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Pope Francis shakes hands with an Indigenous woman during an audience with people taking part in a workshop jointly sponsored by the Pontifical Academies of Sciences and of Social Sciences on the knowledge of Indigenous peoples and research carried out in the sciences during an audience at the Vatican March 14, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by Catholic News Service

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Vatican City — February 11, 2025

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For Indigenous communities around the world, "land, water and food are not mere commodities, but the very basis of life and of these peoples' bond with nature," Pope Francis said.

So, defending their rights to land, water and food "is not only a matter of justice, but also a guarantee of a sustainable future for all," he wrote in a message to the global meeting of the Indigenous Peoples' Forum at the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

The forum, meeting in Rome Feb. 10-11, brought together representatives of Indigenous communities in every region of the world with government representatives and agriculture experts to focus on "Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination" and how that would provide "a pathway for food security and sovereignty."

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Defending the right of Indigenous communities to preserve their culture and identity "necessarily passes through the recognition of the value of their contribution to society and the preservation of their existence and the natural resources they need to live," the pope wrote.

But their traditional land, water and food are "seriously threatened by the growth of the grabbing of arable land by multinational corporations, large investors and states," Francis said. "These are practices that cause harm by jeopardizing the right of communities to live in dignity."

The goal, the pope said, should be to learn from the Indigenous communities and return to practices that respect "a world in harmony with the beauty and goodness that guided God's hands in creating it."