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Fresh and drinking water is becoming extremely rare. Various factors are playing their role so as to render this basic and primary element we thought inexhaustible, a major issue for the near future. Demographic growth, intensive urbanization, climactic changes, intensive cultivation, the use of chemicals and pesticides, the need for irrigation, industrial pollutants, waste waters and a lot more give cause for concern regarding the survival of water and that of humanity. This situation offers cause for tension likely to give birth to wars and conflicts on the international scene.

As prerequisites crucial for life, air, water and land are jeopardized by pollution, over-consumption, provoked desertification and deforestation. Are we going to be chronically indecisive, lost between hunger and thirst, due to the ecosystem disequilibrium we are provoking in nature? Consequently, we are not only facing one single risk, but a system of risks. If we want to safeguard the survival of human beings we have to offer them the minimum required for a healthy environment: air, water and land – the three necessary elements one needs to live.

Our earth, now completely explored, is a huge ship. Yet, present scientific knowledge has not allowed us to discover a new continent on which we could moor. Thus, we have to count on our own resources and manage them in a responsible way. We have to deal carefully with the future and be united, i.e. take care of ourselves and the others. This is why we are calling not only for knowledge but for wisdom – wisdom that would help us face the problems and try to solve them armed with rational clarity for the common welfare: this is the sole condition for a lasting development and longed-for peace. This direction is the one and only condition to guarantee peace in our century. Now two worlds confront one another: a consumption society, which squanders and plunders the natural resources, and an underdeveloped one which lives in hunger. Both tend to exploit the natural wealth and riches, polluting water without the slightest concern. Yesterday, man was fighting for land; today, man is not only fighting for land but for water too. Perhaps the time is not very far that a fight for breathing air will lead the earth and its inhabitants to ultimate destruction.

I think this last issue merits attention, and it is exactly what the Thessaloniki International Symposium on Transboundary Waters Management is going to deal with. The symposium will address the following aspects of the water problem attempting to give solutions as well as their possible implementation. On the topic of scientific approaches for transboundary rivers, lakes and groundwater the main question is: Do we really know enough in order to take decisions? On the topic of international law regulating these problems, the question is: Is it possible to define new tools for negotiations? Finally, on the issue of policy making and the institutions required, the questions arising are: What policies can be envisaged for rising the awareness and participation of society as a whole? How can the chances of success be increased? How can one win the race between economic/technological progress and environmental preservation?

Today, we are faced with the oxymoron of a really tragic situation. We live in the so-called ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge economy’ and yet we seem not to have the slightest idea of how to deal effectively with the environment – our home – that would guarantee the future life of our world. I therefore wish every success to the present conference, adding one more question for you to reflect on, a question which I borrow from the English poet T.S. Eliot:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?