

Pope Francis to COP28: ‘Choose life, choose the future!’

Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin delivered Pope Francis’ speech to delegates at the UN Climate Change Summit, urging world leaders not to postpone action any longer but to craft concrete and cohesive responses for the well-being of our common home and future generations.

By Linda Bordoni

Expressing regret for his impossibility to be present in Dubai for the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference, Pope Francis reiterated his belief that “the future of us all depends on the present that we now choose.”

This year’s UN Summit comes in the wake of a year of record heat and drought and features a contentious set of issues for countries working to find common ground in tackling climate change.

In a hard-hitting *message*, delivered on his behalf by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, the Pope told the COP assembly that his presence serves to remind them that “the destruction of the environment is an offence against God, a sin that is not only personal but also structural, one that greatly endangers all human beings, especially the most vulnerable in our midst and threatens to unleash a conflict between generations.”

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Appeal to choose life

Climate change, the Pope continued, is “a global social issue and one intimately related to the dignity of human life”.

It raises an urgent question; he said, “Are we working for a culture of life or a culture of death?”

“To all of you,” he added, “I make this heartfelt appeal: Let us choose life! Let us choose the future! May we be attentive to the cry of the earth, may we hear the plea of the poor, may we be sensitive to the hopes of the young and the dreams of children! We have a grave responsibility: to ensure that they not be denied their future.”

Reiterating his urgent call to address the climate crisis, Pope Francis attributed its root cause to the excessive heating of the planet, driven mainly by escalating levels of greenhouse gases that, he said, result from unsustainable human activities.

“The drive to produce and possess has become an obsession, resulting in an inordinate greed that has made the environment the object of unbridled exploitation. The climate, run amok, is crying out to us to halt this illusion of omnipotence,” he stated.

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The Pope called on humankind to recognize its limits “with humility and courage” as the sole step towards authentic fulfilment.

He pointed to the divisions that exist among us as the main obstacle to this crucial shift, and said “a world completely connected, like ours today, should not be unconnected by those who govern it, with international negotiations that ‘cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good’.”

Emphasizing the need to overcome inflexible positions, he urged a focus on collective responsibility for the future: “The task to which we are called today is not about yesterday but about tomorrow: a tomorrow that, whether we like it or not, will belong to everyone or else to no one.”

Pope Francis then rejected attempts to shift the blame on the poor and high birth rates.

“It is not the fault of the poor, since the almost half of our world that is more needy is responsible for scarcely 10% of toxic emissions, while the gap between the opulent few and the masses of the poor has never been so abysmal,” he said.

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Smoke billows from Europe's largest coal-fired power plant

Impact of climate crisis on the poor

Highlighting the disproportionate impact of environmental issues on the poor, the Holy Father noted the dramatic effects of climate change on indigenous peoples, deforestation, hunger, water and food insecurity, and forced migration.

“Births are not a problem but as a resource,” he said, “whereas certain ideological and utilitarian models now being imposed with a velvet glove on families and peoples constitute real forms of colonization.”

Furthermore, the Pope argued against penalizing the development of economically burdened countries, suggesting instead a reconsideration of the “ecological debt” owed by wealthier nations, and called for a comprehensive and equitable approach to address the interconnected issues of climate change, economic debt, and social justice on a global scale.

Unity and multilateralism

The way out of the current environmental crisis, the Pope suggested, is the way of togetherness and *multilateralism*, and he called for effective cooperation in a world that has “become so multipolar and at the same time so complex that a different framework for effective cooperation is required.”

It is disturbing, he noted, that “global warming has been accompanied by a general cooling of multilateralism, a growing lack of trust within the international community,” and he underscored the crucial role of trust in rebuilding effective international collaboration.



Catastrophic floods in Somalia

Care for Creation and Peace

The Holy Father drew attention to the interconnected nature of environmental and peace issues, decriing the waste of humanity's energy and resources on wars – “such as those in Israel and Palestine, in Ukraine and in many parts of the world” that exacerbate problems rather than by solving them.

“How many resources are being squandered on weaponry that destroys lives and devastates our common home!” he said, again presenting an already voiced proposal: “With the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures, let us establish a global fund that can finally put an end to hunger” and carry out works for the sustainable development of the poorer countries and for combating climate change.

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Reiterating the need for political change signalled by climate change, Pope Francis urged a departure from narrow self-interest and nationalism, advocating for an alternative vision that fosters ecological conversion.

Commitment of the Catholic Church

In this regard, he assured the commitment and support of the Catholic Church, which, he said, “is deeply engaged in the work of education and of encouraging participation by all, as well as in promoting sound lifestyles, since all are responsible and the contribution of each is fundamental.”

Upholding the importance of cultural changes and a new collective mindset that transcends individual and national interests the Pope said: “May this COP prove to be a turning point, demonstrating a clear and tangible political will that can lead to a decisive acceleration of ecological transition” with efficient, obligatory, and readily monitored measures in the sectors of energy efficiency, renewable sources, elimination of fossil fuels, and education in sustainable lifestyles.

Appeal to move forward

“Please,” Pope Francis begged, “let us move forward and not turn back.” He urged leaders not to postpone action any longer and pointed to the responsibility of policymakers to craft concrete and cohesive responses for the well-being of current and future generations.

He reminded them that the purpose of power is to serve and warned against clinging to authority “that will one day be remembered for its inability to take action when it was urgent and necessary to do so.”

And urging them to foster “good politics” he said that “if an example of concreteness and cohesiveness comes from the top, this will benefit the base, where many people, especially the young, are already dedicated to caring for our common home.”

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Young people in Bangladesh participate in a "Friday for Future" rally

‘May 2024 mark a breakthrough’

Concluding, Pope Francis expressed his hope that the year 2024 could mark a breakthrough, drawing inspiration from the transformative experience of Saint Francis of Assisi who composed his “Canticle of the Creatures” in 1224, an experience that led him “to turn his pain into praise and his weariness into renewed commitment” which also led him to settle a conflict between the civil authorities and the local bishop.

Invoking this historical event as a symbol of fraternity, Pope Francis urged leaders “to leave behind our divisions and unite our forces! And with God’s help, let us emerge from the dark night of wars and environmental devastation in order to turn our common future into the dawn of a new and radiant day.”

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By Linda Bordoni, Journalist. (SOURCE Vatican News)