Devotion for IUCN Oceania Conservation Forum
Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
30th July, 2019

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a pleasure to be here this morning, not just as the General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches, representing 30 mainline churches and 9 national councils of churches across 15 countries of this Blue Ocean Continent, but also as a chaplain of our traditional voyaging society, a paddler and someone with a strong affinity for the Ocean.

A deep spirituality permeates the communities of the Pacific and is at the heart of the Pacific people’s relationship with each other and the environment.

Spirituality is integral to the way we interpret, understand and interact with one another, and with the natural world. This spirituality is enhanced by the many faith traditions of the world which have grown roots in our diverse Pacific communities. These faith traditions are shared with 85 percent of those who share this planet.

The language of spirituality – the expression in metaphor, in image, in silence, in hymns of praise and cries for justice, in reflection and meditation, in ethical action, in confession and repentance and in justice and compassion.

Acknowledging and embracing the significance and centrality of such life-affirming spirituality has the potential to provide important catalyst for grass roots action.

That spirituality is not only experienced through faith communities but also through indigenous culture – that deep sense of vanua – of rootedness not only to land, rooted in respect and in celebration of just relationships with all creation. When combined, traditional knowledge and wisdom, spirituality and science have the capacity for a major ecological paradigm shift – or as Pope Francis termed it, “An Ecological Conversion”.

This morning I would like share with you as our invocation a song from the book of Psalms, common to the Abrahamic faiths and which I hope will resonate with you:
Psalm 8

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants - you have fortress because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, the children of dust that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than angels and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them mastery over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

I’m a Methodist minister, but my favourite theologian is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit Priest who was a theologian, philosopher, geologist and palaeontologist. His writings also focused on the far distant origins, evolution and ultimate purpose of the universe (cosmology).

One day, while working on the excavation of the Peking Man he found himself alone in the desert: longing to celebrate the mass, he had neither bread or wine but instead declared the world as an altar and the struggles and suffering of humanity the elements. The revelation he received was that God’s living and Life giving Word is present in all matter.

Once censured by the Catholic Church, Teilhard was quoted by Pope Francis in Laudato Si. The encyclical on Care for Our Common Home.

The story of Teilhard is significant as you gather here in the Pacific. We are a deeply spiritual people – our spirituality is the lens through which we understand and respond to the world around us.

I once read that science and spirituality are tools to investigate reality from two different angles. Each discipline asks a fundamentally different question.

Science asks: how does the universe work?

Spirituality reflects on: why is there a universe and what is its purpose, and what is our purpose of existence as human beings?

Scientists can tell us what needs to be done to address a situation. Spirituality provides an ethical or moral framework to mobilise and motivate the action.

While my prayer will be according to the Christian tradition, I invite those of other paths of spirituality or worldviews to use this spiritual pause as a way to affirm the work the work you do, to receive some positive vibrations and energy and experience the unity in diversity for which many of us in Fiji strive.
Meda masu, hum saab prathna kare, let us pray:

In the name of the Spirit of God, who hovered over the primordeal waters.

In the name of the Word of God, who called forth creation.

In the name of the Wisdom of God, who filled the created the amazing designs that form the delicate web of life.

Eternal God, the whole cosmos sings of your glory, from the dividing of a single cell to the vast expanse of interstellar space:

Creator God, 
God of the waitui, the moana, the solwara – the oceans, turquoise lagoons within the reef and the depths of dark blue sea
God of the lagilagi – the sky, the atmosphere and outer space
God of the vanua, the fenua – the land and all that is within it:

You created this world with the power of your word. 
You formed humankind with your own hands and breathed your own breath into us.
You gave us these lands as a gift – a source of our identity and sustenance.

you empowered us to be the stewards of what you have made.
Oceans, seas and watery deep, celebrate with all that lives within you, and roar in praise with us today. We celebrate the song of Oceania; the Liquid Continent

As the reef heron stretches its wings rises over the waves. Our prayers rise to you.

We give thanks for the the sea, for fish, turtle, dolphin and coral; for creatures of the land and the sky.

Our spirit seeks you in the early dawn, O God, for your commandments are light.

Loving God, we have failed you and abused the gift you have given us.
We have offended you and defiled what you have made.

Forgive us for betraying your trust.
Forgive us for our greed and arrogance.
Forgive us for what we have done to your earth.
Forgive us for what we have done to your oceans.
Forgive us for what we have done to your creatures, on the land, in the sky and in the depths.

Hear, O God of Compassion: 
The cries of the land have become a desert; land laid barren through corrupt agricultural practices, pollution, mining and deforestation.
The cries of islands are drowning in the rising seas, oceans that rise with the melting of the ice and the heating of the seas.

The cries of distress from Mother Earth - storm and drought.  
God of Life, heal your wounded earth.

Help us to listen to the cry of the currents bearing pollution, to the sigh of the bleached and dying coral, to the lament of the turtle and the hunted whale and exploited tuna.

Help us to listen to the voices of the Ocean and to heed those voices for the wellbeing of the Oceans, for the wellbeing of the Land.

Grant us listening ears, loving hearts and wills to work together to effect positive change.

Grant us the sharing of pearls from the depth of your wisdom.

Grant that we may honour and care for your gift of creation, so immense, so mysterious, so marvellous.

Grant that our children’s children will rejoice that we set out with intention to care for the health of Oceania and and for the well being of its creatures.

Empower us to choose the road that leads to life.  
We pray for the participants of this Forum – who seek a restoration of relationship between humankind and creation that affirms abundant life in harmony and gentleness.

Empower them to continue to speak truth to power in love – open closed ears and closed hearts.

This we ask in the name of the one who came that we may have life in abundance, your Son, our Saviour Jesus the Christ.

Amen.

(adapted from my prayer of confession for creation used in the 2013 World Council of Churches Assembly).

James Shri Bhagwan (Rev.)  
General Secretary