

Clean Drinking Water for All

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, I thank you for the possibility of addressing you here today. My name is Giuseppe Musumeci, and I am a lawyer by training; however, I am here today as the President of the Cardinal Paul Poupard Foundation. As you may know, for many years, Cardinal Poupard was the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture and also of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious dialogue. In these offices, he was the main representative of the Holy See in discussion both with non-Christians and non-believers, and as such, was a good friend of UNESCO, and one of its strongest supporters. In keeping with the passion and the expertise of the Cardinal, we have created the Foundation to continue his life's work of finding means of discussion and collaboration between all people of faith of any kind, as well as men and women of good will the world over. Therefore, our focus is on formation, social inclusion, environmental sustainability and the promotion of culture.

I can think of no better issue with which to foster this collaboration and concern than the topic of the right to access to clean water for every man woman and child on planet Earth. It is impossible to imagine a single human being who would be opposed to this, and yet, we are all too painfully aware that there remain far too many people who are unable to obtain safe and clean water. How is this possible? There are many reasons for this: for those of us living in the major industrialized nations, it has been so long since our ancestors had to worry about clean water that we are at times oblivious to the large number of people for whom water, which is essential for survival is often the very thing which brings death. Even if we look to our recent past, the 19th century, where Cholera was still a major problem and one which led to the development of modern public health and water works, it was not until the wealthiest members of society began to be affected by poor water that a solution was finally found.

Let us face it, clean water is a simple and inexpensive means of protecting the vulnerable and prolonging life, as well as a guarantee of quality of life, but, precisely for this fact, it is neither glamorous nor profit-making. We need to agree that clean water is a right, not a privilege, and that people should come before profits. That is, we need to foster every possible means of eliminating water borne pathogens, even if we find that there are more profitable avenues of research and development.

It is not just the difficulty of more than one hundred years of people in the developed world living without fear of the water they drink, or the fact that

clean water is not a money making proposition; there are other factors that impede our quest: often times those areas which are most in need of clean water are also those areas in the midst of civil war, or other forms of political and economic instability, and, as a result, in spite of all the good will in the world, it is difficult or impossible to intervene. Then there is the tragic specter of race based violence, or of religious persecution, all things that should be nothing more than footnotes in history textbooks, but which are still very real in our contemporary world. We need to agree that clean water is a basic human right, and, as such, every single woman, man and child must be given access to it regardless of his or her race, religion, economic status or location on the planet. Water must never be used as a bargaining chip by political or military leaders, much less as means of controlling groups of people.

Of course it is also true that there are factors in some way beyond human control that also affect our laudable goal of access to clean water for all of humanity. We are not yet fully masters of the natural world, and, as such things like hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, and earth quakes also impede access to clean, safe water. In fact, even in the developed world, where such disasters occur, often times those who are caught in its path find themselves, at least temporarily without clean water; however, even then, it pales in comparison to what so many have to deal with each and every day. What I mean by this is that typically, such disasters only affect the water supply for short periods of time, and, even during that time, there is usually easy access to bottled water, or to heat sources to boil the water, or even to the technology necessary to filter and purify that water while the rebuilding process goes on. Add to this the ease of movement, and the existence of insurance policies that protect against such natural disasters and you begin to understand how easily we may loose sight of the tragic consequences of lack of clean water. As I said, even though such natural disasters do at times affect the developed world, we have the money, political stability and infrastructure to quickly and efficiently return life to normal for those who are most affected. It is also true that whenever a major natural disaster strikes, those of us who are blessed with the means to do so are moved with compassion for the sufferings of our fellow human beings, and, at least in the immediate aftermath, there is a noticeable uptake in donations to the various charities that bring about the necessary assistance to those who are affected by these catastrophic events.

I spoke earlier about the dangers which political and economic instability pose to the provision of clean water for all, and I alluded to the fact that racial and religious tensions can often be at the source of these difficulties. I believe that this is one of the major ways in which the Foundation can be of assistance.

Fostering dialogue between people of different faiths, or of no faith at all, is a priority for us, and we are convinced that the more we learn to see ourselves for what unites us: our humanity, our basic hopes and dreams, fears and longings, then the less we will focus on what divides us. We believe that on the day in which we finally recognize in each and every person we meet another self, a human being who is equal to us in dignity, then all of those things that divide us, no matter how important they may appear to be, will pale in comparison to our equality, and as a result, we will be willing and able to help anyone anywhere any time. Ignorance is a great source of prejudice, and, the more we encounter one another, the more we learn about the other, the more we see those common bonds of humanity that hold out the hope and the promise of a world in which clean water is a reality for all.

There is another way in which knowledge is crucial for survival, and that is the way in which we humans are also affecting our environment. We all know that desertification is increasing throughout the world, and that at the same time, hurricanes, and melting polar ice caps are also on the rise. We are increasingly aware of the role that development has played in all of this, and, by means of education and public advocacy, we are improving. Recycling means that we have less need to exploit resources that we are able to re-use. Understanding the affects of development on the ozone layer means that we have developed and continue to develop alternative technologies that provide us with the same levels of comfort and convenience without the hazardous side effects on our natural world. It is our belief and our hope that education and advocacy can have the same great success with regards to our relationship to each other that it has had with regards to our relationship with the environment.

We are becoming more and more aware of the inter-connectedness of the entire human family, and of how seemingly unrelated events on the other side of the globe affect us all. As it becomes easier to migrate, and as people of all cultures find themselves spread throughout the globe, we develop an ever keener sense of belonging not to any particular race or creed, but to the human family. It is my sincere hope that greater awareness of the fundamental equality of all human beings, and of the value of all cultures will push us forwards, overcoming the obstacles of past hatreds, of silly human pride and of an excessive valuation of one's own homeland or culture. We cannot deny that women and children are still not as valued as they should be, and that, often times they are the ones who are most vulnerable to precarious conditions of lack of clean water or lack of access to a proper education, or the denial of other basic human rights. As we come to understand better and better the fundamental equality of cultures and races and creeds, it is not too much to hope that gender and age can be added to that list.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would like to re-iterate that access to clean water is a basic human right, and that, in order to guarantee this right, we need to look beyond the profit motive, to better understand the impact of technology on the environment, and, above all else, to foster dialogue between groups who, historically have been unable or unwilling to do so. After all, the more we get to know each other, the more clearly will we see that common thread of humanity that runs through every fiber of our being. Clean water is the most basic and important element of human survival and flourishing, and I pledge the full co-operation and expertise of the Foundation to make this dream a reality for every single man, woman and child, now and in the future.