



# International Conference on Religions and Sustainable Development Goals

Vatican City, 7-9 March 2019

## ***Opening Remarks / New Synod Hall 7 March 2019***

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*Prefect*

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Your Eminences, My Lord Archbishops and Bishops,  
Your Excellencies: Members of the Diplomatic Corps,  
Representatives of different religions ,  
Leaders of International Organisations,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to thank you all heartily for your very kind acceptance of our invitation to participate in this *International Conference on Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): responding to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*, which is jointly organised by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

#### *The aim of the event*

The event aims at initiating a *dialogue* between the Religions with view first to recognizing the inestimable contribution Religions can make to the realization of the SDG Goals, and, secondly, actually committing, from their moral and persuasive strength within their communities, to the implementation of the Goals. To support and to promote this *dialogue of Religions* towards its end, we have also invited Experts on the SDGs: Representatives of international agencies engaged with implementing the sustainable goals, Scholars and Researches in the general area of Development who will stimulate and guide the *Dialogue of Religions* with their invaluable contributions, their expertise and their experiences.

As you know very well, in 2000, the UN held a *Millennium Summit*, where it adopted the *Millennium Declaration*. A part of this Declaration was the adoption of eight (8) international development goals, called the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs), and which it committed to achieving by 2015. The G8 finance ministers wanted to make available monies to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the African Development Bank to cancel debts of highly indebted poor countries, so that they can focus and re-direct resources to improving health and education, and to alleviating poverty.

As 2015 was drawing to a close, a post-2015 process and action plan to carry on further the development goals and objectives of the *MDGs* were set in motion.<sup>1</sup> At the Rio+20 meeting (2012),<sup>2</sup> the meeting's document, "*The Future we want*", called for the identification and formulation of *sustainable development goals*, as a continuation of the MDGs. In 2014, the UN Open Working Group subsequently developed 17 goals and 169 targets, covering a broad range of developing issues and targets. When, on 4 December 2014, the UN Secretary General presented his *Synthesis Report* to the UN General Assembly, it was considered an advance version of the case that he would make for the SDGs in September 2015. The report called for coordinated action to usher in an era of sustainable development for all; and the SDGs were presented as a global agenda centred on people and on the planet, underpinned by human rights. It was about protecting the human rights of people and the eco system of the planet. And just as the *UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights* inseparably relates *Human Rights* to the *dignity of the person*,<sup>3</sup> so are the SDGs presented as "*the Road to Dignity*."<sup>4</sup> by the UN secretary General. His words are: "[We] have an historic opportunity and duty to act, boldly, vigorously and expeditiously, to turn reality into a life of dignity for all, leaving no one behind."<sup>5</sup> For him, the SDGs are a reaffirmation of the UN's faith in the dignity and worth of the human person, and taking the world forward to a sustainable future. It is, then, about turning reality into a life of dignity for all: a compelling and a principled narrative, based on human rights and dignity.<sup>6</sup>

We know about all this; so, the conference of these three days is not about the evolution of the SDCs. Our SDG Conference of 7-9 March is about the urgency of the implementation of the 17 goals determined by more than 190 nations; and it is about marshalling the moral

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<sup>1</sup> Ban Ki-Moon refers to this *post-2015 action plan* as a "successor framework to the MDGs" (<http://www.diplomaticcourier.com/news/opinion/2461-achieving-a-road-to-dignity-by-2030-reflections-on-the-un-secretary-general-s-post-2015-synthesis-report>).

<sup>2</sup> The origins of the *sustainable Development Goals* are to be placed, perhaps in the 1987 UN meeting on "*Our common future*". There the concept "**sustainable development**" was introduced. In 1992, at the Rio de Janeiro conference on the environment, **Agenda 21** (things to do in the 21st century), *sustainable development* was taken up further, especially in the context of the impact of human presence and activity on the environment. At the Johannesburg Conference in 2002: the *World Summit on Sustainable Development*, economic development, social development and environmental protection were identified as pillars of *sustainable development*; and Rio+20 (2012) called for the formulation of the *sustainable goals*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,...", (**Preamble, The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, 10 Dec. 1948).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ban Ki-Moon, *Synthesis Report, The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming all Lives and Protecting the Planet*, UN general Assembly, New York, 4 December 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49509#.VWGpDE0w-Uk>

<sup>6</sup> Idem.

force of religion behind nations' and communities' implementation of the SDG goals. We need to work together; for no source of wisdom can be left out, just as the SDGs themselves, according to Ban Ki-Moon, are a *human development narrative that leaves no one behind*.

### Religions and development

But, what do Religions have to do with development? For, if *sustainable development*, as the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (UNWCED) defines it, is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (UNWCED, 1987),<sup>7</sup> then what social institution best pursues this than Religion.

At a panel discussion in Stockholm on water two years ago, the moderator asked. *Cardinal, here we are talking about science and technology. What role can you play here?*

It was not really difficult to respond. *Whenever the talk is about the human person, there is a central place for religion; for religion is about the human person*. But let me just make two brief observations:

- a) First, with about 80 per cent of the world's population professing a belief in God, religion is an inescapable reality in international development. A belief in an ultimate source of meaning, or God, influences the choices that the majority of people make with regard to their lives, the lives of other human beings and the life of nature, for the better or for the worse. In fact, religion has been invoked to justify killing as well as to inspire peace and reconciliation, to plunder natural resources as well as to seek a life in harmony with nature. The influence of religion on lives, conduct and behaviour does not need any proof. Accordingly, following the lead of Pope Francis, we hope to evoke and to refer to the *wisdom of religions and the language(s) particular to them (Laudato sì, 63)*, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality, their core values and traditions, to underline how they can contribute to fashioning healthy and sustainable models of living in community and seeking progress. This, according to Pope Francis, represents an immense potential to unleash

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<sup>7</sup> "Sustainability" is now applied to several things with a promising future. The *Cedar Creek Correctional facility's* way of giving skills to inmates for their post-prison life has won the name "*sustainable Correctional institution*". (France 24 TV news/documentary, Sunday 24 May).

the power of love most religions profess, and to lead the transformation that the world needs, in order to respond to *the cry of the earth and of the poor* (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 49).

Cf. *Long-term vision* as opposed to *short term vision*.

- b) Secondly, religions are key players in the development of humankind. Religions have invested greatly in education and the healthcare needs of peoples all over the world. They have been often the first respondents to disasters and organize relief services (cf. Caritas networks, Relief agencies of Religions, Chu-chi Buddhists of Taiwan, etc)..According to a UNICEF report, religions provide 64% of education in Sub-Saharan Africa, and run around a third of all medical facilities of the planet. Here, we may recall with great profit the words of Pope Paul VI to the Government and people of Uganda in 1969:

*“Have no fear of the Church; She honours you, she educates honest and loyal citizens for you, she does not foment rivalries and divisions, she seeks to promote healthy liberty, social justice, and peace. If she has any preference at all, it is for the poor, for the education of little ones and of the people, for the care of the suffering and abandoned. The church does not make her faithful sons strangers to civil life and national interests; on the contrary, she trains and engages them in the service of the public good”*.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Religion helps foster a holistic understanding of development, not limited to material growth.

- c) Finally, Religions bring and inspire *purpose for change*. If we want to forge sustainable development, we may need to change urgently and radically patterns of lifestyles, ways of producing goods, trading, consuming and wasting (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 4). Such a change requires deep motivation, a motivation that the technical language of development often cannot provide. No one was ever converted by a pie chart on development economics. Among powerful stories that trigger life-change, religious narratives stand out (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 199). These narratives, transmitted from one generation to another, have captured the imagination of millions of people and countless communities worldwide. They can actually provide the incentive for the transformation we need today.

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<sup>8</sup> *Address of Paul VI to the Parliament of Uganda, Kampala, 1 August, 1969.*

### *Discussion and urgency for change*

I would like to urge participants to keep the sense of urgency alive during our discussions. Last October, the Inter-governmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) warned that humanity has less than a decade to embark on a systemic transformation of our consumption and production systems so as to keep global warming within the range of 1.5 degrees. So please, let us not lose this sense of urgency for change while we debate on the way “we are shaping the future of our planet” (*Laudato Si'*, 14).

### *Action oriented*

At the end of the conference, we will break out into five groups, each corresponding to one of the “Ps” upon which the conference is structured: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. The aim of the Working Groups is threefold: first, to identify what has been done so far. This means to collect some key ideas/words/symbols from the conference that have touched people’s heart and on which we can build greater ambition and stronger commitments for a sustainable future. Second, to identify what is missing. Listen to further contributions from participants, especially those concerning religious implications/inspirations/commitments towards a sustainable future. And thirdly, and most importantly, to identify where do we want to go. We will have the task to elaborate a road map or lines of action that can connect religious contributions to the implementation of the SDGs, especially to the negotiation discussions towards the UN General Assembly in September 2019, where nations will assess the SDGs. The idea is to work together on this joint “journey” in order to raise ambition and forge a new global solidarity.

### *Key players: young generation, indigenous people, religions*

In this joint journey, there are three groups of people who can provide us with that extra energy required for sustainable future. The young people, who are demanding change and calling for intergenerational justice. The indigenous people, who inhabit 80% of the land with biodiversity reserves in the world and remind us of the importance of the interconnection between our wellbeing and our territory. And religious people, who can provide inspiration for converting us from our own attitudes of domination and destruction, and for promoting attitudes of love and care. The three groups, all of them represented at

this conference, can also encourage us to change the structures that foment inequality and environmental damage, into structures that promote inclusion and ecological caring. While listening to these three groups, we can find the way of responding effectively to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.