

Climate Change and *Laudato Si'* at the UN
Maribeth Stewart

Important meetings concerning the environment were recently held at the United Nations in New York: the 29th of June 2015 was devoted to a High Level Event on Climate Change convened by the President of the General Assembly and on 30th June, a High Level Discussion of *Laudato Si': On Care For Our Common Home*, Pope Francis' encyclical on ecology, was presented by the Mission of the Holy See at the UN.

The High Level Event on Climate Change addressed the issue through briefings and two panels: Discussion of strategies for mitigating climate change from the viewpoint of politics and from that of stakeholders. Climate change was noted as one of the defining global challenges of our times. Xiuhtezcatl Roske Martinez, a 15 year old, eloquently and passionately stated, "What's at stake right now is the existence of my generation."

In all, it was most encouraging to listen to everyone agree that there is a need to act now and swiftly to eliminate or mitigate human actions that affect or accelerate climate change. To hear the perspectives from political, business, and environmental experts was most interesting. We now have the opportunity and the obligation to achieve sustainable development and preserve our planet.

The next evening, a large group gathered at the invitation of the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN, His Excellency Archbishop Bernardito Auza, for a High Level Discussion on *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis' encyclical on ecology. H.E. Ms. Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, spoke of the eloquence of the encyclical and its call to act on a moral imperative concerning climate change. She noted how the document asks us to act in solidarity with the poor, the young of today and of future generations and of how it reminds us of the unique nexus among science, morality, and political will. She noted that we are the first generation to have the tools, finances, and technology to eradicate poverty and to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. We can actually eliminate poverty and act to save our planet. She noted that this is a matter of primary importance and is an urgent opportunity.

Cardinal Turkson then took the floor. He thanked Patriarch Demetrios, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of the Americas who was present with us, and then provided a bit of the background of how this encyclical came to be. Pope Francis first suggested this topic for an encyclical to Cardinal Turkson at the 50th Anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*. Like that wonderful encyclical from Pope John XXIII, he knew that this document was to be for the whole world, not just for Roman Catholics. A large group of scientists and theologians were consulted throughout the preparation of the *Laudato Si'* and the document went through several drafts. Cardinal Turkson said that in this encyclical:

-Dialogue was the foundation of the document as the Pope relied on a wide range of contributors

-All common concerns and hopes are brought together

- Perspectives are shown to be interwoven and complementary
- The guiding principle of the encyclical's creation is that no one can profess to love God if he does not love what God has created. God created the Earth and persons to live on the Earth. Nature and human ecology are one and intertwined
- We must understand that there is a proper value in each creature. All must be accorded dignity. This is the human meaning of ecology.
- The encyclical presents a critique of a new paradigm arising from technology. There is a challenge to business and politics that technology be used for the common good.
- The encyclical calls for forthright and honest debate or dialogue.
- We must be prepared for a new lifestyle and a new way of understanding "progress". We must be amenable to an ecological conversion to take on responsibility for our common home.
- There is still a chance to intervene and achieve positive change for our planet and our fellow men.
- Universal education in ecological citizenship is needed.
- The heart of the encyclical is integrated ecology: The relationship between nature and the society living in nature, which is ecology. The two cannot be separated.
- We face one complex crisis; social and natural components cannot be separated. The solutions must be comprehensive with strategies reflecting a combined approach: restore dignity and protect nature.
- There is a relationship between the poor of the earth and the fragility of the planet.
- We must question what kind of a world we will leave after us? Not just the environment alone in isolation. We must search the meaning of our existence, of social life, as all are intertwined.
- We must adopt St. Francis' relationship to Mother Earth: An attitude of prayerful contemplation of the universe.
- We must care for the vulnerable and nature developing a commitment to the poor and to our planet, a sense of justice. This commitment to society will give us interior peace.

The Cardinal then gave a brief overview of the six chapters of the encyclical.

We are first called to acknowledge our intimate connection to the Earth and St. Francis is used as our example. Cardinal Turkson noted that science is the best tool that lets us listen to the cry of the Earth. Climate change is still controversial for some. Over 800 scientists advised on this issue. The encyclical is not saying that human activity is exclusively causing climate change but that it does have an adverse effect and we must do all that is in our power to correct this.

Chapter 2 notes the responsibility of humans for all creation according to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the root causes of the present environmental problems.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of integrated ecology. We see our unique place in this world and our relationship to all around us.

Chapter 5 shows us what we can and must do concerning climate change from the levels of personal, local, national, and international actions. It discusses politics and the economy, religion and science, the tension between national and international interests.

Chapter 6 provides guidelines for human development and concludes with two prayers so a spirit of prayerful contemplation both opens and closes the encyclical.

A Greek Orthodox priest provided insights into the ecumenical context of this encyclical noting the extraordinary relationship between Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis. They interact like brothers and their common goals provide a great hope for the communion of the two churches. This encyclical, long anticipated, has 2 religious leaders profoundly committed to coming together and finally reuniting the two lungs of the Church, East and West. Both committed to compassion for the exploitation of the people and the planet. He closed by saying that we praise God for that and for *Laudato Si'*.

These meetings show the need to pray and act to achieve the end of poverty and the end of environmental exploitation of our planet. The presentations assured us that not only is this possible for our generation but that it is imperative we do so.