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Presentation of the Pope's first message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation

This morning in the Holy See Press Office a press conference was held to present the Holy Father's first message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, following his decision last year that Catholics, like Orthodox Christians, celebrate on 1 September a day of reflection and prayer for the defence of creation. The message was presented by Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, former president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Archbishop Brian Farrell, L.C., secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and Terence Ward, author of the book "The Guardian of Mercy".

The message, as Cardinal Turkson explained, poses three questions: how as human beings we are asked to show mercy to our common home, to acknowledge and repent for our sins against creation, and to amend our ways through the merciful grace of God.

"The first step in this process is to humbly acknowledge the harm we are doing to the earth through pollution, the scandalous destruction of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity, and the spectre of climate change which seems nearer and more dangerous with each passing year. And", the prelate added, "to realise that when we hurt the earth, we also hurt the poor, whom God loves without limit".

Pope Francis is asking us to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that this is sin—sin against creation, against the poor, against those who have not yet been born. "This means that we must examine our consciences and repent. I realise that this is not the way we traditionally think about sin. These are sins, Pope Francis says, that we have not hitherto acknowledged and confessed. But we are now called upon to do so. This means we need to take a long and hard look at our lifestyles, especially when they reflect a disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary. ... A genuine examination of conscience would recognise not only our individual failings but also our institutional failings", Cardinal Turkson added.

"If we truly desire to repent, we can confess our sins against the Creator, creation, and our brothers and sisters. And the merciful grace of God received in the sacrament will help us to do so. Once we have done this, Pope Francis says, we are ready to amend our lives and change course. This adjustment also has an individual and institutional dimension. Individually, we are called to "ecological conversion" in our daily lives. We should not think that our efforts – even our small gestures – don't matter. ... Yet individual initiative, important though it is, is

not sufficient to turn the ship around. Ecological conversion entails not only individual conversion, but community conversion too. We need a conversion of economics and politics – away from an obsession with short-term and self-centred financial or electoral gains, and toward a true appreciation of the common good”.

“This is brought into stark relief when we consider the sustainable development agenda”, he affirmed. “Pope Francis praises the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change last year. But”, he warned, “for this agenda to succeed, it will require a heroic amount of political will and a heroic effort by business and economic interests”.

The Cardinal noted that, with regard to climate change, the global community has drawn a red line under a rise in global temperatures of 2 degrees Celsius. This will require a complete shift away from fossil fuels toward renewables by about 2070 and constitutes a momentous undertaking. Furthermore, the Paris Agreement puts 2 degrees Celsius as the upper limit, and asks us to try to limit the increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius instead.

“This is exponentially more difficult, and it will require an even stronger ‘firm purpose of amendment’.... This is the responsibility of all of us. Pope Francis says it is up to citizens to insist that these commitments are honoured, and to advocate for more ambitious goals. ... He suggests that social pressure – including from boycotting certain products – can force businesses to consider their environmental footprint and patterns of production. Let us also not forget the global solidarity dimension. As part of paying down their ‘ecological debt’ to their poorer neighbours, richer countries need to provide them with needed financial and technical support. The same logic animates the fossil fuel divestment movement”.

“Following this amendment of our lives and institutions, Pope Francis is calling us toward a new work of mercy. ... This is really the final step of ecological conversion, a true internalisation of an ecological sensibility. So we are being asked to complement both the spiritual and corporal works of mercy with care for our common home”.

For his part, Archbishop Farrell recalled that “all Christians, East and West, pray that God will continue to sustain and bless the work of His hands ‘until all the earth sings the praises of his Name’”, and that Christians of all traditions are familiar with prayers for the harvest, for rain, for the end of shortage or for help during natural disasters.

“It is a great sign of ecumenical progress that Christians in all Churches are joining together in prayer at the same time to praise God for His work, to seek His protection of it and to re-commit themselves to safeguarding it”, he emphasised.

In this regard, he noted that in 1989, during the mandate of the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided to dedicate 1 September, the beginning of the liturgical year in the Orthodox calendar, to prayer for the safeguarding of creation. On that day the Orthodox liturgy reads the biblical account of the creation of the world. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has paid particular attention to the theme of the care of creation, so much so that he has been called “the green Patriarch”. The initiatives he has promoted include the inter-Christian Symposia on the safeguarding of water, with the participation of Catholic representatives, and his dedication to the protection of creation was underlined in Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*. For this reason Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas was invited to take part in the press conference to present the encyclical in June of last year, during which he Zizioulas launched the idea of a joint day of prayer for the care of creation.

The Holy Father gladly took up the idea and last year established the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation in the Catholic Church, to be celebrated each year on 1 September, coinciding with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Throughout the Christian world, the Holy Father’s decision was greatly appreciated.

The World Council of Churches had already dedicated the period between 1 September and 4 October, the feast of Saint Francis, to prayer and reflection on safeguarding creation. The Anglican Communion also celebrates such a day on 1 September. The day dedicated to prayer for the care of creation by the Moscow Patriarchate is the first Sunday of September, as 1 September is already a holiday for the opening of the school year.

“The fact is that there is broad ecumenical agreement on this important issue”, affirmed Archbishop Farrell. “Significantly for this year, the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, uses a video message to encourage the faithful of the member churches to pray for this intention. Likewise, the Council of European Bishops’ Conferences together with the Conference of European Churches and the European Christian Environmental Network have published a common message”.

“The hope is that on the occasion of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation members of all confessions will come together for prayer and collaboration in common actions regarding this issue, also at the diocesan and parochial levels. ... As today’s Message says, our culture of prosperity is distorted and our desire to consume more than what is really necessary is disordered. We must change our attitudes and our actions. All Christians together are called to make this change”.
