



World Water Week - Stockholm, Sweden

Session “Water and Faiths: Faith based Organizations contributing to the Water SDGs”

29 August 2016

Keynote Address - Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson

“Faith and Development”

Distinguished representatives of various Religions, Organizers, dear Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to greet you in the name of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Having been asked to speak on “Faith and Development”, I notice that many religions are represented here. This suggests that indeed there are many links between faith and development. Fruitful inter-religious collaborations and synergies have already started in several sectors, such as healthcare, food security, investment, education, stewardship of natural resources, and assistance to migrants.

From a Catholic perspective, our planet, its resources and ecosystems are a marvellous gift. So too, human life is a gift – we are not self-created, we receive our bodies and our first relationships through the same grand course of divinely-given nature. Hence, we readily understand that nature is intended to be shared between all the humans, one generation after the other, and that the whole human family is expected to take care of our common home. These fundamentals are easily found in other religions and spiritual traditions as well, regardless of their specific unique features.

Why is this shared fundamental understanding so important for development?

First of all, science can only explain concrete reality, its substances and causal relationships. Science can quantify the pollution in deep oceans or around a mining site, foreseeing its negative consequences and proposing remedies. But science cannot provide the motivation for virtuous action. The same holds beyond the realm of the natural sciences: sociologists, economists and lawyers can analyse and explain the negative effects of unemployment, speculation and corruption; they can warn us about rising inequalities, contradictory policies or geopolitical unrest. But in the end they cannot supply the motivation for virtuous action.

Pope Francis, in the Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, asks: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? [...] What is the goal of our work and all our efforts?” (§160). Observing numerous alarming environmental and social indicators leads us to the daunting question: why should I care? Science and technology will not help here. Any technical solution is powerless “if we lose sight of the great motivations which make it possible for us to live in harmony, to make sacrifices and to treat others well” (§200). Pope Francis shares his conviction “that change is impossible without motivation and a process of education” – and for those purposes he proposes “some inspired guidelines for human development to be found in the treasure of Christian spiritual experience” (§15), since “faith convictions can offer Christians, and some other believers as well, ample motivation to care for nature and for the most vulnerable of their brothers and sisters” (§64).

Simply put, motivation to virtue is the valuable contribution that religious faith and spiritual practices can and must bring to development, through their spiritual leaders and the multitudes of believers and adherents. They “must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions” (200). They must contribute, for example, to the adoption and further extension of ambitious and ethically-rooted frameworks for development action such as those pertaining to the implementation of the new Sustainable Development Goals.

A second perspective grounded in faith touches on human dignity. We are much more than items or data to be measured and represented by GDP. We are not simply factors of production and consumption. When human beings are just human resources, they cease to be the measure of success of policies. Instead, humans become disposable. Throw these people away in favour of better producers. Displace those people in favour of more profitable consumption of water.

Our vision of being human must be much more complex. Pope Francis teaches that we must integrate spirituality, social relationality, and our connections with nature. This lies behind his conviction that “what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn” (§160).

Since we are gathered during the World Water Week, I would like to conclude by giving a few examples of the contributions that Faith-based-organizations can provide concerning water.

1. Educate youth to embrace solidarity, altruism and responsibility. Later of, these virtues will help them to be honest administrators and politicians.
2. In teaching Sacred Scriptures and spiritual traditions, show that water is a precious and even a divine element. It is used extensively in liturgy. This should inspire us to use water with respect and gratitude, reclaim polluted water sources and understand that water is not a mere commodity.
3. Organize interreligious campaigns for cleaning rivers or lakes, in order to foster mutual respect, peace and friendship among different groups.

4. Reaffirm human dignity and the common good of the whole human family in order to promote a wise hierarchy of priorities for the use of water, especially where there are multiple and potentially competing demands for water.

All this will help in making universal and sustainable access to drinkable water a reality. This most vital challenge has been a focus for the Catholic Church for many years. It is a continuing shame that so many of our brothers and sisters are systematically thirsty or compelled to drink unsafe water; that their needs are secondary to industries which take too much and that pollute what remains; that governments pursue other priorities and ignore their parched cries. We already know how Jesus judges these matters. In the *Gospel of Matthew* (25:35), Jesus teaches what we are supposed to do: “I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink”. I pray that this conference will help the world to be more alert to the thirst of Jesus and give him sufficient, clean water to drink! Thank you.