

SERVITES AND PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT  
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**The Prior General**  
**The Opening Address**

Bem-vindos! ¡Bienvenidos! Benvenuti! Welcome! Bienvenus! Willkommen! ... to this Sixth International UNIFAS Conference. We have come from many nations and countries and are gathered here in Brazil to discuss "Servites and Protection of the Environment."

First of all we must recognize that we too are a part of the Lord's creation. We are family members – sons, brothers and sisters – of creation. We are related to the sky, water, fire and wind. We are not the masters of creation, rather we are its guardians and servants.

1. CHILDREN AND SINGERS OF CREATION

We are children of the earth. The Creator has made us *with the clay of the ground* (*Gen 2, 7*) and put us on the path of time; we are on a transformative journey. We are dirt and to dirt we shall return (Cf. *Gen 3, 19*) before we reach the new world of the Kingdom. Together with us the earth praises its Divine Creator (Cf. *Dan 3, 52-90*): ... *Let the earth bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all forever. Mountains and hills, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever. Everything growing from the earth, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever[...]*You sons of men, *bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever...(Dan 3. 74-76. 82).*

We are sons of heaven, the children of our Heavenly Father (cf. *Mt 6, 9*) – God is mysterious – *God is in secret and he sees in secret* (*Mt 6, 6*). We have been created male and female in his image and likeness (cf. *Gen 1, 26-27*), we long for a new heaven (cf. *Apoc 21, 1*), we long to return to the Garden of Eden (Cf. *Gen 3, 23*) the heavenly paradise. Together with us the heavens praise the Divine Creator (cf. *Dan 3, 52-90*): ... *You heavens, bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all forever.[...] Sun and moon, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever. Stars of heaven, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever.(Dan 3, 59. 62-63).*

We are the sons of water; we were born in the water of our mother's womb and re-born through baptism in water and the Spirit (*Jn 3, 5*). Our thirst will be quenched with living water *that wells up to eternal life* (*Jn 4, 14*). Together with us all the waters praise the Divine Creator (cf. *Dan 3, 52-90*): ... *All you waters above the heavens, bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all forever.*

*[...] Every shower and dew, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever. [...] You springs, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever. Seas and rivers, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever. (Dan 3, 60. 64. 77-78).*

We are the sons of fire, baptized *in the Holy Spirit and fire* (Mt 3, 11; Lk 3, 16) we are consumed with that fire Jesus came to bring on earth (Cf. Lk 12, 49). We burn with the desire to penetrate the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection in the light of Scripture (Cf. Lk 24, 32. 27). Together with us fire praises the Divine Creator (Cf. Dan 3, 52-90): *... Fire and heat, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever [...] Light and darkness, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever. (Dan 3, 66. 72).*

We are sons of the wind, brought into being by God the Creator's breath of life and by the life-giving breath of the Risen One (Cf. Jn 20, 22-23). We have been struck by the *strong driving wind that fills the entire house* (Acts 2,2) where the disciples had gathered to pray with his Mother. We are moved by the wind that *blows where it will* (Jn 3, 5) and directs our steps on the ever-new paths of the Gospel. Together with us the wind praises the Divine Creator (Cf. Dan 3, 52-90): *... All you winds, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever [...] All you birds of the air, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever. (Dan 3, 65. 80).*

## 2. GUARDIANS OF CREATION

We, the sons and daughters of the earth, the heavens, the waters and fire – we are not masters; we are the guardians of creation. According to the words of Scripture out of love and with love God the Creator made all things good (cf. Gen 1-2). He then *took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it* (Gen 2, 15). The Psalmist sings *The earth is the LORD'S and all it holds* (Ps 24 [23], 1). He calls on everyone to contemplate its beauty and to praise its creator. The *earth and all it holds* are not ours, we are temporary guests – we are here for a day but the *earth and all it holds* belong to the Eternal Lord (cf. Ps 24 [23] 1).

Throughout history the Prophets frequently recall the creative power of God – he is the Lord!. They do this to strengthen the faith of the people and call them to conversion (Cf. Isa 40, 12-13; 44, 24-25; Am 4, 13; 5, 8-9). They call people back to a life of justice and faithfulness to the Word. This is the only way it is possible to live in concord with the earth and creation. It allows mankind and all creatures to lead a good life. Especially important are the commandments of Sabbath, the sabbatical year and the Jubilee year (Cf. Lev 23, 3; 25, 1-17). They remind man that he is not the absolute master of the earth: the earth was given to him as a gift to cultivate and care for faithfully (cf. Gen 2, 15).

With the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God invites us to dream of and look forward to *new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (2 Pet 3,

13) *Creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now (Rom 8, 21-22).*

The greater our power as human beings grows the more our responsibility increases. The current worsening of the ecological crisis is caused by our industrial civilization and aggressiveness. It is a challenge for all of us. Civil society grows increasingly aware of this challenge – how should the Church and the individual believer respond? From documents of the Magisterium and the ecumenical process it is clear that the Churches recognize responsibility for the environment as an essential dimension of life: 1989 Basel Convention on Hazardous Waste; the 1997 Graz European Ecumenical Assembly; the 2001 *Charta Oecumenica*.

In his Bull *Inter Sanctos* (November 29, 1979)<sup>[1]</sup> Pope John Paul II proclaimed St. Francis of Assisi the heavenly patron of all who promote ecology: St. Francis – he notes - *offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation. As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Saint Francis invited all of creation - animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon - to give honor and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples.*<sup>[2]</sup>

This year in his message for the World Day of Prayer for Peace Pope Benedict XVI writes: *It is becoming more and more evident that the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our life-style and the prevailing models of consumption and production, which are often unsustainable from a social, environmental and even economic point of view. We can no longer do without a real change of outlook which will result in new life-styles, "in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments". Education for peace must increasingly begin with far-reaching decisions on the part of individuals, families, communities and states. We are all responsible for the protection and care of the environment. This responsibility knows no boundaries.*<sup>[3]</sup>

### 3. SERVANTS OF CREATION

We, Servants of Mary, are here at this conference to discuss protection of the environment. What can we do? What can we accomplish together?

Throughout Servite history<sup>[4]</sup> and especially on Monte Senario ecological concerns are present. At the beginning of our Order (c. 1245) we read that they reached the summit of Monte Senario *it was this mountain that God inspired our fathers to seek* and our Seven

Fathers found at the top a delightful though small level area, a spring of very fine water off to one side and a surrounding grove of trees so well-arranged that it might have been planted by hand (*Legenda de Origine* 41). Over the centuries the friars cared for this natural setting. In 1713 the fir tree forest was still so dense that friar Francesco M. Poggi (+1720) notes with satisfaction that "said woods" are "filled with thick pines" planted "not carelessly and without order as in other woods" but rather lined up like "a well ordered militia."<sup>[5]</sup> This orderliness is due not to chance but to the detailed and severe instructions found in the *Constitutions of the Hermits of the Sacred Hermitage* of Monte Senario, a text inspired by awe-filled respect for nature:

*Father Rector and the Custodian will see to the maintenance of the hermitage's woods by having a good number of pines planted each year. Since no one is allowed to cut wood without permission of the Chapter, so as not to ruin the attractiveness of the place,<sup>[6]</sup> whoever cuts green trees without the permission of Father Rector or the Chapter will fast on bread and water, once for each tree.<sup>[7]</sup>*

This love of nature was transmitted to all the other hermitages<sup>[8]</sup> founded from Monte Senario and continues today. Anyone who goes to Monte Senario will find the *grove of trees so well-arranged that it might have been planted by hand*.

The last General Chapter (Ariccia, October 8-30, 2007) described the urgency with which *we must respond to the very serious aggression the Earth endures through the savage exploitation of its resources. This exploitation puts the very existence of humanity at risk* (*General Chapter 2007*, no. 16). The Chapter further stressed the Order's commitment: *Today as well, some Servites are promoting ecological responsibility; others are defending the earth's resources. All of our communities must join them and grow in love and respect for the environment. They can do this by embracing a sober life-style, being careful in their use of water and energy, and giving witness against consumerism* (*General Chapter 2007*, no. 16). The General Chapter also assumed a commitment to preserving the Amazon Rain Forest and called upon the whole Servite Family to join in this project.

#### *An Urgent Project: the Amazon Rainforest*

**17.** In the area of environmental concern, the General Chapter is adopting a project presented by our Brazilian friars and offering it to the whole Order: defense of the Amazon Rainforest – it will be our common project.<sup>[9]</sup> We join the courageous voices and efforts of Servites already involved and the Latin-American Episcopate (*Aparecida Document*, May 2007).

The General Chapter invites all branches of the Servite Family to join in this project. It invites every jurisdiction to engage in educational and promotional activities in defense of the Rainforest – and if possible to involve National Conferences of Religious.

(*General Chapter 2007*, no. 17).

I trust that our discussion of environment protection in this conference will support the proposals of the Order's General Chapter and will come up with new and specific proposals to protect the environment and restore its original beauty.

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[1] JOHN PAUL II, Bull *Inter Sanctos* (29 novembre 1979), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71 (1979) pp. 1509-1510.

[2] JOHN PAUL II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*, Message on XXIII World Day of Prayer for Peace, January 1, 1990 (December 8, 1989). No. 16, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71 (1990) pp. 156 (original text in French).

[3] BENEDICT XVI, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* Message on XLIII World Day of Prayer for Peace, January 1, 2020 (December 8, 2009). No. 11.

[4] See the Marian document *Servants of the Magnificat* from the CCX General Chapter O.S.M. (October 1995), no. 109.

[5] *Memorie della vita del Servo di Dio p. Giulio Arrighetti Fiorentino ... raccolte e descritte (nel 1713) da Francesco M. Poggi ...* (Alberto Pacinotti, Pistoia 1920) p. 62.

[6] This expression «not to ruin the attractiveness of the place» states the purpose of the prohibition to cut down young trees.

[7] *Regola del Padre Sant'Agostino e Costituzioni de' Romiti del Sacro Eremo di santa Maria de' Servi di Monte Senario* (Stamperia di Bartolommeo Sermartelli, Firenze) chap. 40, p. 121.

[8] Among these is the Hermitage of St. George in Lunigiana whose Constitutions state "all the friars work as masons and laborers [...] in idyllic 'Franciscan' peace [...] in a positive relationship with the nature that surrounds them and becomes their own" (O. JACQUES DIAS, *L'amicizia tra due eremeti dei Servi in una lettera del 1632 sull'eremo di san Giorgio in Lunigiana* in *Studi Storici OSM* 34 (1984) p. 201.

[9] The CCXII General Chapter of the Order (Ariccia, October 8-30, 2007) also sent a message to the President of Brazil (cf. *General Chapter 2007*, no. 99).