



ALLIANCE OF RELIGIONS AND CONSERVATION

launched in 1995 by HRH The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh KG KT

Pope Benedict's call for urgent action on the environment reinforces the importance of ARC/UNDP's work with the faiths

January 26, 2010: The Alliance of Religions and Conservation welcomes Pope Benedict XVI's recent, very powerful statements on the need for urgent action to protect the environment. Both statements highlight the role of religion in this matter, and reinforce the importance of ARC/UNDP's work with the major faiths of the world - particularly in the areas of advocacy, education, lifestyles and assets.

In his message for World Day of Peace on January 1 and in his speech to the Diplomatic Corps on January 11, the Pope emphasised that:

- we cannot remain indifferent to what is happening around us, "for the deterioration of any one part of the planet affects us all";
- protecting the environment is about protecting creation and is a moral issue;
- neglect of the natural environment is a threat to peace, prosperity and humanity's future (as great a threat as global terrorism);
- protecting the environment is the responsibility of us all;
- every economic decision has a moral consequence;
- a "great programme of education" is required to change attitudes;
- religion has a vital role to play in bringing about the profound cultural renewal and change in lifestyles needed.

How what Pope Benedict says relates to ARC/UNDP's work

In 2007 ARC and the United Nations Development Programme began a pioneering programme which is consistent with the points made by the Pope. The nine major faiths of the world - Baha'ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Shintoism and Sikhism - were asked to develop long-term action plans on the environment, focusing on seven key areas: assets; education and young people; wisdom; lifestyles; media and advocacy; partnerships and eco-twinning; and celebration.

The result was more than 30 Long-term Plans by faiths and faith organisations, which were launched at the Windsor Celebration in November 2009 in the presence of Prince Philip and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. This was the first major, internationally-coordinated commitment by the nine religions to the environment, and aims to shape the behaviour and attitudes of the faithful for generations to come

Assets

The Pope said the environment must be seen as "God's gift to all people" and treated accordingly. He emphasised that economic activity had to "consider the fact that every economic decision has a moral consequence and thus show increased respect for the environment".

The Pope added: "When making use of natural resources, we should be concerned for their protection and consider the cost entailed – environmentally and socially – as an essential part of the overall expenses incurred."

In the Long-term Plans launched at Windsor in November 2009, the faiths included pledges to make religious properties, pilgrimage sites and assets more ecological. These include:

- Catholic plans in the US, Australia, England and Wales to undertake environmental audits on church properties and implement ethical purchasing policies;
- the Muslim plan to green key cities and the Hajj;
- the Church of England's pledge to cut its carbon footprint by 80 per cent by 2050;
- the development of faith-based eco-labelling systems in Hinduism and Islam;
- the Jewish commitment to promote environmentally responsible investment, with the aim that 5% of Jewish investments will use environmental criteria by the end of 2010.
- the Shinto plan to develop an international Religious Forestry Standard for ethical and ecological management of faith-managed forests.

Education and lifestyle

The Pope said a profound cultural renewal was needed to combat the "self-centred and materialistic" way of thinking which was endangering creation. He called for a radical rethink of values.

"The causes of the situation which is now evident to everyone are of the moral order, and the question must be faced within the framework of a great programme of education aimed at promoting an effective change of thinking and at creating new lifestyles," he said.

He added: "We are all responsible for the protection and care of the environment. This responsibility knows no boundaries."

All the Long-term Plans include major education and outreach programmes aimed at bringing about long-term lifestyle change. These include:

- the Jesuits' plan to inspire the next generation to protect the environment through teaching ecological awareness in their schools and universities around the world;
- the pledge by the Catholic Coalition of Climate Change (a partnership of 13 US-based institutions) to make teaching on the environment more central in Catholic schools and in the training of clergy;
- the Daoists' plan to establish a series of eco temples as centres of inspiration and training, including meditation sites in forests to help visitors understand nature better.

- the Bahai's plan to launch an educational programme on climate change and the environment for members of its community, especially young people.

Advocacy

Pope Benedict said religion had a key role to play in protecting the environment and added that this was something "the community of believers" wanted to do.

"The Church has a responsibility towards creation, and she considers it her duty to exercise that responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone, and above all to save mankind from the danger of self-destruction," he said.

The Pope also emphasised the moral crisis underlying our abuse of the environment.

"Our present crises – be they economic, food-related, environmental or social – are ultimately also moral crises, and all of them are interrelated," he said.

In their plans, the faiths recognised the environment as a moral issue, with implications for their responsibility in advocating for change. Initiatives include:

- Active lobbying of governments on environmental issues (for example, the Lutheran Church of Norway is demanding that Norway fulfil its responsibility as an oil producer by working to mitigate the impact of petroleum extraction; the Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa is speaking out against the dumping of industrial waste in Africa).
- Speaking up for the victims of climate change, as well as launching practical initiatives (examples include the Church of England's Climate Justice Fund to help those suffering most from the impact of climate change, the work by the Quakers on environmental refugees and the Jesuits' active witness to the destruction of Amazonian communities and rainforest;
- Advocating for individual change internally, among faith communities.

ARC and UNDP welcome the recognition given by the Pope of the importance of working with faiths on the environment. It is a position shared by many other religious leaders as well as by an increasing number of secular organizations such as the UN and the World Bank. It was recognition of the enormous potential for such partnerships which led Prince Philip to create ARC 16 years ago.

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