

The Common Good of the Seas

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. Yet, this well-balanced ecosystem is becoming increasingly endangered by human activity. Thus, the European conference of Justice and Peace Commissions decided to organise the 2020 annual concerted action on the theme "The Common Good of the Seas".

The state of our Seas

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 seas. Every year approximately 8 million tonnes of plastic enter the sea. By 2050, it is estimated that the weight of fish in the ocean will be less than the weight of plastics floating in it. 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. 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 eutrophication in the seas. 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 2013. Deep-sea trawling is causing unknown, untold catastrophic damage to our sea-beds, 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 seas 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. It is hard to mention the sea 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 find better working and living conditions. Growing environmental degradation contributes to an increase in displaced people, who flee in search of better life conditions.

Summary

Growing Awareness and Justice & Peace Europe Concerted Action

This terrifying decline in our sea's capacity to withstand the onslaught of human carelessness and civilization's activities is finally catching public attention. Various other international meetings and initiatives are aimed at ocean conservation. All parties have a duty to preserve this common good for perpetuity. Justice & Peace Europe is therefore pushing for commitments at five levels, as outlined below.

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. Direct measures of ocean conservation include the designation of marine protected areas. Many scientists have recommended setting aside 30 per cent of the seas by 2030 in a network of marine protected areas. 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. Regarding the fishing industry it is important for fishing quotas to be set and followed. We also appeal to governments to apply international laws and conventions making sure fishermen are guaranteed their rights.

European and National Level

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. The European Union should play a key role in the second UN Ocean conference in June 2020 in Lisbon. The EU has also 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. National governments should invest in programmes and technologies to clean-up the oceans. Governments should also invest more in research and development, in order to continue to improve the state of the oceans.

Local Church level

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.

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.

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.