



Address
by the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the opening of the Conference
Faith Action for Nature
5 October 2020

Dear listeners,
near and afar,
distinguished participants
in the Faith for Nature conference
here in Skálholt in Iceland

It is my honour to open this global online event. It is always suitable to discuss the pressing issues of our times, the effects of human-made climate change on nature. In a discourse of this kind, religious communities and philosophical organizations can play an important role.

These are trying times. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc around the globe. Worldwide, over one million people have died, many more have fallen ill, and this common foe will continue to disrupt our daily lives.

Here in Iceland, the authorities have always deemed it necessary to heed the advice of our experts in disease prevention and control. Defensive measures have enjoyed nationwide support and I sincerely hope that we will maintain that unity. I congratulate the organizers of these event for having adapted to ever-changing and challenging circumstances. This includes the most recent restrictions on public gatherings that took effect today.

We will get through this. We will find a way to beat the virus. And how will that be done? Through science and through international collaboration, through the effort of scientists around the world to develop a vaccine and other remedies. Yes, we will conquer this virus – but then what? Back to normal? Back to what we had? Was that good? Was that “the good old days”?

I leave you with that to think about, but dear friends: Let me say a few words about this place, Skálholt. Almost one thousand years ago, the first bishop of Iceland resided here and for centuries it was the centre of the country's two dioceses. Today, it remains a religious site but also a place of culture and study, music and arts.

Throughout the ages, nature and faith prevailed here. People kept their faith, but nature could be harsh. I will give you one example, one harsh example. Travel with me to the year 1783. On Whitsunday that year, a massive volcanic eruption began in southeast Iceland. For the next eight months, ash covered the whole country, livestock fell and people starved or died from diseases. Overall, around 20% of the population died. As if that was not enough, in 1784 a terrible earthquake destroyed all but one of the buildings here at Skálholt, this central site of religion in the country. In a sense, nature and faith vied for victory. Again, in a sense, and despite the damage, faith won. The only building that withstood the quake was the cathedral.

These years of disease, disaster and death led some officials in Denmark, the colonial power, to wonder whether the poor people who survived should not just be shipped away from this godforsaken island. But the bishop here would hear nothing of such surrender. He was a man of faith but he was also a scholar, eager to study natural sciences, learn how nature works. And his conclusion was simple: We can live on this island, we can use what God and nature have given us.

That message still holds true. In recent times, we have learned to harness the forces of nature here. We heat our homes by using our geothermal wealth. We also produce green energy in that manner, and we exploit waterfalls. We toil the soil and we fish the seas. Yes, we are blessed with natural resources but we must use them wisely, we must champion sustainability, we must respect nature. We will never be the masters of natural forces. Despite, or rather because of, all our scientific progress – the progress that will enable us to beat the virus – we must be modest, humble, and respectful.

Dear friends, I leave you with Icelandic words of wisdom. Last century, one of our most beloved poets wrote about duty and challenge, the need to act when action is needed. His words are strong in Icelandic, equally so in English translation:

For when there is wrong that you could have put right
and when there is struggle but you stand aside
the troubles of this world are also your fault

(Tómas Guðmundsson)

Dear citizens of this world: I wish you all great success in your work. Stay safe.