

Friday, June 6 - Plenary VI

Welcoming Address Anneli Jäätteenmäki *Prime Minister of Finland*

Your All Holiness, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At first I would like to thank Your All Holiness for the initiative to arrange this unique symposium. I wish, that this symposium can provide a forum for a fruitful dialogue between scientific experts, environmental activists, spiritual leaders and political decision makers. We need a closer interrelationship between religious values, scientific knowledge and environmental awareness. This new triangle could provide new and fresh approaches in order to combat the environmental dangers, which threaten the Baltic Sea today.

Political decision makers certainly can do more, to solve these dangers. There are means of better environmental legislation, stricter rules, fresh resources and international agreements. The Government of Finland is working actively in a number of international forums to achieve this.

Recently I personally met the Prime Ministers of Estonia, Sweden and Russia. Condition of the Baltic Sea was on top of the agenda during all these meetings. We discussed both the overload of waste flowing to the sea and the risks caused by increasing traffic, especially by oil transportation.

The enlargement of the European Union should give a special impetus for the Baltic Sea protection issues. The goal of my government is to strengthen the status of the Baltic Sea area in different European Union programs. This is also a part of the Northern Dimension, which we want to emphasize.

Last weekend we celebrated the 300th anniversary of St. Petersburg. The Baltic Sea around St. Petersburg will not live a further 300 years if the Neva stream continues to load current levels of waste to the Gulf of Finland. One of my particular targets is to create a special programme for the Gulf of Finland in collaboration with Estonia and Russia.

But, ladies and gentlemen, the political force alone is not strong enough at the moment. It is not strong enough to save the Baltic Sea soon enough. We have to speed up the decision-making processes both internationally and nationally.

We need better public awareness of the interrelationship between sustainable economic growth, quality of life and necessary investments in the cleaner environment in all Baltic Sea countries. For example, effective purification of sewage could have an immediate positive influence on the coastal territories of St. Petersburg also economically. I would like to mention only the well-known Zelenogorsk beaches, which nobody can enjoy due to thick seaweeds.

Therefore, in order to save the Baltic Sea for the future generations we need the wide cooperation of all actors of civic society, as well as new scientific innovations. Here the contribution of churches and religions, environmental activists and scientific experts comes to the point. You have your own means and methods to have an impact on the mindsets and values of the citizen.

For the last 20 or so years environmental movements have done a tremendous work to raise the awareness especially in the Nordic countries. An increasing civic activism in the field of environment can be noticed also in the other Baltic countries.

Especially here I would like to underline the role and possibilities of churches in this work. The heritage of Christianity is very strong in the Baltic Sea region. This heritage and the impact of Christian values on citizens of the Baltic Sea region has been even more persistent than the state structures themselves. Despite political revolutions, religions had their place in the hearts of the people in many Baltic Sea countries.

In addition to that, Christian thinking and traditions had their profound impact on the worldview of all of us. It had an impact on how we relate ourselves as human beings to the environment and other creatures. Therefore Christian churches also have their responsibility to take care of the proper balance between the cultivation and the protection of nature. In my opinion we have to realize better that it is not the human being that has the almighty powers to change and mould the nature and other creatures.

Dialogue between religions and sciences can also provide new fruitful insights in order to broaden our view on nature. Earlier a very strict separation between the religious faith and scientific knowledge used to take place. Some interesting philosophical discussions have emerged in this area recently. Hopefully this dialogue can help us to avoid too mechanical views of nature and also balance our views on the role of human being.

Your All Holiness, Your Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Finnish Government I would like to wish this symposium all the best success. I am looking forward to hear about the results of Your discussions.