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Press Conference to present the Meeting “Faith and Science: Towards COP26”

At 11.30 this morning a press conference was live-streamed from the Holy See Press Office, to present the meeting “Faith and Science: Towards COP26”, promoted by the Embassies of the United Kingdom and Italy to the Holy See, along with the Holy See. The meeting, which is scheduled to take place in the Vatican and in Rome on 4 October 2021, will see the participation of religious leaders and scientists who together will consider the theme of climate change and the need for global commitment to the care of creation.

The speakers were: Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States; Her Excellency Mrs. Sally Jane Axworthy, ambassador of Great Britain to the Holy See; and His Excellency Mr. Pietro Sebastiani, ambassador of Italy to the Holy See.

The following are the interventions by Her Excellency Mrs. Sally Jane Axworthy and His Excellency Mr. Pietro Sebastiani:

Intervention by Her Excellency Mrs. Sally Jane Axworthy

Thank you for coming and for your interest.

As you know, the UK will host the climate change summit COP26 this year in partnership with Italy.

The Issue

We have a moral obligation to protect the planet and those most affected by the climate crisis in particular indigenous peoples, small-island developing states and the least developed countries.

But we are running out of time. Climate change is not yet going in the right direction. Global temperatures have risen by more than one degree, and we are on course for rises of more than two degrees. This would mean:

Vulnerable People

- 37% of the world's population would be exposed to severe heatwaves at least once every five years;
- Southern Europe, North Africa and the Near-East would be exposed to severe droughts;
- whereas more northern areas would suffer floods;

Agriculture

- crop yields would be lower in sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia and Latin America;
- rice and wheat would become less nutritious;
- 7-10% of livestock would be lost;

Biodiversity

- parts of the Mediterranean would become desert, whereas part of the tundra will melt;
- forests would reduce and wildfires increase;
- sea levels would rise by more than 20cm in most parts of the world submerging low-lying island nations, altering fish migrations and coral reefs would all but disappear.

COP26

It is critical that we hold temperature rises to 1.5 degrees and COP26 is our chance to this. To do that we have four aims:

1. All countries should set targets for the reduction of their emissions that would halve emissions by 2030 and take us to net zero by 2050.
2. The international community must support those who are most vulnerable to climate change e.g. to build resilient infrastructure and agriculture, and protect nature.
3. Developed countries must raise at least \$100bn each year in finance to support developing countries. In addition, every financial decision should take climate into account.
4. We must finalise the rules implementing the Paris Agreement e.g. on carbon markets and transparent reporting.

The Role of Faith

Faith leaders played a key role in building momentum for COP21 in 2015 e.g. Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Interfaith Climate Change Statement to World leaders, and declarations by different religious groups on climate change. We wondered whether faith leaders might make a similar contribution to COP26.

We were further inspired by the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, which called on all believers and all people of good will to

address global challenges together. This seemed to offer a way for faith to guide the world on environmental issues.

Further, we suspected that the faiths might take a very similar approach to environmental issues. That has proved to be the case.

The Initiative

We invited nearly 40 leaders from the world's major religions and 10 leading scientists to come together to prepare an appeal for COP26. It was key to have representatives of most major faiths and denominations from every corner of the world.

We asked the faith leaders to do three things:

- set out their own theology on the environment;
- explain the action they had taken so far to protect the environment; and
- articulate what they wanted for the future, including what they wanted to say to political leaders at COP26.

We asked the scientists to bring us up to date on the science.

The leaders and scientists have met in six virtual meetings over the course of the last six months. Every leader and scientist has set out their views.

There has been a remarkable convergence of views. All the faiths and belief systems see nature as sacred, and our duty as being to protect the environment. Many speakers have emphasised the interconnectedness of humans and nature, and that if we destroy nature, we destroy ourselves. The leaders have drawn on their own traditions to suggest solutions: that we moderate our desires, rethink our economic model to be within the bounds of what nature can sustain, and focus on support for those least responsible for but most affected by climate change. The dialogue with the scientists has been creative – facts and values coming together – or as one speaker put it, enlightened passion.

Intervention by His Excellency Mr. Pietro Sebastiani

I thank His Excellency Archbishop Gallagher for offering a timely and inspired overview of the initiative that we have decided to organise together with the Embassy of the United Kingdom to the Holy See, which I thank, in collaboration with the Holy See itself.

“Faith and Science: Towards COP26”, which we are presenting here today, stems from the desire to deepen, develop and compare the sensitivity to environmental issues shared by different religions and spiritual traditions, and thus to offer an unprecedented impetus to COP26 in the year in which Italy and Great Britain also hold the Presidency of the G20 and G7 respectively.

Additionally, it will be an opportunity to promote a debate on ecological issues related to those of social justice and to reflect on a development model that cannot continue to produce an unsustainable environmental cost and increase social and economic inequalities, aspects that have been aggravated by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has also highlighted inequalities in access to healthcare.

Climate change is also a moral issue: we must urgently intensify our action to respond to the threat of climate

change, particularly for the younger generation and for the most vulnerable countries and communities.

Religious leaders played a key role in creating the conditions for the success of COP21 in Paris in 2015, and many of them have repeatedly referred to the shared responsibility of people of faith to care for the whole of Creation.

The British Presidency, in partnership with Italy, of COP26 therefore offers a unique opportunity to develop synergies between these different multilateral fora at a time when multilateralism needs to be reinvigorated and strengthened.

As a COP26 partner, Italy will host a series of important preparatory events for the Conference itself:

1) in Milan, from 30 September to 2 October, the Pre-COP, i.e. the preparatory meeting of ministers that is traditionally held about a month before the COP, with the aim of offering ministers representing the main negotiating parties the opportunity to discuss informally the main policy issues, a very important preparatory work for a successful COP;

2) also in Milan, Italy will host on 28-30 September an event entitled *Youth4Climate: Driving Ambition*, which in turn is linked to the Pre-COP. This event will give an opportunity to about 400 young people - 200 girls and 200 boys between 15 and 29 years old - from each of the 197 countries that are parties to the UNFCCC to discuss and formulate concrete proposals on climate change issues that will be taken into account in the Pre-COP, and especially in COP26.

These young people were selected in recent months through a special UN platform. On the Italian side, it was decided to combine the two events as it was considered fundamental to involve the commitment and enthusiasm of the younger generations.

More specifically, the first two days of the event will be dedicated to thematic working groups, whereas the third day will be devoted to a debate between young people and the ministers participating in Pre-COP26. The third day of *Youth4Climate* will in fact coincide with the first day of the Pre-COP, so that young people on the one hand and ministers and negotiators on the other can meet and debate.

Dedicating a specific event to young people is a novelty that has been greatly appreciated by all and is also intended to be a pioneering initiative with the intention of becoming structural in any subsequent format on climate-environmental issues.

In order to fill the “gap” generated by the postponement of the COP26 events due to the pandemic, as early as June 2020 the Italian Ministry for Ecological Transition launched a major programme of virtual events entitled *Youth4Climate: Live Series*, in collaboration with the Office of the Youth Envoy of the UN Secretary General and the World Bank's *Connect4Climate* programme.

The results of the discussions and debates among young people, which have already started in virtual mode prior to the event in Milan, will then be reworked during *Youth4Climate* following debates organised in different working groups, with professional moderators and experts in the field.

All this should lead to a final Declaration, containing the proposals or recommendations that have emerged on the macro-themes identified, the content of which will be brought, as I said, first to the table of the ministers and negotiators of the Pre-COP and then to the COP26 negotiations in Glasgow.

3) In addition, Italy will host a high-level ministerial event on environmental and climate challenges in Africa (“Meetings with Africa”) in Rome on 7 and 8 October.

All these events have been conceived as an opportunity to broaden the perspective of the theme of ambition to all actors involved in global climate action: in addition to young people, civil society, the business world, academia, local and regional authorities, and institutions.

This brings us to 4 October, the concluding event of the initiative “Faith and Science: towards COP26”, which will have the following objectives:

- religious leaders will be able to illustrate the common duty to tackle climate change, encouraging national governments to increase their commitment and ambition with respect to achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement;
- they will show how religions and faiths are leading the way by making their own venues, organisations and projects more respectful of environmental issues, and by encouraging the faithful to contribute personally to safeguarding the environment, in particular to slowing the increase in the planet’s global temperature.

The programme therefore includes a morning part that will take place in the Vatican.

A joint appeal addressed to COP26 will be read out and signed, and two young people will also take part in presenting the results of the Milan Youth COP.

The day will continue in the afternoon at Palazzo Borromeo, headquarters of the Italian Embassy to the Holy See, where participants will explore various topics, in particular how religions can motivate and mobilise men and women of faith in a practical sense, as well as illustrating the many programmes already underway in many parts of the world that apply high ethical and spiritual values in the action of preserving and caring for Creation.
