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MONOLOGUE #4

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Since water does not reach those who need it, those who need it have to reach water. The appalling images of migrants dying in the sea are still in our eyes: the Mediterranean sea as an escape route. But thirst is another less known connection between water and migration.

According to the World Resource Institute water shortage is one of the causes of unrest and subsequent armed conflict in Syria. Due to the drop in hydric resources one and a half million people, mainly peasants and shepherds, have left their villages migrating towards urban areas, thus increasing the destabilization of the country.

The water-food-life nexus causes the migration of millions of men and women not only in the Near East. In 2050 the estimated population of Sub-Saharan Africa will be two billion four hundred million people. How high should the wall be built to keep them out in case the fresh water scarcity worsens? Only by offering an alternative can we persuade all those who have no hope of survival to remain where they are.

It does not seem that we are doing much to create this alternative. According to Unesco's World Water Assessment Programme, if nothing changes in 2040 the hydric deficit will be 40 per cent. The world will be a thirsty world with frequent wars for the control of water sources and two thirds of the 9 billion people living in urban areas. It will be a distressed world as no coexistence is really possible without sufficient fresh water resources, when there is no certainty of adequate food and energy supply.

“Water is a fundamental right which conditions the exercise of other human rights”, the Pope reminds us in his encyclic “Laudato si”. But how can we guarantee this fundamental right? The world population increases by eighty million each year. One in five sources of subsurface water is nearly depleted. The fossil energy consumption is very high in desalination plants which pollute the air and return too salty and too hot water to the sea. In Africa landgrabbing steals fertile fields from those who have little and give them to those who have a lot as it is easier to move a ton of cereals from one continent to another than the one thousand tons of water necessary to produce them.



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Nevertheless, despite these dramatic facts, we can still hope for the best: mankind did not make water disappear. Water quantity in our planet is still the same. We drink the water that dinosaurs drank. But we use it more, we pollute it more. It is not a problem of quantity, it is a problem of availability and quality. And it is a problem we can do something about. For instance, one dollar invested in the protection of water catchment areas means saving up to 100 dollars in avoiding the construction of water treatment plants.

In other words, we have water but we do not have the capacity to use the elements nature offers us. There is no governance of water and other ecosystems. Not only scarcity but also excess can be dangerous when roads become torrents and landslides destroy villages. We have to observe our planet from above, from the atmosphere where greenhouse gases are building up, if we want to understand why this is the case, why water is at the same time a menace and a victim of the climate change we contribute to by burning too much charcoal, consuming too much petrol, cutting down too many forests. Atmospheric CO₂ is rising at an accelerating rate. In just a few decades it has reached levels unknown in the history of mankind. This is why since 1992 floods, droughts and storms have increased affecting the life of more than 4 billion people.

Too much water is the other side of the coin. We have undermined whole ecosystems, we have abused nature, but we risk harming ourselves. Nevertheless, we can change our course and water can help us to find the right one.