



Statement by H. E. Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the Side Event on the occasion of the International Day of Mother Earth, the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* and the care for our common home.

Geneva, 13th April 2018

Excellencies, dear Friends,

Allow me to begin by thanking the Permanent Missions of the Plurinational State of Bolivia and of Ecuador for organizing this event and for inviting me to share some reflections on the Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis *Laudato si'* and the care for our common home.

The recurrence of the International Day of Mother Earth, as well as your presence today, is a concrete example of the invitation of the Encyclical *Laudato si'*, namely, to bring into dialogue all persons and peoples, all institutions and organizations that share the same concern for *our common home*, as the title of this Special Event emphasizes. The current world situation encourages us to consider that different yet equally important perspectives are ever more intertwined and complementary: the richness of faith and spiritual traditions, the significance of business and scientific developments, as well as the concrete efforts at various levels of both government and civil society, are all necessary for attaining an equitable and sustainable development.

This type of dialogue is evident in the Encyclical, which relies on a wide range of contributions, many of them acknowledged in the text and the footnotes.

As is well known, the Encyclical takes its name from the invocation of St. Francis of Assisi: “*Laudato si' mi' Signore* – Praise be to you, my Lord!” The *Canticle of the Creatures* calls to mind that the earth, our common home, “is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us” (§ 1). As the Encyclical affirms, St. Francis shows us “just how inseparable is the bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace” (§ 10).

Midway through *Laudato si'*, reflecting on justice between the generations, the Pope invites us to consider: “what kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (§ 160). The Holy Father continues: “This question does not have to do with the environment alone and in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal.” This leads us to ask ourselves about the meaning of existence and the values that are the basis of social life: “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?” Such questions are addressed in the third chapter as consequences of the mis-directed anthropocentrism of today. “If we do not ask these basic questions” – says the Pope – “it is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations” (§ 160).

The thoughtful and provocative questions raised by the Holy Father are derived from an astute observation: today, the earth and its resources are all too often mistreated and abused. Its strains join those of all the world’s forsaken and “discarded”. Pope Francis invites us to listen to them. One might thus discover the real sense of the anthropogenesis of ecological problems.¹ Listening to them, he urges each and every one – individuals, families, local communities, nations and the international community – to an “ecological conversion”. Such a change of heart means a “change of direction” by taking on the important responsibility of “caring for our common home”. In this regard, the words of Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople underscore the moral obligation of humanity as stewards of creation: “For human beings ... to destroy the biological diversity ... by causing changes in its climate,” by contaminating “the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins” (§ 8).

From this perspective, Pope Francis welcomes the environmental awareness growing world-wide, along with the concern for the damage that is being done. Notwithstanding the grave challenges, the Holy Father keeps a hopeful outlook on the possibility of reversing the trend: “Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home” (§ 13). “Men and women are still capable of intervening positively” (§ 58). “All is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start” (§ 205). So, with hope for a renewed future, Pope Francis puts forward the concept

¹ Cf. “The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (§ 2) and “When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves” (§ 115).

of integral ecology, which clearly respects the human and social dimensions of the crisis (cf. § 137). This is an inclusive, dynamic paradigm that articulates the fundamental relationships of each person with God, with other human beings including him- or herself, and with creation.

In order to appreciate better this notion, it seems useful to recall that the term “environment” as understood by Pope Francis enjoys a much more inclusive and thorough meaning than its usage in common parlance. He says: “When we speak of the ‘environment’, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the ways it grasps reality. Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” (§ 139).

An essential part of the thought of Pope Francis in this field concerns the relationship of the environment with the enjoyment, protection and promotion of human rights. At first glance, one may easily recognize the role and interplay that the environment and its changes have on the enjoyment of human rights. The Holy Father makes this abundantly clear at the outset of the Encyclical wherein he delineates the problems that the world faces with environmental degradation and overconsumption, which is part and parcel of a “throwaway culture.” As he states: “Human beings too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity. So, we cannot fail to consider the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture.” (§ 43). Environmental changes can certainly have a negative impact upon the enjoyment of human rights, as is witnessed in numerous examples, from the lack of access to clean water and sufficient food, to forced migration and even the right to life itself, to name only a few.

While the Holy Father clearly underscores the necessity of protecting our common home through a renewed emphasis in the relation that the human person has with God, with others, especially with the poor and most vulnerable, as well as with all of creation,

he does not, however, see the solution to environmental problems, along with their human consequences, as being found only in the field of technology or science. While lauding the proper use of technology, he points to the underlying difficulty. “The basic problem goes even deeper: it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational. This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. It is the false notion that ‘an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed’” (§ 106).

Such a technocratic paradigm results in the domination of technology over the human person rather than having technology remain subservient to, and at the service of man for the common good. Yet here we are confronted with a simple yet important question: how is it that this technocratic paradigm has come to “dominate” or “rule” modern man? Is it not the case that man’s misuse of technology and science has led to this very domination wherein he becomes the servant in the technocratic paradigm? Here, I believe, we encounter one of the many jewels in the thought of Pope Francis when he addresses this question. He speaks of a distorted anthropology, a distorted vision of the human person, as the root cause of this technocratic domination of humanity. Only with a correct approach and understanding of the human person in relation to creation can the human person be truly respected and enjoy his rights. He states: “Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since ‘the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere “given”, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it

views the cosmos similarly as a mere “space” into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference’. The intrinsic dignity of the world is thus compromised. When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves.” (§ 115).

For the Holy Father, the solution to overcoming the present situation is to rediscover the proper relationship that man ought to have with all of nature. He states that we must not “underestimate the importance of interpersonal relations. If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships,” (§ 119). The new anthropological approach which Pope Francis offers clearly counters the modern reality in which we live today. He reminds us that a “misguided anthropocentrism leads to a misguided lifestyle,” (§ 122) and that the culture of relativism so abundant in our societies “is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects,” (§ 123).

Since man is a central part of creation and acts as its steward, he must rediscover his correct relationship with his Creator, with nature and with his fellow man. Such a solution to the current crisis is much more comprehensive, circumspect and necessary; in fact, it is a completely novel outlook which sees all of creation as interrelated. It is an approach that sees the reclamation of the value of all of creation by way of recovering the proper understanding of the dignity of the human person. Throughout the Encyclical, Pope Francis stresses the interconnectedness of all of creation; a fact that science also clearly demonstrates. The Holy Father articulates this reality through the concept of “integral ecology” which requires that human beings give ethical consideration of their duties in justice to God, to creation and to fellow man. It is in this sense that he speaks of the “environment”, properly understood, as something that never stands apart, but always implying a relationship between nature and society. By integral ecology, we are speaking of a holistic perspective of reality by which the common good and the dignity of the human person are promoted together with the flourishing of the natural world.

The linchpin to understanding the role of environment and the protection and the promotion of human rights may be found in the practice of this “integral ecology” because it is the integration of a proper notion of the human person in his inter-relationality which is indispensably tied into the social-ethical principles of the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity.

Pope Francis weaves these principles together with his concept of integral ecology, explaining that: “An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. The common good is ‘the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.’ Underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development. It has also to do with the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups, applying the principle of subsidiarity. Outstanding among those groups is the family, as the basic cell of society. Finally, the common good calls for social peace, the stability and security provided by a certain order which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice; whenever this is violated, violence always ensues. Society as a whole, and the state in particular, are obliged to defend and promote the common good. In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.” (§§ 156-158).

As we see, the Encyclical does so much more than demonstrate the devastation of the environmental crisis and the adverse effects that it has on creation, as well as on our fellow human beings. The Holy Father expresses that the crisis is a result of bad ethical decisions, selfish attitudes and behaviors of individuals, cultures and societies, that have distorted nature and, in the end, have negatively impacted man himself. The way forward, to recovering a proper sense of the common good for humanity and for the generations to come, is through a rediscovery of the dignity of the human person and the undeniable interconnectedness that it has with God, creation and fellow man. What the Pope is proposing is really something radical, an “ecological conversion”, wherein man finds his true and just place in relation to all that is around him and thus begins to behave in a manner that is coherent with the common good of all creation and the Creator. Such an approach, placing the good of the human person at the center of all ethical decisions, in preference to political or economic motives, clearly gives greater protection and promotion to the enjoyment of human rights.

Thank you.