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71st Session of the General Assembly

Remarks of H.E. Peter Thomson at Cathedral of St John the Divine

Dean Kowalski, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since the time of my birth in Fiji nearly seven decades ago, on countless occasions I've sat in the pews at services of worship in cathedrals, churches, and chapels around the world. But this is the first time in all those years and places, that I've had the honor of addressing a congregation from the pulpit. After listening to me this morning, perhaps you'll conclude this was just as well.

I have been given the privilege of standing up here today, not because of my person, nor indeed for the value anyone has placed upon my thoughts. The privilege arises solely from the fact that I have been elected President of the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Therefore I will be speaking today principally on the subject of what I see as the central focus of the General Assembly's 71st Session, namely the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and for the purposes of today's service, I would like to demonstrate just how much the goals of that Agenda can be seen to relate to many of the world's great religions, and in this case to the Christian faith.

But first, since the nature of my own faith is unknown to any present but my wife, Marijcke, who is sitting here with us today, I'd like to give you an idea of the quarter I'm coming from.

At the outset, let me say that I feel very comfortable in an Episcopalian place of worship as it was in an Anglican church that Marijcke and I were married, back in 1973. That was at St Luke's, a little stone church in Fiji that my grandfather helped build, the same church in which our son and daughter were later baptized.

My parents were married in the old Anglican cathedral in Suva, the capital of Fiji, within days of the end of World War Two. My mother was a fourth generation Fijian, but the man she married, then an officer in the Fiji Military Forces, was a Presbyterian from Scotland and so her seven sons and one daughter, myself included, were herded through the leafy lanes of Suva to Sunday service at the Presbyterian Church of St Andrews. My wife, Marijcke, on the other hand was born and raised a Roman Catholic, attending St Joseph's convent in Suva, and her father was a leading layman of the Church in Fiji.

Through the blessed inheritance of family, I am a Christian. Of course, being Christian means different things to different people; for instance, in the course of my life, the relevance of the Old Testament has pretty much drifted away. Truth be told I never put much store in it even when I was young; and I have

never been attracted to the fundamentalist or apologetic element of Christianity with all its emphasis on hellfire and damnation.

The New Testament, however, remains the fundament upon which my ethical life is built, a moral law centered on love – love for God, for family, for neighbor, for all creation. The New Testament teaches obligations of care, forgiveness, charity, friendship, hope, empathy, faithfulness and even altruism. I embrace these obligations, even as at the same time I feel no compulsion to conform to pronouncements of the New Testament that are clearly creatures of distant times and cultures – for the world has moved on. Speaking in tongues might have had a place in the early churches, but at the United Nations we have translation facilities only for the six official languages.

So, I stand here today in the Cathedral of St John the Divine, which I'm told is the fourth largest Christian church in the world, speaking as a simple public servant, sharing the New Testament's central message of love, affirming as I do so that the message is needed as much as ever in these troubled times.

In my experience, that message of love knows no boundaries. Through the multi-faith nature of Fiji, going to school with Hindus, Muslims, Taoists, Sikhs and Christians of many different denominations, and then spending the first decade of my public service as a District Officer in rural Fiji, produced in me abiding feelings of affinity with the spiritual aspirations of other faiths. It also garnered a deep respect for the commons sown with a diversity of cultural seed.

Indeed, whenever I'm in search of better instincts, my thoughts and purpose are fortified by those feelings of affinity and respect for the higher beliefs of others. There are, after all, many paths homewards, and many means of nourishing the soul on the journey.

It is thus that I find so objectionable the absolutism and extremism of brands of so-called religious thought that condemn others not of their ilk to irrelevance, demonization or even annihilation. We live in a world where deranged and/or deluded people believe righteousness smiles upon them when they mow down innocent people enjoying a waterfront stroll in Nice, or massacre a congregation of good citizens at worship in a church in Charleston, or blow to pieces hundreds of late-night shoppers during Ramadan in a Baghdad bazaar, or gun down scores of Kenyans at leisure in a Nairobi mall... the list of horror goes on and on.

One thing is indisputable: these are not religious acts. And though the proponents of terrorism in these turbulent times are largely adherents of Al Qaeda, the Taliban or Daesh, this is by no means a struggle of Islam vs the Rest, for by far the largest numbers of victims of this wave of violent extremism are Muslims.

At the United Nations, as well as working to prevent and combat terrorism through increasing international cooperation, mediation, and conflict prevention, we are addressing the conditions that make the spread of violent extremism possible. In my view, the most effective means of overcoming those negative conditions lies in immediate and meaningful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

And so, I move to the main part of my address today.

In recent times, the more enlightened leaders of Planet Earth's 193 countries came to recognize that the survival of many societies, and indeed the survival of the biological support systems of the planet, were at risk.

The vulnerability of habitat, set against the accelerating pace of Climate Change and a human population trending towards 9 billion, were pointing to an unsustainable future for humanity if current patterns of production and consumption were to continue. They recognized it was unjust, unacceptable and unsustainable for 800 million people to continue living in poverty, or for example, for 60 million children to go without even basic primary school education.

Accordingly, after two years of intensely attended negotiations at the United Nations, on 25th September 2015, world leaders adopted, by consensus, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It is universal, inclusive and integrated, and sets out to free the human race from poverty, and to heal and secure our planet. In short it aims to transform our world.

Put bluntly, if we succeed in implementing the 2030 Agenda, our grandchildren will have a sustainable place on this planet. If we do not, their future will be placed in jeopardy. One need think only of a failure to deal with the Climate Change goal of the Agenda to appreciate the veracity of that statement.

The 2030 Agenda contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals – or SDGs as they're commonly known – incorporating 169 targets. Fear not, it is not my intention to recite each of those targets, but I would like to spend the remaining minutes of this address summarizing those seventeen goals, and how a Christian might relate to each of them.

The first SDG is the End Poverty Goal. As a humanist and as a Christian, I feel not only the obligation to act, but a sense of outrage that extreme poverty continues to exist in these days of super-technology and cultural largesse. Jesus said, "Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." It is time for civilization to lay down more love than what we've been witnessing, for until the shame of extreme poverty is expunged from the Earth, good conscience cannot rest.

SDG2 is the Zero Hunger Goal – it's about hunger, food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. Considering the subject of hunger, a Christian's mind turns towards the feeding of the four thousand on a mountainside on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus, anxious not to send the crowd away hungry, divides the available supply of seven loaves and a few small fish amongst the four thousand. Today we charge the World Food Program and other agencies to perform these tasks on our behalf, but like SDG1, the Zero Hunger Goal is one with which we must all be seized.

SDG3 is for Good Health dealing with major issues such as reducing the global maternal mortality ratio as well as premature mortality from non-communicable diseases; ending preventable deaths of

newborns and children under five years as well as the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

In Corinthians, Christians are exhorted to see our bodies as the temple of God, and in Romans to present our bodies as living sacrifice to God. The expectation comes shining through that we not only seek to live healthy lives but to help others to do likewise.

SDG4 is the Quality Education Goal. Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone that asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” To be faithful to our creed, we must provide conditions under which those who knock at the door of education are given entry.

SDG5 is for the achievement of gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

On gender discrimination, Galatians is unequivocal, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all in Christ Jesus.” Christianity is essentially about serving the God of love and upholding the commandment to love one another – there is no gender distinction in that command.

SDG6 is directed at ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. From the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, to Jesus asking the Samaritan woman at the well for water; imagery of water goes throughout the Gospels. Indeed, water is a central element for most every religion, with water representing life itself. Thus, it is for many of us, that the attainment of SDG6 is a sacred task.

In the interests of time, let’s look at SDGs 7-9 together.

Sustainable Development Goal 7 is about ensuring affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, with emphasis on renewable energy. SDG8 aims to bring about better economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. SDG9 aims to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.

In response to the above three goals we can reference the well-established role of the Protestant work ethic in the development of capitalism and the industrial revolution; so too the role of the Church in coping with the social ills that arose, through its promotion of social justice and provision of hospitals, health care and education. The 2030 Agenda calls upon that heritage, coupled with the resources of other branches of civil society, of multinational agencies and of national governments, to drive successful implementation of SDGs 7 to 9.

SDG10 is about reducing inequality within and among countries. I encourage you to take time to read the targets of this goal, for its call for equity lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda’s work to transform our world. For the Christian response, all we need do is repeat the words of Jesus, when he said, “Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.”

SDG11 seeks to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. By the year 2030, 60% of humanity is expected to be living in cities and urban areas, so we must prepare the ground carefully. In a wondrous declaration of resilience, with a deft play on petros being the Greek word for stone, Jesus told his disciple, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

SDG12 is also central to the 2030 Agenda and is all about humanity achieving sustainable consumption and production patterns. Of course, technological and regulatory changes are required, but the greatest challenge here is public awareness. In my view this must be the central driver for the Agenda’s success. People everywhere must know the 2030 Agenda’s message on sustainable development, so that universally lifestyles come into harmony with nature. It is thus that during the General Assembly’s 71st Session, we will be taking the Agenda to the people, so that every human being has the opportunity to see the SDGs as central to their individual rights and responsibilities.

SDG13 is the Climate Action goal, with targets calling for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. In contrast to the years of post-Copenhagen stalemate, since 2015 we have momentum: the Paris Agreement on Climate Change Action has been adopted, its ratification is proceeding on or ahead of target, and the great Climate Change tasks of mitigation and adaption are gaining traction even as self-serving Climate Change deniers continue attempts to block the safeguarding of humanity’s place on this planet.

In his encyclical “Laudato si, On Care For Our Common Home”, published in 2015, Pope Francis aims to inspire humanity to protect the planet, endorsing climate action and making the case for Christian environmentalism. “People occasionally forgive,” he writes, “But nature never does. If we don’t take care of the environment there’s no way of getting around it.”

SDG14, the sustainable Ocean Goal sets out to reverse the cycle of decline in which our oceans and seas are caught. As a friend of the fishing community from which at least four of his disciplines were drawn, I’m convinced this goal would have been dear to the heart of Jesus.

The Laudato si encyclical makes numerous references that support the thrust of SDG14, including overfishing, ocean acidification, rising sea levels, melting polar ice caps, disappearing glaciers, and the pollution of our lakes, rivers, and seas.

When it comes to SDG15, the goal for sustainable life on land – our ecosystems, forests and biodiversity; the primus inter pares of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, does not mince words, “For human beings ... to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the world by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins.”

SDG16 is about promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and calls for the provision of access to justice for all and the building of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

From the Holy Communion to the Sermon on the Mount, the Gospels are infused with the spirit of sharing and inclusiveness. Indeed peace, justice are the central themes of the New Testament. In the first letter to the Corinthians we find the telling words “We are free to do anything, but does everything help the building of the community? Each of you must regard not his own interests, but the other man’s.” And when it comes to accountability in governance, the Gospels are also forthright, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

And so, to SDG17, the final goal; the Partnerships Goal; the goal that reminds us that we are all in this together. Through fidelity to this goal, we can summon the collaborative action and the means of implementation required to achieve sustainable development. SDG17 is in complete harmony with the Christian spirit. What is partnership but coming together for common purpose; and where such coming together is bound by love, love for thy neighbor, for the blessings of nature, it cannot fail. *Omnia vincit amor*: love prevails over all, this I know to be true.

Congregants and friends, it has been an honor to speak with you here this morning.

I leave you with the thought that the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals are hugely ambitious and present us with one of the greatest challenges ever set by humanity. We must meet that challenge for the sake of our grandchildren and the welfare of all future generations. We must embrace the universality and the transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The stakes are just too high for humanity to do otherwise. But we are not daunted: we have trust in equity, faith in reason, and we have hope in progress. We will persevere.

With the same zeal that Christians exercised when taking the Nazarene’s message of love to the world, we must now spread the message of the Sustainable Development Goals – humanity’s master-plan for security and survival in a loving world – to every human in every corner of our beautiful planet.

I thank you for your patience and perseverance in listening to my words today.