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***Introducing the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.
International Conference on Religions and Sustainable Development Goals, Vatican City
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Eminences, Excellencies, Brothers and Sisters.

Warm greetings and thanks for this opportunity to share with you one of the most dynamic and healing initiatives of recent years, bringing faith to bear on forests and climate change; The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.

I am honoured to be at the Vatican representing all the partners to the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, including Religions for Peace, GreenFaith, World Council of Churches, Parliament of the World Religions and the Yale Forum on Religions and Ecology. We are all committed to saving the rainforests. We are all working together in partnership with UN Environment.

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is and must be driven by faith. It is hosted and served by UN Environment program and staff. The Government of Norway is supporting the Initiative financially and, I am sure, would welcome other partner governments to join this unique collaborative enterprise.

I welcome the statement we heard yesterday from The Parliamentary State Secretary for the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, dr. Maria Flachsbarth that her Ministry wants to expand cooperation with faith-based organisations. I recommended the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative to her kind attention.

As faith-based organisations and institutions, we assert that working towards the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals is also a spiritual exercise and a moral imperative.

It is a widely shared affirmation of faith that we - all persons – are created equal in God's image, and all share responsibility for God's creation.

Many references have been made by speakers at this important conference to the cry of the people – the cry for justice, for well-being, indeed for life.

This cry for life comes also from the earth.

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is a humble attempt to hear both the cry of the people and the cry of the earth.

The climate crisis – like the nuclear threat – is today uniting science and religion, common sense and faith.

Moreover, no other global issue has so genuinely unified religious leaders and faith communities on a shared platform.

No other issue has so convincingly demonstrated a shared scientific and spiritual vision and a compelling ethical conviction

Within the response to the climate challenge, tropical forests - the rain forests - hold a unique and critical place.

Saving tropical forests as the life-sustaining lung of the world is our common calling, as is supporting the indigenous peoples that serve as their protectors and guardians.

Why is a focus on tropical forests so important?

Simply put – because they are magical.

They house the greatest diversity of living organisms on Earth. They are an irreplaceable part of humanity's shared natural, cultural and spiritual heritage.

And they are essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

First, SDG 1 on poverty eradication. Tropical forests are a lifeline and a principal source of jobs, livelihoods, health and wellbeing for more than 1 billion people, including many of the world's poorest and most vulnerable.

Next, SDG 2. We all know that agriculture is the backbone of rural development. Tropical forests make largely underappreciated contributions to agricultural production by being a source of clean water for irrigation, influencing weather patterns that make the land suitable for farming and providing a habitat for pollinators.

Also, SDG 6. Tropical forests absorb, clean and recycle freshwater by catching what comes down in the form of rain, sending moisture up, capturing water underground, removing pollutants, recycling nutrients and maintaining weather patterns.

Next, SDG 11. Tropical forests serve as a protective "green infrastructure", preventing soil erosion and mitigating the risks of natural disasters like landslides, floods, storm surges and tsunami waves.

Perhaps most importantly, SDG 13. Tropical deforestation is a MAJOR contributor to climate change, and protecting tropical forest is an even more significant part of the solution.

This is clear – there is no climate solution without tropical forests.

Deforestation and forest degradation are responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than all the cars, trains, planes, ships, and trucks in the world.

Recent research suggests that the protection, restoration and sustainable management of forests could offer up to one-third of the emission reductions needed to meet our climate goals.

Tragically, destruction of rainforests is rampant and accelerating. New data shows a loss of tree cover equivalent to the area of France, Germany and the UK combined in the last decade.

This destruction is wrong, and it must stop.

And achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals depends on it.

Therefore, over the last decade, a broad coalition of partners from government, indigenous peoples, NGO, business and civil society partners have been working so strategically to halt and reverse tropical deforestation.

But policy discussions at the international level and in major rainforest countries have needed a stronger moral voice on the issue.

That is the idea behind the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.

This initiative is making religions a core part of the solution and this coalition going forward as an international, faith-based movement to protect rainforests and those that serve as their guardians.

We are therefore working globally - and in major rainforest countries- to connect religious leaders with indigenous peoples, NGOs, governments, businesses and other stakeholders on efforts to end tropical deforestation.

So far, we have launched Interfaith Rainforest Initiative country programs in Peru and Colombia that are effectively bringing all these groups together into collective action and purpose. We are in the process of building similar programs in Brazil, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Indonesia. These five areas are home to 70 % of the remaining rainforest on the earth.

Here are key elements of our action plane:

We are aiming to equip religious and spiritual leaders with the science, information and tools they need to become effective advocates for protecting rainforests.

We are currently working with forest experts and our interfaith partners to develop a series of educational materials, resource guides, fact sheets, sample sermons, lesson plans and other practical tools on forests, climate change and indigenous people's issues. These we are developing for more than a dozen different spiritual traditions

At the same time, we are mobilising religious and spiritual leaders to hold governments and companies to account for their commitments to protect rainforests.

We know the industry practices and policies that are driving deforestation, and we know those that are counteracting it and reversing it.

Our efforts are focused on exerting influence on governments and companies to adopt, fulfil and expand upon their existing commitments to protect rainforests.

Finally, we are working on a global, faith-based campaign to end tropical deforestation, calling on all people of faith and good conscience to see halting deforestation as a moral and ethical responsibility.

We are planning to announce a year-long campaign on *Faiths for Forests* later this year.

We hope that we can work in close partnership with the Vatican and all of you on this effort

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is inextricably linked to the compelling vision that has been put forth by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*.

From its inception, this initiative has taken its inspiration and theory of change from the *Laudato Si'*'s call to action.

We look forward to collaborating with the Vatican and all of you here to ensure this initiative achieves its potential, including putting forests at the heart of discussions on how to achieve the SDGs.

Legislation and political decisions can only take us so far. It is commitment to shared virtues and respect for the sanctity of life that will make it possible to reach this development goal. Let us together move forward with a passionate commitment to protect and restore the rainforest. Different faiths common action. Together we can end deforestation.

The tree of life is a widely shared religious symbol which has gained renewed moral significance in this generation. The image of the tree of life gives a resounding spiritual and political message in the 21st century.

Thank you

(Please follow this work on www.interfaithrainforest.org and www.religionsforpeace.org)