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INTERVENTO DELLA SANTA SEDE ALLA IV CONFERENZA DELLE PARTI ALLA CONVENZIONE SULLA LOTTA ALLA DESERTIFICAZIONE (BONN, 11-22 DICEMBRE 2000)

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LOTTE ALLA DESERTIFICAZIONE (BONN, 11-22 DICEMBRE 2000)

Dall' 11 al 22 dicembre 2000 si è svolta a Bonn la IV Conferenza delle Parti alla Convenzione sulla Lotta alla Desertificazione, dove la Santa Sede è stata rappresentata da una Delegazione guidata da S.E. Mons. Paul Josef Cordes, Presidente del Pontificio Consiglio "Cor Unum", ed integrata da Mons. Frank Dewane, Ufficiale del medesimo Dicastero.

Pubblichiamo di seguito l'intervento del Capo della Delegazione della Santa Sede pronunciato mercoledì 20 dicembre:

• INTERVENTO DI S.E. MONS. PAUL JOSEF CORDES

Mr. Chairman,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to address the fourth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa. The Holy See welcomes the opportunity to participate and lends its support to the important scope of this Convention. In conformity with the nature of the Holy See and having actively participated in the preparatory phase of the Convention, it strives to make its own specific contribution to this Conference and to the struggle against desertification.

Desertification is not a new phenomenon. Traces of ancient lakes can be found in the midst of what is today a desert. Relics of plants and other forms of life have been found that indicate lands that we have only known in modern times as deserts, were once very fertile. Several parts of the Holy Bible, along with other ancient

writings, comment on the journey of peoples in desert lands and the hardships encountered, the struggles to respond to the loss of the life-supporting capacity of lands.

Despite the presence of this concern in the course of history, today desertification is spreading at an increasing, ever alarming rate; some estimates identify this expansion at approximately a half million hectares each year. No region of the world has escaped the effects of desertification, with the African continent exhibiting the most pronounced consequences. It is a global problem calling for a combination of policy and institutional changes which need to occur at the local level while facilitated by a response up to and including the international community.

In the analysis of the problem of Desertification, its causes and consequences, its diversity according to region and continent, components of varied disciplines (sociology, economics, technology, science, etc.) are present. Obstacles have been overcome and there are reasons for hope.

The common element found within this mix of diversity is the human component, our sisters and brothers. Populations living in areas experiencing desertification are often the most marginalized communities of a region and live on the edge of hunger, struggling to maintain an existence in the harshest conditions. This is sadly the human face of desertification, a face whose expression of pain and suffering is recognized by this august assembly and one it strives to change. It is precisely at this point, concern for the person in need, where the technological, scientific, moral, economic, and for that matter, all the components of desertification must converge.

The victims of Desertification are increasing in number, economically poorer, evermore marginalized, less healthy, hungrier, undernourished, thirstier - and this list could easily continue. This is the ethical dimension of the issue which necessitates an ethical commitment in response. The first principle of the 1992 Rio Declaration places human beings at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. The first sentence of the Convention to Combat Desertification affirms that human beings are at the centre of concerns to combat desertification. Indeed, human persons are at the center of the entire development process. People must be the protagonist of their own development. More can be done, by all parties involved, to decrease the suffering found in the human face of desertification. The affected states must be empowered economically to combat desertification. The individuals affected must have the ability to fully realize their God-given potential.

In June of 1999 in Cologne Germany, the countries attending the G-7 summit addressed the question of debt relief and debt cancellation. Despite what some have called a decisive beginning and the acknowledgment that debt relief would be a start to helping those living in poverty, many of the promises made there have remained unfulfilled. In the context of the United Nations Millennium Summit, the General Assembly passed a Declaration setting a series of ambitious and specific targets to be met by 2015. One is for halving the proportion of the world's population which suffers from hunger and the lack of safe drinking water - that is people living in poverty. With only limited action on debt relief and without reversing the long downward spiral in the proportion of wealth that rich nations give to foreign aid, the number of those who go hungry and thirsty - the poor - will not decrease.

In 1984 Pope John Paul II established the "Foundation for the Sahel". This was the culmination of an earlier appeal by His Holiness on behalf of what he termed "the thirsty lands". The Holy Father said, "That in spite of the many initiatives of governments and of the international community the situation persists in its seriousness, after consulting my brothers in the Episcopate of the region of the Sahel, it seemed opportune to give a more organic, permanent and effective form to the Church's aid intended for Sahel in a spirit of charity, authentic human promotion and collaboration with all the organizations committed to aid programmes."

The Church is aware she cannot meet every need, but makes this concrete gesture so as to give hope and help to the restoring of the self-esteem sometimes lost in the face of this plight. She seeks to contribute to the social progress of individuals and peoples in the grip of the suffering and poverty caused by desertification giving a sign of the Creator's love for the whole of creation and especially for all human beings.

The Foundation for the Sahel, while founded prior to the Convention to Combat Desertification, is very much in

keeping with the thrust of the Convention according to the nature of the Holy See. Based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and entrusted to the care of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum", control of the Foundation and its decision-making authority is completely with the local Churches of nine Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Chad).

The purpose of the Foundation is that of promoting the training of personnel to combat desertification and its causes while at the same time aiding the victims of drought and land degradation, providing incisive strategies and the necessary skills so the crucial actions can be carried out on the spot by those most afflicted. The majority of the trainees are women with particular concern for pastoralist women and their plight. Confidence is placed in the abilities proper to the countries and the peoples of the Sahel Region. Assistance is given to self-help initiatives, giving people the possibility to combat desertification, helping the humiliated discover their capacity and dignity.

The Holy See is pleased to engage in bilateral and multilateral contacts to look for ways of improving the capacity and skills of those in need as well as sharing her experiences over the years through the "Foundation for the Sahel". In this context, contact has been made with the Government of Israel so that responses to this threat can be shared and benefit all impacted by desertification. Unfortunately this phenomenon of desertification has continually expanded, oblivious to boundaries of any sort. A response of international cooperation at all levels and in the full range of disciplines is needed to combat desertification. Maximum cooperation will also be needed so as to ignore boundaries and focus on individuals suffering and so desperately in need of relief and compassion. A sense of global justice must be exercised towards those suffering the consequences of desertification.

The Holy See wishes to pursue and encourage endeavours in favour of human beings negatively impacted as the result of desertification and drought, especially those in Africa. To the extent that it is in its competency, the Holy See desires to serve the aspirations of people living in lands impacted by desertification and is interested in all initiatives to combat it. The Holy See contributes to the development of an awareness of the common good so that everyone may feel responsible for their brothers and sisters in need.

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