

European Parliament: Ecumenical Conference.

September 29, 2015

Distinguished guests, dear brothers and sisters.

We are united in the common care for our common home, for our European community, and further, larger, for the whole of mankind. We share a mission, a prophetic mission, such as the one Moses received, to lead the people through the desert, to the beloved land, leading them at the same time to their God. The desire to reach the land and the link with God formed the basis for their unity. That was the task of their leader, a social and political leader as Moses was. Under that image, we are gathered today, conscious of the particular situation we are living in, with hundreds of people at our doorstep, looking forward to reach the land they desire so much, running away from natural disasters, conflict, poverty and misery.

This event today at this crucial time of the year is also marked by the visit of Pope Francis at the United Nations General Assembly last week in New York and his visit in America, as well. The enormous enthusiasm he creates wherever he goes shows that he touches upon essential issues.

Dear friends, though we have been talking for quite a long time about this, 2015 marks a turning point for development policies, steering toward a world without poverty and hunger. Being honest, we would say the whole debate on the sustainable development goals came after a partial defeat of the Millennium Development Goals. The framework was established in the year 2000 with the same purpose to defeat poverty and hunger. Pope Francis is particularly worried about the reason why these summits do not seem to reach their goal. He does not hesitate to state that “the failure of global summits on the environment make it plain that our politics are subject to technology and finance” (Laudato si’ 54).

We know those goals could be improved since the beginning, we know they have been somewhat effective in some parts of the world but we also know the approach they brought in themselves was of quite a different nature, compared to these new ones.

The level of debate during the past months and years, the involvement of different actors, and continuous dialogue should invoke a new hope to extremely urgent challenges. This hope needs to be concretized immediately and in the most effective way.

On May 24th, Pope Francis gave a new push on this perspective with the encyclical letter “Laudato si’”: for the care of our common home. It is a comprehensive document that speaks to each and every one of us in a new way. It is pretty long, but easy to read, with an understandable language, far from theological language. Pope Francis speaks the language of the people. He speaks not only to Catholics and Christians, but to “all people of good will”, which is already a kind of revolution.

Nonetheless, if someone had expected an encyclical focused only on ecology (a green encyclical as it is called), he/she might be disappointed. In these 184 pages, Pope Francis considers “our common home” as an integral, comprehensive house, where economic, social and environmental dimensions cannot go the one without the other (L.S. 13). Given this special call for a transformational change, he calls on the need to rethink a new model for development, where poor people have to be at the center of policy and political will and thinking in silos needs to be avoided (201). “We have to retrace our steps before it is too late” he says (L.S. 193).

Following this first important thought, I want to add one more message: policies need to be inclusive and aimed to overcome injustice, in any case this transformational change needs to start by personal behavior, whether of individuals, families or communities. Stewardship of the creation is key in every human action. Therefore the Encyclical calls on the need to rethink our own habits by considering the consequences for our planet and for poor people. Political institutions have the responsibility to lead this change and to make it more feasible and easy for people to be involved.

Climate change is key in this debate; it is clear that the imminent impact of it is more than heard (and felt) in developing countries and among poor communities (L.S. 25). Nevertheless,

we cannot avoid considering its consequences also to a larger extent everywhere in the world and for future generations. I quote from the Encyclical:

“We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach. It must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor... there are not two crises, one about the environment and another social, there is only one complex socio-environmental crisis” (130) .

Once you read it you won't need too much imagination to link about it in reality. Europe is now doing its best to manage the phenomenon of migration, with all the related difficulties. Caritas is a network spread all over the world and we are systematically called to cope with situations where people experiencing poverty and food insecurity are forced to flee their home because of natural disasters, lack of water or too much water – here, I am thinking about the rising of the oceans -, land erosion, desertification only to name a few. We know all these people and could call them by name. This is true for all regions in the world (Nepal, Philippines, United States of America, droughts in Ethiopia and Eritrea, Sudan, floods in Serbia and Bosnia, also natural disasters all around Europe). None of us should feel abandoned and excluded as a result. For all people experiencing the loss of material goods, livelihoods and land, we need to consider and invent sufficient measures of adaptation to climate change.

But we have to think about the role Europe is called to have in all of this. The European Parliament already voted its own position towards the Conference of the Parties to be held in Paris by the end of the year. Nevertheless, we know that a big game is still at stake ahead of the meeting of the European Council, not to forget the expected national positions during the Conference.

Pope Francis met EU national ministers on environment a couple of weeks ago exactly on this subject. Let me repeat his words at that time. He based his speech on three main messages.

1. Solidarity: solidarity is in the DNA of Europe and we have heard about it sometimes controversially in these recent months. When talking about climate, we know that those who are most vulnerable to environmental degradation tend to be poor. They are the

ones who most suffer from its serious consequences. Solidarity in this context means the implementation of effective tools that are able to fight environmental degradation and poverty at the same time. There are many positive experiences in this regard. For example, the development and transfer of appropriate technologies that are able to make the best possible use of the human, natural and socio-economic resources that are most readily available at a local level, in order to ensure their long-term sustainability;

2. Second, is the principle of justice. In the encyclical "Laudato si", the Pope spoke of "ecological debt", especially between the North and South, connected to trade imbalances with consequences in the context of ecology, as well as the disproportionate use of natural resources historically exploited by some countries. We must honor this debt. These nations are called upon to contribute to solving this debt by setting a good example: limiting in a big way consumption of non-renewable energy; providing resources to countries in need for the promotion of policies and programmes for sustainable development; adopting appropriate systems for the management of forests, transportation, waste; seriously addressing the grave problem of food waste, which is a shame for our society and the conscience of Europe, as well; encouraging new attitudes and lifestyles (cfr. L.S. 21).
3. Thirdly, the Pope spoke about the principle of participation, which requires the involvement of all stakeholders, even of those who often remain at the margins of decision-making. In Europe and also thanks to the European Parliament, it has been possible to establish different fora, involving people, aimed to different extents to contribute to an effective dialogue towards the eradication of poverty and global hunger. "We live" – Pope Francis said – "in a very interesting historical time: on the one hand science and technology give us unprecedented power; on the other, a proper use of this power requires that we adopt a more integral and inclusive vision. This demands that we open the door to dialogue, a dialogue that is inspired by a vision, which is rooted in that of integral ecology, the very subject of the encyclical.

This is obviously a big cultural, spiritual and educational challenge. Solidarity, justice and participation for the respect of our dignity and for respect of creation”.

These strong messages were reinforced last Friday during the Pope’s speech to the 70th UN General Assembly. The agreement around the 17 Global Goals – though welcomed in principle – requires a further and constant effort from all nations, governments and their policies - in a constant and non-hesitant way. On that occasion, Pope Francis said that “Economic and social exclusion is a complete denial of human fraternity and a grave offence against human rights and the environment. The poorest are those who suffer most from such offences, for three serious reasons: they are cast off by society, forced to live off what is discarded, and they suffer unjustly from the abuse of the environment. They are part of today’s widespread and quietly growing “culture of waste”. And, again: “Solemn commitments, however, are not enough, even though they are a necessary step toward solutions.”

Dear Member of the European Parliament, distinguished guests and esteemed audience, let’s be ambitious about this event and its aftermath. Today, we will hear from competent people, gathering the voice of different Christian faiths, representing a more technical point of view and/or the present Presidency of the European Union. We need to use this time to discuss possible solutions to overcome the effect of climate change for poor people around the world. As Pope Francis said: “I strongly encourage you to intensify your work, along with that of your colleagues, so that in Paris the desired result is achieved. Let’s keep this commitment and try to do our best to ask Europe, the whole united Europe, to champion a battle for a more just and enjoyable environment. We owe this to new generations, to youths and children and the whole world. The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others.

As a Christian I want to end my intervention with a short prayer which I take from *Laudato Si’* 246:

O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live... help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. Praise be to you! Amen.