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Intervention of the Cardinal Secretary of State on the occasion of the International Summit “Water and Climate: Meeting of the Great Rivers of the World”

The International Summit “*Water and Climate: Meeting of the Great Rivers of the World*” took place in Rome, in the Sala della Protomoteca in Campidoglio conference hall, from 23 to 25 October.

The following is the Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin’s address, given yesterday at the beginning of the summit, in which he read the Holy Father’s Message to the participants:

Intervention of the Cardinal Secretary of State

Mr President of the Council,

Honourable Ministers,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Firstly, I am pleased to read the Message that Pope Francis has addressed to this Summit:

His Holiness Pope Francis addresses his greeting to all participants at the International Summit, “Water and Climate: Meeting of the Great Rivers of the World”, along with his well wishes for its work, aimed at identifying the ways through which the precious gift of water may be preserved for the future of humanity. It is His hope that your joint commitment to raising awareness among the international community of the urgent problems faced by the world’s most important river basins will not only lead to practical solutions, but will also highlight the need for

an increasingly integrated approach with a view to the promotion of the development and dissemination of a “culture of care” (Laudato si’, 231). In particular, Pope Francis trusts that the threat posed by climate change to our brothers and sisters in the most vulnerable countries can be met by timely and effective responses. Entrusting the deliberations of the Summit to the guidance of the Almighty, His Holiness invokes blessings of wisdom and perseverance upon the participants and all those engaged in promoting greater care for our common home.

Allow me, following the words of Pope Francis, to pause for a few moments on some aspects of today’s meeting, focusing on a resource as essential as water, which Saint Francis in his Canticle of Creatures calls “sister water” and defines as “very useful, humble, precious and chaste”.

There is no need, on the one hand, to emphasise the importance of water, an indispensable element for human beings in all fields of life.

On the other hand, we are all well aware that the constant increase in water needs, exacerbated by climate change, is one of the most serious challenges to the international community today and in the future.

This requires all of us to increase responsibly our efforts to examine the theme of water in more depth, with its different meanings. For example, I think of:

- water as an essential component for human life and for land and water ecosystems, which refers to that human right of access to water, which is increasingly discussed in numerous forums. Access to water is, in fact, one of the inalienable rights of every human being, since it is a prerequisite for the exercise of many of the other human rights (see *Laudato si’*, 30) such as the right to life, to nutrition, and to health. From this perspective, the management of water, the common good of humanity, must permit access for all, especially to those who live in poverty;
- water as an element to which a number of religions have attributed a “spiritual” and “symbolic” value; consider the role of “purification” of water so clearly outlined in many of these;
- water as a key factor for development. Water scarcity or mismanagement is, in fact, a “limiting factor” in human development: even in the presence of other factors (labour, land, minerals, other natural resources), water shortage or mismanagement can prevent a decent life, agriculture, livestock farming, productive activities and adequate sanitation, can lead to inequalities and forced migration;
- water also as a destructive element of life on Earth, through various extreme natural phenomena associated with its abundance or its scarcity, phenomena which, unfortunately, are becoming increasingly intense and frequent;
- water as a potential cause of “conflict” or, conversely, solidarity, especially where there are water resources shared between two or more States.

And it is precisely on these last two points that I would like to reflect briefly, since they are closely linked to the theme of our Summit: the link between water and climate and the management of shared water resources.

Speaking of the link between water and climate, one can not fail to see that the problem of water as a “limiting factor” of development is aggravated further by the problem of climate change, which affects the hydro-geological cycle and depends not only on natural elements, but also on poorly managed anthropic activities that may create alterations and imbalances in the same cycle. Consider, for example, the pollution of aquifers or rivers, or the destruction of forests. There is a strong link between climate change and water-related disasters: it is estimated that about 90% of the major extreme events occurring in the last thirty years are attributable to water^[1]. From this perspective, careful integrated management of water resources is one of the main tools for reinforcing resilience and adaptation to climate change.

Secondly, water can be the subject of conflict and contention (so-called “water wars” are increasingly widespread) , especially in the presence of rivers, lakes, or hydrographic basins shared among several nations. But by adopting a far-reaching change of perspective, water can be seen as an element of collaboration and dialogue, an opportunity for peace and solidarity, through enlightened and responsible political or technological arrangements of participatory management founded on the precious value of “sharing”. Cross-border water resources, “shared” by several States, offer opportunities both for competition and conflict, and for cooperation and solidarity, since they represent a key factor for the economic stability of each State. Concepts such as “hydro-solidarity” or “hydro-diplomacy” are being developed. In the second half of the twentieth century, over two hundred Treaties on Water were negotiated, often showing cross-border water cooperation as a valid example of long-term conflict prevention, given that countries with mechanisms for co-operation in such areas have rarely resorted to war.

Therefore, new approaches to water are necessary, of a legislative, institutional, political, economic, technical and ethical nature, and therefore also educational and cultural (cf. *Laudato si'*, 30), based on the awareness that the issue of water requires a long-term outlook, from the perspective of that integral ecology so well outlined by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*. It is necessary to make the commitment to include the issue of “water” in all the discussions on development taking place in the global arena: new investments will be needed in the coming years to increase resilience and thus reduce the risks of natural disasters, and to favour truly integral human development; it is good for access to water and the integrated management of water resources to be central elements in reflections in deciding on these investments.

The need to identify innovative approaches also requires new forms of cooperation between public and private sectors, new partnership models, in the context of rational water planning, where to take into account phenomena such as climate change, the spread and the assimilation of information among the population, and the long-term modification of behaviour and water use. Underlying these approaches, priority should be given to meeting the water security needs of the poor through water policies that favour them, as well as the revitalization of the local environment through the promotion of decentralization, namely subsidiarity, making the most of the knowledge and experience of populations and local communities.

I hope that from the Summit beginning today further elements may emerge to develop these forms of solidarity and “cross-border diplomacy” based on water.

Thank you.

[1] Cfr. Par. 5 of the *Cancun High-Level Communiqué*, 24 May 2017, of the Fifth Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction: «We further identify the close nexus between climate change and water-related disasters which account for almost 90% of the 1,000 most disastrous events since 1990».