

Church involved in efforts to combat global water challenges



A special session at the 9th World Water Forum, organized by Caritas Senegal, Catholic Relief Services, and the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, highlights the role of religion in assuring the right to safe drinking water for all.

Benedict Mayaki SJ – Dakar, Senegal, *Vatican News*, 23 March 2022

Catholic and Islamic leaders highlighted the efforts religions are making to combat global water challenges at a special session entitled “Religions and the Right to Water for All”, organized by various elements of the Caritas organization.

The Holy See's delegation to the 9th World Water Forum, taking place on 21 – 26 March in Dakar, Senegal, is led by Cardinal Michael Czerny, the interim Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

Throughout the week, participants from various sectors—including political and economic decision makers, as well as international agencies, academia, and the private sector—are meeting to collaborate on efforts to respond to global water challenges, in this largest international water-related event, the first to be held in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Forum also provided an opportunity to further celebrate World Water Day, which is annually commemorated on 22 March.

The Church and water advocacy

Following the grand opening ceremony at the Dakar Arena on Monday, the forum broke up into smaller panels, each on tackling a different theme relating the precious liquid resource and how it contributes to the promotion of peace and development.

On Wednesday, a special session was hosted by Caritas Senegal, in collaboration with Catholic Relief Services and the Holy See's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Development, at the Abou Diouf International Conference Centre (CICAD), Diamniadio, Dakar, within the framework of the World Water Forum.

The session, entitled “Religions and the Right to Water for All”, explored the religious point of view on water and how it can contribute to promoting the right to access to safe, potable water for everyone, particularly the poor and in areas where water supply is not always guaranteed.



Imam Ahmadou Makhtar Kanté (L)

Water in religion and culture

The first panel, dedicated to presenting the views of Islam, Senegalese culture, and the Bible on water was introduced by Bishop Jean-Pierre Bassène of Kolda and President of Caritas Senegal.

Presenting the Islamic perspective was Imam Ahmadou Makhtar Kanté, of Point-E Mosque, who explained that the right to everyone to water is born of good sense, which is not only limited to the Islamic religion but is for everyone. He said that the right to water is present in Islam in the paradise-lost and the story of Adam, and that, even in that paradise, Adam was promised that he will never be thirsty.

The Imam further stressed that in the Koran, we are citizens of the earth and no one has the right to deprive another of it. He notes that the Islamic holy book also speaks of guarding against waste in all its forms, even while humans are to enjoy of creation.

Mr. M. Noumo Mane, a PhD student of Assane Seck University of Ziguinchor, who spoke on Water in the spiritual traditions of Senegal, said that water is a source of life but is also predominantly present in religious and traditional practice. He highlighted the different uses of water: for the treatment of some illnesses, for the pouring of libation in traditional prayers to ancestors and for purification before ceremonial prayers.

He called for proper water management at local and national levels, inspired by the traditional attitude of respect for water. Mr. Mane also stressed the importance of the protection of water sources and for proper distribution to avoid situations where some have an abundance while others are parched.

Biblical perspective

Archbishop Benjamin Ndiaye of Dakar presented the Biblical vision on water, noting its presence in several passages.

He cited several examples, including Jesus' words on the Cross: "I thirst", water as sign of salvation in Psalm 23... "near restful waters he leads me to revive my drooping spirit"; Water running from the side of the Temple and bringing life (Ezekiel 47), the use of water in the sacrament of baptism, among others.

He concluded his speech by inviting everyone to a care of creation and water resources in the spirit of Pope Francis' teachings in *Laudato si'*.



Archbishop Benjamin Ndiaye of Dakar (C)

Right to water for all

The second panel, moderated by Mr. Tebaldo Vinciguerra, an official of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, saw Cardinal Czerny speaking on promoting and realizing the right to drinking water and sanitation.

Reiterating the Pope's words to the World Water Forum, he stressed that the right to drinking water and sanitation is closely linked to the right to life, which is rooted in the inalienable dignity of the human person and constitutes a condition for the exercise of other human rights.

In this light, he continued, the world has a serious social debt to people who do not have access to water and sanitation, and also to those whose traditional sources of water have been polluted or damaged through poor management.

The Cardinal highlighted that the world is at the verge of two "cliffs", pointing out firstly, that we have to start by changing what we do individually before changing how we speak. He said that the Forum has underlined solutions to global water challenges and thus, all that is left is to take action as the solutions have been recommended, which are all achievable.

The second "cliff" is the problem of governance and how we manage our lives together in society. In this light, he stressed the importance of authorities listening to and hearing the voices of those not heard and taking adequate action.



Fr. Alphonse Seck, Secretary-General of Caritas Senegal

Concrete commitments

The Secretary-General of Caritas Senegal, Fr. Alphonse Seck also gave a presentation of the concrete commitments of the Church on the ground through Caritas.

He spoke of some projects promoted by Caritas and of some of the challenges, including the price of water and sustaining access to water for people who need it. He also highlighted the work of Caritas through community mobilization

Fr. Seck's presentation was followed by that of Dr. Mohamed Ahmed Sneiba, Director General of the Senegal office of the NGO Direct Aid Society, who also illustrated the concrete commitments of his organization in responding to water challenges.

Essential element for life

Professor Pedro Arrojo Agudo, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, highlighted the importance of basing the right to water on an ethical criterion of priorities, separating between water as an essential element for life, general community interest on water, and the use of water for economic development and growth.

He insisted that water is a common good, necessary for all and owned by none and called for us to make peace with nature and to take steps to ensure sustainability and proper management of water resources.

The special session was concluded with a word of acknowledgment by Anta Gueye-James, CRS Country Representative in Senegal.