particular chemical, engineered seed or seed treatment should take into account how these technologies could impact their neighbour and creation.

Pope John Paul II warned that these "serious ecological problems" emphasize the need for "an effective change of mentality leading to the adoption of new lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of the common good are the features that determine consumer choices, savings and investments. There is a



need to break with the logic of mere consumption and promote forms of agricultural ... production that respect the order of creation and satisfy the basic human needs of all."<sup>xxx</sup> Farmers and policy makers need to seek further models that promote environmental sustainability while strengthening farmers' economic viability and the infrastructure of farming communities. We call on all Ontarians to cooperate with farmers in stewardship of the land.

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## Alternative energy sources and farmland

Society must clarify the ethical issues around the role that ethanol production plays in food production. While corn has been used for decades to produce such diverse items as talcum powder and biodegradable plastics, ethanol production diverts significantly larger portions of the corn crop from food production than these earlier non-food uses. Over time, this added demand escalates grain prices, thus affecting grain and even meat production costs. As global grain reserves decline, grain prices rise and become more volatile. With vast sums of speculative capital in the commodity market, even modest changes in supply and demand become exaggerated. These erratic swings in farm gate prices negatively impact farm business plans.

We call upon everyone to reflect upon our fuel-dependent lifestyle. Agriculture itself is energy-intensive, from field to table, but now our lust for fuel has spurred an industry that converts food into fuel. Pope Benedict warns that "technologically advanced societies can and must lower their domestic energy consumption, either through an evolution in manufacturing methods or through greater ecological sensitivity among their citizens."<sup>xxxi</sup> We need a longer range vision for a more sustainable energy production and consumption.

Another energy source impacting farming today is the creation of electricity from wind and sun. This exerts more demand for productive farmland, from small, isolated solar panels in a farmer's field to large, corporate "solar/wind farms" which cover acres of farmland. While such projects are overtly a less dangerous approach to electricity production than nuclear fuel, current projects are seldom developed as a sustainable, self-reliant economic rural technology with local ownership and governance. Worthy of consideration is Germany's experiments on producing bio-gas from manure. Can this be a source of self-sustaining energy sources for Ontario farmers?

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## Biotechnology

Biotechnology, the science of splicing genes from one organism into another to create a new organism has powerful social, economic and environmental impacts upon farmers. Its application in agriculture provides both hope and alarm from a moral viewpoint. All Christians should evaluate these questions according to the ethical criteria that must always guide human actions.<sup>xxxii</sup>

# Agriculture as a Vocation

The irrationalities of our food system abound, from farmer to shopping carts. We see the production of surplus alongside of starvation, highly processed food that travelled thousands of kilometers, alongside of the unwillingness to provide food as a human right. One farmer's bounteous crop prices may come at the expense of another farmer's crop failures from climatic extremes in another nation. The exodus of farm families from the land occurs alongside the migration of "temporary" workers from their homeland to provide their families with a better life.

Farmers take pride in the way they contribute to the sustenance of Ontario. As bishops we celebrate the dignity and value of the work of people on the land. We exhort farmers to embrace their work as a vocation. Farming offers a unique opportunity to experience God through caring for the animals and growing and harvesting crops in all sorts of weather conditions. Farming may well be as much a spiritual activity as it is economic.

We call on all people to restore and protect the sanctity of the ancient relationship between the people, the land and God, reflected in the bread and wine of the Eucharistic meal.

Jesus gave importance to the sharing of food and feeding the hungry in His life here on earth. His common meal became both promise and paradigm: we are all to eat and drink, to share the fruits of God's creation, and when we act with justice, we will find there is enough for all, as in the Eucharistic feast, and in the miracles which Jesus did in feeding the multitudes.



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## Fruit of the Earth and Work of Human Hands

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# References

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- i Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict. #66
- ii Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. The People and the Land, 1989. "Areas of Concern and Recommendations" (h)
- iii 2001 Canadian Census states Ontario accounts for approximately one quarter of Canada's gross farm revenues, with sales of \$32 billion, and \$3.4 billion in taxes; Ontario also has the largest percentage of Canada's 205,730 farms with about 25% of Canada's farmers.
- iv This includes more than 90% of Canada's soybeans, nearly half of Canada's corn, and nearly all of its white beans. Ontario's share of Canada's dairy and egg farms is in proportion to Ontario's 13 million-person population.
- v Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "Subsidies" paragraph 4
- vi Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "Areas of Concern and Recommendations" (f)
- vii Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict. #27
- viii Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict. #66
- ix By sustainable we mean well-being of natural and human resources to provide a stable food supply in perpetuity without degrading natural resources. It is a system of farming that retains the family farm for generations. It recognizes the need to maintain biodiversity of crop varieties and animal breeds for future generations as we do not know what we will need in the light of changing climatic and economic conditions.
- x Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "The Economic Situation" paragraph 3
- xi Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "A Just Remuneration" paragraph 5.
- xii In spite a slight movement of younger people entering farming (usually larger, multi-generation farm operations), the 2011 Census reveals that 48% of Canada's producers are aged 55 or older, up from 41% in 2006.
- xiii A program that may help bring youth into farming saw urban youth assume internships on some Ontario farms in order to experience the farm life. Another existing entrance program is the Farm Start program by the University of Guelph, which enables immigrants and others to supply niche crops such as hops or meet the needs for ethnic vegetables by New Canadians living in the Greater Toronto Area. While these examples only involve a minute quantity of entrants, they model new ways for people to enter farming. What models exist in other countries which we can adapt for Canadian needs?
- xiv Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church #340-341
- xv Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas In Veritate, #58
- xvi Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "The Economic Situation" paragraph 2
- xvii Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "Areas of Concerns and Recommendations" (e)
- xviii Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "Areas of Concerns and Recommendations" (j)
- xix Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "A Just Remuneration" paragraph 1
- xx "Permanently Temporary? Agricultural Migrant Workers and their Integration in Canada", Jenna Hennebry, Institute for Research on Public Policy, Study #26, February, 2012
- xxi [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/migrants/pom2001\\_85\\_87/rc\\_pc\\_migrants\\_pom85\\_asia.htm](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/pom2001_85_87/rc_pc_migrants_pom85_asia.htm)
- xxii Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. "We are aliens and transients before the Lord our God" 2006. "Recommendations"
- xxiii Statistics Canada, 1999: "Canadian Agriculture at a Glance" Cat. #96-325-XPB
- xxiv Statistics Canada reports that Ontario lost more than 150,000 acres or 18% of its Class 1 farmland to urban sprawl and non-agricultural ends between 1976 and 1996. The 2011 Census of Agriculture reveals that the area farmed by the province fell by 4.8% between 2006 to 2011 – just 5.6% of Ontario's land base. Historically, the Canadian Census states that the amount of productive agricultural land in Canada peaked in 1951 and has been declining ever since. Sources: Ontario Farmland Trust website, Environment Canada, 1982, Canada's Resource Lands, Map Folio #4
- xxv Statistics Canada, 1999, "Canadian Agriculture at a Glance", Cat. #96-325-XPB
- xxvi Ontario Ministry of Finance Projections for 2011-2036
- xxvii For instance, the federal-provincial governments' Environmental Farm Plan encourage farmers to voluntarily map out their environmental strengths in up to 23 different areas on their farm; they also set realistic action plans and time tables to strengthen their environment.
- xxviii Promising models currently include the ALUS (Alternative Land Use Services) project in Norfolk County and the Huron County Payment for Ecological Goods and Services Pilot Project. These demonstrate how such holistic farm plans benefit the farmer, the wildlife and society. Both projects encourage native bees and birds to feed on the land year-round. Some forms of poly-culture, notably tall grass prairie species planted in some fields, produce roots that grow approximately three meters deep into the ground and provide an excellent means of sequestering carbon from the atmosphere, and helps filter water into the water table below.
- xxix Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops. People and the Land, 1989. "Ecological and Environmental Considerations" paragraph 6
- xxx Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, #486; and Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, #36
- xxxi Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate, #49
- xxxii Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, #472-474