

The Common Good of the Seas

Basic text for the 2020 annual concerted action of Justice and Peace Europe

Our planet is very much a blue planet - 70% of Earth's surface is covered in water. It is where life originated, and where a bewildering variety of sea creatures live, roam and sustain the web of life as we know it. Seas and rivers have been a source of nourishment for humans and the livelihood of millions of people depends on the state of our seas. Yet, this well-balanced ecosystem is becoming increasingly endangered by human activity. In May 2019, the European conference of Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe) together with delegates the Apostleship of the Seas, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, the Global Catholic Climate Movement and Justice and Peace Denmark organised a conference in Copenhagen to reflect on the particular relationship humans have always had with the sea. As affirmed by Pope Francis, "Egoism and self-interest have turned creation, a place of encounter and sharing, into an arena of competition and conflict. In this way, the environment itself is endangered..."¹ This conference led Justice and Peace Europe to organise the 2020 annual concerted action on the theme of "The Common Good of the Seas".

The state of our Oceans²

The impacts of our civilisation on our seas has been staggering. In the past century, especially, untold volumes of waste generated have been dumped into the oceans. *Out of sight, out of mind.* Every year approximately 8 million tonnes of plastic enter the sea³. By 2050, it is estimated that the weight of fish in the ocean will be less than the weight of plastics floating in it.⁴ Very small pieces of plastics, called microplastics, are especially harmful as they are very difficult to collect and easily mistaken for food by fish. Pollutants reach the ocean as a result of human activity on land, including deforestation, unsustainable agricultural practices (e.g. the effluent from pesticides) and the disposal of industrial waste at sea. Carbon pollution released into our atmosphere is entering our oceans, leading to acidification, endangering the oceans' biodiversity. Sewage and agricultural pollution are the leading causes of mass eutrophication⁵ in the seas, leading to oxygen-depleted dead zones the size of entire countries, which expand every year. Overfishing has led to the collapse of entire ecosystems - what were once prolific fishing zones are now depleted of the life that flourished within them. The global share of marine fish stocks that are within biologically sustainable levels declined from 90 per cent in 1974 to 69 per cent in

¹ Pope Francis Message for the World Day of Prayer for Creation, 1 September 2019: w2.vatican.va/content/en/message/2019/documenti/papa-francesco_20190901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html.

² In this document the words 'oceans' and 'seas' are used interchangeably, and refer to those bodies of water which cover the earth surface. Whilst technically distinct, all form part of this complex ecosystem we call home.

³ European Investment Bank, Report, *The clean ocean initiative*, October 2019, 8 pages, https://www.eib.org/attachments/thematic/the_clean_oceans_initiative_en.pdf

⁴ World Economic Forum, Ellen MacArthur Foundation and McKinsey & Company, *The New Plastics Economy — Rethinking the future of plastics* (2016, <http://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications>)

⁵ Eutrophication is the process by which water bodies become greatly enriched in nutrients, such as phosphates and nitrates, leading to an overgrowth of algae. This causes a deficiency in the oxygen content of the aquatic system and fish and other organisms start to die. This process normally occurs due to the emission of detergents, fertilisers and sewage in the water body.

2013⁶. Deep-sea trawling is causing unknown, untold catastrophic damage to our seabeds, with entire ecosystems, possibly entire species (many of which have yet to be discovered) wiped out through this irresponsible practice. The need to take concrete actions to protect our oceans has never been more urgent.

Humanitarian Issue

The health of our oceans is not only an ecological issue, but a social and humanitarian one as well: “Environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked.” The pollution and overconsumption is having a direct effect on those people whose survival depends on fishing. Moreover, people who work at sea have a high mortality rate due to the precarious conditions, frequent abuses related to both working conditions and to contracts. Occasions of slavery have been reported as well.

It is hard to mention the ocean and not remember migrants, who, throughout the ages have taken to the sea to seek better places, either in an attempt to find refuge from persecution, life threats, lack of security or to aspire for better working and living conditions. Growing environmental degradation contributes to an increase in the number of displaced people, who flee in search of better life conditions. The efforts of rescue services to assist those whose lives at sea are in danger need to be supported and encouraged.

Growing Awareness

This terrifying decline in our ocean’s capacity to withstand the onslaught of human carelessness and civilization’s activities is finally catching public attention. Public awareness has grown to the point where discussions are actively taking place in various countries around the world to ban certain harmful products. Single-use plastics, once barely an afterthought of waste campaigners, have come to the fore as a much-maligned product of our civilization. In 2019, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly to ban various single-use products by 2021.⁷ In this same year the United Nations (UN) decade for Ocean science for Sustainable Development 2021 - 2030 begins, which was preceded by a number of initiatives in this direction.⁸

Various other international meetings and initiatives are aimed at ocean conservation. This includes the *Our Oceans conferences*, which are organised on a global level every year. In 2017, this important conference was organised for the first time by the EU in Malta and led to many

⁶ UN, Sustainable Development Goal Knowledge Platform, *Sustainable Development Goal 14* <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg14>

⁷ The European Parliament, Press Release, 27/03/2019, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190321IPR32111/parliament-seals-ban-on-throwaway-plastics-by-2021>

⁸ The United Nations’ Sustainability Goal 14 deals with the sustainability of the oceans. It is embodied in Chapter 17 of Agenda 21, a commitment adopted by more than 178 Governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992, to act on the human impact on the environment. The Commitments to the Rio principles were reaffirmed during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which met in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002. Over 1,360 experts worked together from 2001 to 2005 in order to assess the consequences of changes in ecosystems, including the oceans for the well-being of mankind. In 2012, the UN organised the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro), which resulted in the outcome document “The Future We Want”. The conservation and sustainable use of the oceans and seas together with their resources was specifically mentioned as a requirement for sustainable development and acknowledged its importance in order to eradicate poverty and enable a sustained economic growth, food security as well as the sustainment of livelihood and decent work. The Conference acted as a starting point for the process to develop the sustainable development goals (SDG), including SDG14 which deals with ocean conservation, more specifically it aims towards “Conserve and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”. The SDG are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the document which arose as a result of the United Nations Summit in 2015 for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda and emphasizes the need for sustainable development at all levels in order to eradicate poverty.

important decisions on a number of levels⁹. The EU has also embarked on an ambitious ocean governance policy, which specifies 50 actions for secure, safe, clean and sustainably managed oceans¹⁰. The latest *Our Ocean conference* took place in October 2019 in Oslo, Norway. Ocean governance is one of the fundamental principles of the Paris agreement, a commitment by 185 parties signed in 2016 to fight climate change and take practical commitments towards a low carbon future¹¹. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations has issued a special report on the role of the oceans on climate change.¹² The role of the Ocean in Climate Change was also at the heart of the Madrid Climate Change Conference in December 2019¹³. This important conference marked the 25th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 25).

Justice & Peace Europe Concerted Action

The Seas are a common good, and all parties have a duty to preserve this for perpetuity. Clean and unpolluted water is essential to sustain life, making sure that our oceans are clean and safe. Actions to preserve the Oceans need to be taken on every level starting from the international to the individual level if we want to ensure a healthy ocean for our children and ourselves. As Pope Francis puts it: “If the simple fact of being human moves people to care for the environment of which they are a part, Christians in their turn realize that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith’. It is good for humanity and the world at large when we believers better recognize the ecological commitments which stem from our convictions.”¹⁴ As outlined below, Justice & Peace Europe is therefore pushing for commitments at five levels for this year’s concerted action.

International Level Activity

A commitment from the international community is required in order to have effective international ocean governance and ensure clean, safe and well-managed oceans. All nations need to cooperate together to agree to common rules, be willing to establish good diplomatic relations and cooperate internationally to ensure sustainably managed and safe oceans. It is important for governments to keep the commitments they agreed to during international meetings and implement them in their respective country. While bringing awareness to the problem and encouraging action should give cause for hope, we are far from tackling the problem effectively. In general, the current fragmented governance system for the ocean is not satisfying.

- Direct measures of ocean conservation include the designation of marine protected areas. Indeed, through the increase in the number of marine protected areas, it has been possible to register an increase in key marine diversity from 31.2 percent in 2000 to 45.7 percent in 2018. This trend shows the effectiveness of such actions and calls for a continuation in the expansion of marine protected areas.¹⁵ Therefore it is for instance to be hoped for that the international commission for protecting marine life in Antarctica will

⁹ Our Ocean Conference, 2017, Final Report, <https://ourocean2017.org/>

¹⁰ European Commission, Maritime affairs, https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy/ocean-governance_en

¹¹ United Nations, UNFCCC, *What is Climate Change?*, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/what-is-the-paris-agreement>

¹² International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Special Report on the Ocean and the Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/srocc/>

¹³ United Nations, UNFCCC, *UN Climate Change Conference, December 2019*, <https://unfccc.int/Santiago>

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* 64.

¹⁵ UN, Sustainable Development Goal Knowledge Platform, *Sustainable Development Goal 14* <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg14>

be able to agree on the creation of a huge marine park on the continent's east. Many scientists have recommended setting aside 30 per cent of the seas by 2030 in a network of marine protected areas.

- It is important for fishing quotas to be set and followed. As of June 2019, 62 parties, including the European Union have agreed to the *Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing*, an international binding agreement to fight illegal fishing¹⁶. Regulations and frameworks should help small-scale fisheries to remain competitive and have access to services and markets since this promotes the livelihood of these fishermen.
- It is also the responsibility of the international community to provide help to those countries, which are struggling to provide waste collection services to their communities. The World Bank estimates that waste generation will increase from 2.01 billion tonnes in 2016 to 3.40 billion tonnes in 2050. At least 33% of this waste is mismanaged globally today through open dumping or burning. The World Bank and other institutional donors need to prop their financial and technical engagement for sustainable solid waste management.
- Account must be also taken of the pollution created by all the sea vessels whose carbon footprint is not yet being accounted for. Shipping accounts for at least 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions and – if left unchecked it could produce 17% by 2050. The shipping industry has not been able to agree on an effective system of self-regulation. Also, a mandatory goals based approach within the International Maritime Organisation has not been successful so far and a breakthrough is to be hoped for this year.
- We also appeal to governments to apply international laws and conventions making sure fishermen are guaranteed their rights. It is imperative that fishermen are provided with good working conditions, receive all the necessary training and equipment needed to exercise their profession with due diligence, possess a lawful contract with decent pay and are guaranteed access to medical services as well as adequate pastoral care and legal assistance. Authorities need to listen to the voice of fishermen and their families. Their employment should ultimately be aimed at the happiness of the fisherman and the common good of the community¹⁷. Authorities need to make coastal conservation a priority since by fighting the degradation of coastal ecosystem, poor fishing villages can sustain their livelihood. Fishing practices that respect the environment should be preferred to others which are more damaging such as trawling¹⁸.

European and National Level

The European Union and member states' individual governments have a very important role in making sure the state of the ocean is well-maintained, through devising effective policies which aim towards the effective implementation of international and European agreements.

- A systemic change in our economic model needs to be implemented and pursued, where **a circular economy** finally becomes a reality on a global scale. This would go a long way to addressing some great injustices of our time, where the waste products from more affluent countries are dumped into the oceans or exported to poorly-developed countries

¹⁶ UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) , *Agreement on Port State Measures*, http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/legal/docs/037t-e.pdf

¹⁷ Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, The Vatican, Message on the Occasion of World Fisheries Day (Nov. 21, 2019) <https://www.humantraffickingacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Message-Fisheries-Day-2019.pdf>

¹⁸ The international maritime organization general assembly 31st regular session; Conserve and Sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for Sustainable Development.

that have little to no capacity to process the material sent to them. Work needs to be done to ensure that the Circular Economy moves from a conceptual framework to an implemented model. The European Commission has adopted a second circular economy action plan early 2020. Its swift implementation would be an important contribution to better protect the ocean.

- Governments should invest in programmes and technologies to clean up the oceans. Since the ocean is the responsibility of all, clean-up programmes should not be left solely to voluntary organisations but should be a commitment from governmental agencies as well.
- Governments should also invest more in research and development, in order to continue to improve the state of the oceans.
- The European Union should play a key role in the second UN Ocean conference in June 2020 in Lisbon in order to promote the implementation of the SDG 14 “to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, the sea and marine resources”.

The Ocean would also benefit from incentives aimed at reducing the carbon footprint on land.

- Education programmes can aim at reducing pollution both on land and at sea. Making sure the public has access to efficient public transport means reduces emissions due to individual car-use.
- Effective regulation of industrial emissions ensures that waste is treated in a sustainable manner by industry and that emissions are within limits. Governments can provide incentives for the public to invest in renewable resources. Incentives such as tax deductions for solar panels installations may be considered.
- While Europeans generate around 25 million tons of plastic waste, less than 30% of this is collected for recycling.¹⁹ It is the responsibility of the individual governments to improve their recycling facilities and develop more efficient recycling programs. The EU has pledged to use recyclable plastic packaging material by 2030. Governments should take measures to make sure this is effected. The use of biodegradable materials for plastic bags and incentives to reduce plastic use such as paying for plastic bag (polluter pays principle) should be encouraged and expanded.

Local Church level

As Pope Francis remarked, “To ponder the immense open seas and their incessant movement can also represent an opportunity to turn our thoughts to God, who constantly accompanies his creation, guiding its course and sustaining its existence.”

- We call on people who have a position of responsibility within the Church to maintain an interest in the subject and to set a good example to the people entrusted to their care. It is important to maintain good personal practices, which are concordant with the principles outlined above.
- Audits of daily activities should be carried out so as to change those behaviours, which are contributing to environmental degradation.
- As a Church we should also not be afraid of advocating in favour of the need for ocean conservation in our social programs.

¹⁹ The Guardian, *European Parliament Votes to ban single-use plastic*, 27/03/2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/27/the-last-straw-european-parliament-votes-to-ban-single-use-plastics>

Communities and families

Communities can do much to help in the care of the oceans on a practical level. We encourage communities to be pro-active and make an effort to take steps to ensure the ocean is well taken care of.

- Communities can encourage the use of re-useable plates/mugs instead of single-use plastic ones during their gatherings. Organising beach clean-ups as a community can raise awareness amongst the members of the community as well as act an effective community-building activity.
- Schools can do much to raise awareness through including the subject in their education programs. Competitions organised by the schools related to ocean conservation can help the students be pro-active in devising solutions to dealing with problems related to the oceans. Schools can also invite scientists who work in the field to give their first-hand experience of what it means to work in ocean conservation and education on the threats the ocean currently faces.
- On a local level, youth groups can also contribute energetically and imaginatively in the education of the young people in this matter. The conservation of the oceans and the sea should be included in formation programmes that emphasise our individual and collective stewardship of the whole creation. Such programmes should be accompanied by carefully organising practical steps to reduce, recycle and re-use material at the local centre. Youth groups should emphasize pro-active behaviour and positive peer-pressure, e.g. during outings and during the organisation of activities.
- The family is fundamental in setting an example for future generations. Families should set an example to children and to other families. In practical terms this could translate to for example taking biodegradable bags and recyclable containers when shopping at the supermarket and making an effort to use biodegradable materials. When choosing facial cleansers and cosmetics, buy brands which do not use micro plastics in the manufacturing processes. Taking care of the environment becomes a priority when going to the beach as a family. Set the example and do not litter the shore or throw garbage into the sea.

Personal Commitment

- It is vitally important to acknowledge that change starts to happen when each and every one of us makes a personal commitment to care for the oceans. In order to be fully faithful to God's invitation to care for the gifts of Creation, each member of the Church must consciously take on responsibility for complying with rules and use our imagination and ingenuity proactively in defence of our oceans. This can include taking time to learn more about marine protected species and supporting and/or joining groups, communities and organisations, which work towards ocean conservation. We urge individuals to be pro-active and set-up initiatives to help ocean conservation themselves. A practical way to take concrete action is to organise or to join Citizen Science initiatives in order to help safeguard species and monitor the state of the sea²⁰.

²⁰ For example in Malta, two such initiatives were the 'Spot the Jellyfish' and 'Spot the Alien Fish' campaigns where the citizen scientist is invited to report jellyfish or alien fish species they encounter. The information can then be used for research purposes in order to understand how the biota of the sea is changing and what can be done to preserve species. <https://foemalta.org/tag/citizen-science/>

Conclusion

“All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation.”²¹ We were created not to be tyrants, but at the heart of a network of life up of millions of species lovingly joined together for us by our Creator”.²² Taking care of our oceans is our responsibility towards our fellow humans as well as to future human generations. By taking care of the oceans now, we spare future generations the price they need to pay for the degradation of this rich resource.²³ We hope that the UN decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development beginning in 2020 may become a decade of change for the better.

²¹ Pope Francis (Laudato Si', 14)

²² Pope Francis' Message for the World Day of Prayer for Creation, 1 September 2019: w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/2019/documenti/papa-francesco_20190901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html

²³ Pope Francis (Laudato Si', 159)