Reflection by Richard Kooloos

HEAD OF SUSTAINABLE BANKING, ABN AMRO

Water – a source of life and destruction – has sustained life on earth for centuries, often in extreme forms. The financial specialists at ABN AMRO MeesPierson Institutions & Charities know better than anyone that religious institutions and charities have long had a strong bond with this theme. Over the years, our clients have challenged us – and still do – to take our responsibility as stewards of the environment and to create forward-thinking sustainable solutions. At the same time, we want to share our network and expertise

to stimulate the exchange of vision and knowledge. The water symposium gave us the opportunity to help build bridges between civil society organisations, but also between businesses, science, governments, and the younger generation.

In their own words: Rian Vens-Hagting, Director of Religious Institutions at ABN AMRO MeesPierson Institutions & Charities and Richard Kooloos, Director of Sustainable Banking at ABN AMRO.

Seeking connection

Throughout its history, ABN AMRO has worked with institutions and companies within the water sector – including a large number of religious organisations and charities – on promoting the role and significance of water in the world.

Climate change presents us with new challenges today, not only because of, but also with regard to, the role of water. There is an increasing awareness in the world that something needs to be done and that has opened the floodgates to a stream of initiatives. However, there has yet to be an all-of-the-above approach that would result in truly sustainable solutions. And when parties find each other, cooperation is often difficult, or even impossible. Why is that? It is often because they do not understand each other's language, do not know where to find each other, or sometimes it is because they do not trust each other.

The central purpose of *Laudato Si'* is summarised in a single question: 'What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?' The encyclical establishes the connection between man,

ethics, and nature based on an integral ecology, the philosophy that the Green Patriarch has been actively propagating for 30 years. This year marks the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si'*, making this an appropriate time to reflect not only on how we have heeded the Pope's words, but also to issue a call to action to the financial sector to fight inequality and injustice with all possible means and contribute to a fairer society where possible. Embracing this important philosophy is an essential starting point for Rian Vens-Hagting in her search for a common language:

You have to tackle the problem and look for solutions together. Whether you are a church, dredging company, bank, charity or scientist, it doesn't really matter. There is no point in talking about sand, risks, money or technology until we have embraced the cause we stand for. My most important takeaway from the symposium is: seek connection.

RIAN VENS-HAGTING

Understanding problems

Since the financial crisis, ABN AMRO has increasingly viewed its commitment to society and to these organisations and companies from a stakeholder, rather than a shareholder, perspective. This is reflected, for example, in the purpose, which is an important foundation for the day-to-day provision of services: 'Banking for better, for generations to come.' This also aligns with the central question posed in *Laudato Si'*.

According to Richard Kooloos, however, the bank can increase its proficiency in the integral language of these themes:

New problems create new risks and uncertainties. These risks require new solutions and a new way of viewing the future and each other. This affects our function as a bank. Don't run away from climate change problems, such as water, but recognise them and tackle them head on. From the perspective of integral ecology and not just from the perspective of financial risks. Only then will you be able to find sustainable solutions together.

RICHARD KOOLOOS

Taking responsibility

This and the call to action to the financial sector to commit to achieving environmental justice constantly confronts us, as a bank, with fundamental questions.

How do we define the values we choose to engage in shaping the future? And how can we, as ABN AMRO, make the best possible contribution to that just society, in cooperation with all those involved?

The answers to these questions can only be attained when we and all parties involved, regardless of our backgrounds, find sustainable solutions. Not by running away from problems, but by tackling them. And by stepping outside our comfort zone and broadening our horizons.

The symposium showed us that this connection can only be achieved when we take responsibility as stewards of the environment. That is why we work together on new initiatives that enable establishing and strengthening connections between companies and organisations. For example, by connecting new innovative projects with traditional companies that are looking for alternative and sustainable business practices.

Our aim is to learn to look each other in the eye without prejudice, and not be afraid to answer the questions we see in them. Because this is also what the symposium showed us: only when we empower each other can we create a better world.