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“Listening to the cries of the earth and of the poor”
Panel on Perspective from Abrahamic Religions –
A Christian Perspective
International Conference on Religions
and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
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Presented by Rev. Dr Martin Junge
General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation

Let me begin my presentation by thanking HE Cardinal Peter Turkson and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for putting together this timely International Conference under the theme “Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs).

I am grateful for this space and the invitation to offer some insights from a Christian perspective. In my presentation, I will draw from some key biblical narratives that nurture and inspire our presence and action of service in the world, and point to some of the issues and challenges we may want to consider as we journey toward the year 2030.

Hence, let me begin with the biblical story that the SDGs bring to my mind. It is a parable, or a metaphoric teaching of Jesus, in which he explains how much each and every single human being matters to the eyes of God (Matthew 18:12-14). There was a shepherd, so the parable goes, who noticed that from his 100 sheep one became lost in the field. He left the 99 behind in order to go back to the field and look for the lost one. After much searching, he eventually found it. The message of the parable is clear: God doesn't want anyone to be lost or to be left behind.

As this parable illustrates, the Agenda 2030 with its slogan “leave no one behind” resonates well with the Christian community. It connects easily with our deeply-held faith convictions and practices. It represents an important platform to stem the tide of growing gaps between people in our world, a tide that stands in stark contradiction to the vision we share. It addresses the prevailing logic that not only presupposes, but often builds on the exclusion of a section of the population while seeking prosperity or development. Our voice needs to be straight-forward: a development paradigm that

operates on the basis of exclusion can't be called development. We rather call it for what it is: exploitation.

While there is this evident convergence between Christian faith and the Agenda 2030, I believe it is important to understand the distinctiveness of our approaches. For Christians, our engagement will be first an expression of our faith, a response to what we hear and believe, before it is a response to the SDGs. What this distinctiveness calls for is that we continue to be engaged in a deep exercise of translation and interpretation of our specific frameworks so that we clearly identify both the common space for our partnerships, as well as its boundaries given the varied identities of the actors engaged in it.

“Religious literacy” has been an important concept in this respect. I am grateful for the important strides that the UN system has made, for instance by calling together the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development, and recently by even constituting a Faith Advisory Council to the Task Force. This is a good development, which we in the ecumenical movement strongly endorse. It has provided a valuable space for interfaith interaction, to the benefit of many of us.

The International Partnership on Religion and Development (PaRD), offers another valuable space, which distinctively focuses on the intersections between governments and FBOs. Here too, many of us are involved in the quest of developing literacy.

Yet, I have lately come to understand that the concept of “religious literacy” is too narrow. It assumes that others need to learn about us, the FBOs, but that we, the FBOs, don't seem to need to learn from others.

The communion I represent, the Lutheran World Federation, works together with the ACT Alliance on an approach that looks into the other side of the issues, hence, assisting local churches and organizations to understand the mind-set, the instruments and the procedures regarding development and cooperation of governments and the UN system. I believe that our way forward needs to safeguard this bi-directional literacy training. Only when we fully understand the otherness of the other will partnership be effective and sustainable.

An area that I believe is crucial for us as Christians to work on is our relation to the Human Rights framework. No doubt, faith and its foundational narratives is the constitutive grammar that articulates our engagement around the vision of leaving no one behind. The Agenda 2030, instead, is shaped, or should be shaped, by the Human Rights framework. Human Rights affirm, in other ways, for other actors and with other instruments of accountability the deep-held conviction that each human being is born with inherent dignity and value. This is something we fully share and endorse as a conviction of faith. Together with several other faith traditions we regard each person as created in God's image (Genesis 1:26 – 28).

Looking at our times, I believe humankind is at a critical juncture: whether we will move forward in history with, or without Human Rights. I observe with great concern that the overall accountability to Human Rights and its binding instruments and conventions is fading away. Examples abound: dictators are left unchecked, the Geneva Refugee Convention (1951) is being pushed aside, humanitarian aid politicized.

As someone who grew up during dictatorship in Latin America, I can testify: the disregard for Human Rights results in people being left behind, if not crushed. I am therefore convinced that it is indispensable to deliberately link the Agenda 2030 with its SDGs to the Human Rights obligations of States and the multilateral instruments that have been created for that sake. Otherwise, the Agenda 2030 may contribute to a further weakening of the accountability to these obligations without which, again, the world will continue leaving people and entire communities behind.

Let me offer a particularly poignant substantiation, which relates to the SDG 5. In Switzerland, where I am currently living, there is a gap of 14.6% between the salary men and women get paid for the same job. It means, in concrete terms, that women only started to receive salaries on February 22. Until that day, they worked for free, while we, men, were paid from January 1. What's the rationale?

Ten days ago, I was in a country that has enforced a policy according to which schoolgirls would be immediately removed from school if found pregnant. We were wondering, while discussing with the local church, what about the boys involved in that pregnancy, or worse, what if that pregnancy was a result of abuse? There is a gender bias, a gap, which, if left unaddressed, will always leave women behind: underpaid, less educated, stigmatized, and altogether on an unequal footing when it comes to our development.

I know how the gender discourse is often difficult and challenges us as FBOs. What encourages me personally to still face this challenge is when I read about those many situations in the Holy Bible, which portray our Lord Jesus Christ meeting those he was not supposed to meet, talking to whom he was not supposed to talk, taking even direction from whom he shouldn't (Matthew 15:21-28): women. He did so, because of what the parable of the good shepherd actually outlines as God's vision: that no one should be left behind. And this includes women.

Even if there were not an Agenda 2030, but because of what is in God's mind, faith compels us to face the question how to overcome the systemic inequality in the relations between men and women, particularly around issues of power and resources. Ignoring this dimension wouldn't leave just some behind, but would leave half of the population behind!

Moving to another topic now, but still in light of leaving no one behind, I want to strongly advocate for a much clearer focus on children and youth in the Agenda 2030. Dear friends, we are heading toward an important intergenerational conflict: youth is increasingly realizing and experiencing that neither the economy, nor the ecology are working for them. Until recently, I used to speak of youth and their concerns as a "ticking bomb" for societies. I've stopped doing so because it puts blame on them, and because the issue is actually the other way round: we have managed to set up a stage for youth in which work as we knew it won't exist anymore, at least for large sections, and the ecological system sustaining their lives is deeply endangered because of climate change and loss of biodiversity. Not youth is the ticking bomb. It's the way we've let economy develop, and depleted natural resources. In 2018, the Earth Overshoot day was reached on August 1. From that day on and until the end of that year, we lived on the resources of youth and children. I don't think we borrowed those resources from them. I fear we just took them.

The massive gluttony for resources doesn't stop even when it endangers our own children. The word 'enough' doesn't seem to exist anymore, reason for which we

incur deepening debt, both financial and ecological. And youth and children are our paymasters.

I'm profoundly grateful to HH Pope Francis for his Encyclical "Laudato Si", without which – so I always say – the Paris agreement could hardly have been achieved. I am equally indebted to HH the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who for years has raised his voice on issues related to the ecological disorders we are facing. Both of them constantly remind us of our role as stewards of God's creation (Genesis 1:26), a concept we share with other religions, and point to the deep conversion and transformation that is needed among us, as human beings, to live into this vocation and thereby still avert the dangers we are facing because of the rapid ecological degradation.

Here I see a unique contribution of FBO's. Because at the end of the day, how we live and what matters in life, what we call a successful or a full life is a deeply spiritual question – even in contexts of secularization. The changes that are ahead of us won't be possible without changing minds and hearts.

It is this conversion, based on a deep conversation about what life is and what matters in life, that we as FBO's are uniquely placed to support. It is a conversation about meaning and relationships: to the neighbor and to the created world. Admittedly, for that conversation to happen calls for an important theological shift from a hitherto rather anthropocentric theology toward one that becomes more eco-centric.

This leads me to my last biblical text, which I deeply cherish: it talks about Jesus on the top of a mountain, and some of the disciples suddenly seeing God in him as they never did before (Matthew 17:1-9). Of course, they wanted to stay there, enjoying that moment of divine revelation. Yet, Jesus took them down to the plains, where he met and healed a boy that was continuously falling into fire and had therefore his face disfigured.

From the encounter with the transfigured Lord to meeting the disfigured human being and the mourning creation – that is the space within which we move. There is a deep connection between worship and action. The divine liturgy in our temples and the liturgy of service and witness that follows in the sacred space of this world are interlinked. By holding these dimensions together, we add a distinctive voice and practice to the Agenda 2030. We can and we should be ourselves as FBOs, and in doing so, be meaningful actors in the Agenda 2030 and its call for partnerships.

I personally look forward to deepened engagement, to stronger interfaith cooperation and action and, in doing so, to intensified dialogue among all of us who are carried by this powerful vision: leave no one behind.