

## The Orthodox Church and Climate Change

### **A Review of the Prophetic Voice of the Patriarchs and Hierarchs of the Church**

January 27, 2016

A Summary of Major Statements

SINCE THE 1980'S CONTINUING TO OUR PRESENT DAY, THE ORTHODOX CHURCH through its top hierarchs has spoken repeatedly about the seriousness of the problem of global climate change. In 1989 HAH Ecumenical Patriarch +Dimitrios prophetically addressed this problem just as it was emerging into popular awareness:

Scientists and other men of learning warn us of the danger, and speak of phenomena which are threatening the life of our planet, such as the 'phenomena of the greenhouse' whose first indications have already been noted. ...

In 1997 HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew traveled to California where he delivered a clear statement on Orthodox responsibility for the care of the world and then issued an early call for action on global climate change. This call was not directed only to leaders, but to all Orthodox and all people of good will.

For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation... [to cause] changes in its climate..., [or] injure others humans with disease... for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, land, air and life with poisonous substances, these things are sins. ...

We call on the world's leaders to take action to halt the destructive changes to the global climate that are being caused by human activity. And we call on all of you here today, to join us in this cause. This can be our important contribution to the great debate about climate change. We must be spokespeople for an ecological ethic that reminds the world that it is not ours to use for our own convenience. It is God's gift of love to us and we must return his love by protecting it and all that is in it.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew next visited Sibiu, Romanian (in 1997), where he issued a warning to all the faithful, saying, “climate change, which threatens the survival of humanity, needs to be dealt with immediately.” He emphasizes, “There is no time for waiting or delay. Otherwise, we are willingly and irresponsibly, even dangerously, shutting our eyes. What must immediately take place is repentance, together with the change of life that accompanies repentance.”

In 2000, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was in New York for a luncheon presentation at the Scenic Hudson Environmental Organization. On this November 13, 2000 occasion, he addressed the need for an environmental ethic that would help us reverse the impacts of climate change.

We address ourselves to the leaders of the world and pray that they take the necessary measures so that the catastrophic changes of climate, caused by human activity, may be reversed. We should propagate an ecological ethic, which reminds us that the world is not ours to use as we please. It is a gift of God’s love to us. We must return that love by protecting it with whatever responsibilities it may entail.

Several days later, on November 15, 2000, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew journeyed to Katmandu, Nepal to deliver the keynote address before an international symposium in Katmandu.

Scientists expect that in the coming decades the average temperature on earth will increase by several degrees. This will result in the raising of the sea level, greater rainfall and floods in colder regions, and more drought and deserts in warmer regions.

“These effects,” observed HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, are caused by everyone who uses fossil fuels. “The consequences of a polluting action will eventually affect every person throughout the world.”

In a July 31, 2001 Letter to the United States Senate in support of energy legislation and particularly to reduce the rise of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America joined with His Eminence Metropolitan +Philip Saliba of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America; His Beatitude Metropolitan Theodosius of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA); His Eminence Metropolitan +Christopher of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the USA and Canada; and His Grace Bishop Mercurius of Zaraisk of the Russian Orthodox Church, in declaring the unified perspective of the Orthodox Churches on energy policy:

The energy policies we adopt... must reflect our values. Conservation and the development of the cleanest technologies possible are the wisest, most just, and most prudent means to fulfill our moral obligations to ensure the health and well-being of the American people and people around the world now and for generations to come.

In this letter, these Orthodox hierarchs emphasize the moral dimensions that underlie national energy policy. They also highlight the link between energy conservation and renewable energy sources that facilitate reductions in carbon dioxide.

The letter from these top American hierarchs concludes with the following sentence: There now exists, they write,

a moral obligation to choose the safest, cleanest and most sustainable sources of energy to protect and preserve God's creation.

The implication is that burning oil, natural gas and coal which have been major causes of air pollution, and therefore respiratory illness, should be replaced by clean sources of energy. It is now established that these fossil fuels are major causes of global warming.

In 2002 HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew again addressed climate change in his Letter to the Entire Plenitude of the Church on September 1<sup>st</sup>, the Day of Prayer for Creation. He declared that every person and their actions are important in the effort to avert climate change:

However insignificant the contribution of every individual to the averting of new catastrophic natural phenomena may appear, we are all obliged to do whatever we can, because only then shall we be able to pray to God boldly to supply what is lacking in our own efforts and possibilities. We paternally urge everyone to realize their responsibility and to do whatever they can to avert the increase of the earth's temperature...

In 2004, His Grace Bishop Dimitrios, executive director of SCOBA, endorsed an interfaith declaration by the National Religious Partnership on the Environment (NRPE), entitled "Earth's Climate Embraces Us All." It unequivocally declared:

Global climate change presents an unprecedented threat to the integrity of life on Earth.... What is most required... is moral vision and leadership. Resources of human character and spirit – love of life, far-sightedness and solidarity – are needed to awaken a sufficient sense of urgency and resolve.

In 2005 HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew spoke of the moral dimensions to the emerging climate crisis. On August 12, 2005 he presented the following:

Climate change affects everyone. Unless we take radical and immediate measures to reduce emissions stemming from unsustainable - in fact unjustifiable, if not simply unjust - excesses in the demands of our lifestyle, the impact will be both alarming and imminent.

Climate change is much more than an issue of environmental preservation. Insofar as it is human-induced, it is a profoundly moral and spiritual problem. To persist in the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly. It is no less than suicidal, jeopardizing the diversity of the very earth that we inhabit, enjoy and share. Moreover, climate change constitutes a matter of social and economic justice. For those who will most directly and severely be affected by climate change will be the poorer and more vulnerable nations (what Christian Scriptures refer to as our neighbor) as well as future generations.

There is a close link between the economy of the poor and the warming of our planet. Conservation and compassion are intimately connected. The web of life is a sacred gift of God....

Faith communities must put their own houses in order. Their adherents must embrace the urgency of the issue. This process has already begun, although it must be intensified.... Faith communities are well-placed to take a long-term view of the world. In theological jargon, that is called 'eschatology.'

In 2007, the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America (SCOBA) issued a statement on global climate change. This was jointly signed by HE Archbishop Demetrios of the Greek Archdiocese of America; HB Metropolitan Herman of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA); HE Metropolitan +Philip of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America; HE Metropolitan +Nicholas of the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Church; and by HE Metropolitan Joseph of the Bulgarian diocese; plus all of the other bishops in May, 2007. Here are excerpts from that important declaration for the Orthodox faithful in America:

As Church leaders, our concern is service to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose Gospel of love teaches us that our response to the welfare of our neighbor and respect for the creation are expressions of our love for God. This means that we are all personally responsible to identify and adopt appropriate moral and ethical approaches to the changing conditions of the world.

Faithful to the responsibility that we have been given..., it is prudent for us to listen to the world's scientific leaders as they describe changes occurring in the world's climate, changes that are already being experienced by many people throughout the world. Global climate change assumes many different... appearances within our own country. In Alaska, ... the average temperature has risen by 4°, causing glaciers to retreat and the Arctic Ocean to lose its summer ice. In Florida, Hawaii and the islands of the Caribbean, coral reefs are dying. In ocean waters such as those off ... San Francisco, higher temperatures now result in lower concentrations of plankton, reducing a primary food source for fish and bird life, and ultimately, for humans. Across the western states, a modest increase in temperature has contributed to a six-fold increase in forest fires.... In many parts of America, previously distant tropical diseases, such as West Nile virus and dengue fever, are appearing as a result of rising temperatures.

These are clear signs of a rapidly changing climate. It cannot be predicted in precise detail how climate change is going to unfold, but the seriousness ... is widely accepted. And, while it is true that the world's climate has also undergone changes in past centuries, three crucial considerations make the current changes serious and unprecedented:

- ◆ The rapid extent of temperature increase is historically unparalleled. Past changes in climate occurred over extended periods of time and were... less severe.
- ◆ The human role in changing the climate is unique today. In earlier centuries, people did not have the technological capability to make such radical changes to the planet....
- ◆ The impact that climate change will exert on society is great and diverse, inevitably including conditions which deeply disrupt the lives and livelihoods of people on an unprecedented scale.

Climatologists [identify the causes of] these changes as the result of measurable increases of carbon dioxide and other “greenhouse gases” in the atmosphere. These gases are produced primarily by the burning or combustion of gasoline, coal and other fossil fuels. Among the many consequences, the atmosphere and the oceans are warming; wind and rainfall patterns are changing; and sea levels are rising. Forces of climate change also increase the acidity of the oceans; they raise the ferocity of storms..., they cause droughts and heat waves to become more intense; and, in some areas, they disrupt normal agriculture... Importantly, the conditions that we observe now are only the early alterations to our climate. Much larger and far more disruptive changes will result unless we reduce the forces causing climate change.

It should be clear... that immediate measures must be taken to reduce the impact of these changes to the world's climate. If we fail to act now, the changes ... underway will intensify and create catastrophic conditions. A contributing root cause of these changes to climate is a lifestyle that contains unintended, but nevertheless destructive side effects. It may be that no person intends to harm the environment, but the excessive use of fossil fuels is degrading and destroying the life of creation.

Therefore, we wish to emphasize the seriousness and the urgency of the situation. To persist in a path of excess and waste, at the expense of our neighbors and beyond the capability of the planet to support the lifestyle directly responsible for these changes, is not only folly; it jeopardizes the survival of God's creation.... In the end, not only is it sinful; it is no less than suicidal.

The bishops' statement concludes with the following observation:

In each generation, God sends some great tests that challenge the life and future of society. One of the tests for our time is whether we will be obedient to the commands that God has given to us by exercising self-restraint in our use of energy, or whether we will ignore those commands and continue to seek the comforts and excesses that over-reliance on fossil fuels involves.

- SCOBA Declaration on Climate Change, May 25, 2007

In the Fall of 2007, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew commissioned a special Arctic symposium to study the effects of climate change around Greenland where evidence of its impact is obvious. He concluded his observations from the ice and seas around Greenland this way:

If there is one single message in the information which we have received during our symposium, it is this: "Time is short." The ice of the Arctic is shrinking at a frightening pace. That is what we are told by scientists, that is what we are told by Greenlanders who know the ice better than anybody. If the ice in Greenland melts, the consequences for ... the whole world could be devastating: a Biblical catastrophe in the most literal sense. Some scientists tell us that we have ten years or less to limit the emission of greenhouse gases and hence limit the extent of global warming. Humanity does not have the luxury of quarreling over economic or racial or religious differences. It must act together; and it must act now.

As Orthodox Christians, we use the Greek word *kairos* to describe a moment in time... which has eternal significance. When Our Lord Jesus Christ began his preaching, he declared that a decisive moment, a *kairos* (Mark 1:14) had arrived in the relationship between

God and mankind. The Mother of God, who prays for and protects mankind, experienced her moment of *kairos* when she received the angel Gabriel and replied, 'May it be according to your word' (Luke 1:38). As individuals we are often conscious of a *kairos*, a moment when we make a choice that will affect our whole lives.

For the human race as a whole, there is now a *kairos*, a decisive time in our relationship with God's creation. We will either act in time to protect life on earth from the worst consequences of human folly, or we will fail to act.

On behalf of all of us, allow me to offer up a public prayer:  
*'May God grant us the wisdom to act in time.'*

Orthodox leaders in other parts of the world are similarly concerned. From the Malankara Orthodox Church in India, a call to change behavior has been issued by HB Paulose Mar Milithios, Metropolitan of Madras. His 2007 message begins by declaring that the historic balances in nature are now observed to be changing.

Although the issue of climate change can seem like a complex issue, there are a wide variety of simple actions that individuals and committees can take to make a difference. A few possible actions which we can employ are energy conservation, education programmes to create awareness, planting trees, using less petrol and diesel vehicles, and recycling projects.

I exhort all our Church members to observe the day with its seriousness and learn to go back to the nature. A simple, natural and unsophisticated lifestyle is the only cure for all these maladies. Let us all join our hands to save our planet. Let us unite to combat climate change and make this planet a commodious dwelling place for the future.

In September, 2009 while visiting Bangkok, Thailand, HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew continued his campaign for an awakening to the issues of climate change. In addressing the upcoming United Nation's climate summit in Copenhagen, Denmark, he declared, "The accomplishment of a good agreement..." is not solely because it is "a moral imperative for the conservation of God's creation."

It is also a route for economic and social sustainability. Taking action against climate change should not be understood as a financial burden, but as an important opportunity for a healthier planet, to the benefit of all humanity and particularly of those states whose economic development is lagging behind.

Earlier in 2009, HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew had declared,

The ecological crisis, and particularly the reality of climate change, constitutes the greatest threat for every form of life in our world.

On September 1, 2010 Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew issued a call to the entire Church on climate change. In a letter, circulated to Orthodox parishes, he called upon Orthodox Christians and upon all the children of God to join in the great challenge of alleviating environmental problems.

For our Orthodox Church, the protection of the environment... embodies a great responsibility for every person.... The direct correlation of the God-given duty and mandate, to work and preserve, with every aspect of contemporary life, constitutes the only way to a harmonious co-existence with each and every element of creation, and the entirety of the natural world....

Therefore, we call upon you, beloved brethren and children in the Lord, to take part in the titanic and righteous battle to alleviate the environmental crisis, and to prevent the even worse results that derive from its consequences. Let us motivate ourselves to harmonize our personal and collective life and attitudes with the needs of nature's ecosystems, so that every kind of fauna and flora in the world and in the universe may live and thrive and be preserved.

In 2011, HAH issued a letter to the delegates assembling in Durban, South Africa for the 17<sup>th</sup> UN Summit on climate change. HAH offered spiritual direction toward the resolution of the climate problem. He proposed three keys to dealing with climate change. He begins with the following introduction to his remarks.

We are dealing with a profoundly moral and spiritual problem. Our ministry and mandate is to sensitize consciences and energize listeners of good will. Therefore, we ask that you contemplate the following challenges:

(i) A first challenge for participants at this conference is *the struggle to surmount national and regional considerations and to consider the larger picture*. Climate change is a global problem. We share one world..., one atmosphere and the same habitat. We are all inseparably interconnected. Any genuine solution demands the ability to think for the whole world. We are all connected and our actions affect each other. Conservation and compassion are intimately interrelated.

(ii) A second challenge is *remembering that sacrifice is needed to arrive at a successful conclusion*. When will we face the... truth that all ecological activity is ultimately judged by its impact on the poor? When will we sense the painful reality that the continent that has scarcely contributed to global warming [Africa] is bearing the most detrimental repercussions, ... while being the least equipped to cope with its consequences? The greatest delusion is that measures to deal with climate change must not ... affect economic growth. Without sacrifice, ... we cannot reach the unity necessary for an ... agreement.

(iii) A third challenge is *the priority of securing moral leadership*. Global climate change presents an unprecedented threat to the integrity and diversity of life on earth. At the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we have already denounced ecological abuse as sin against God; we should recognize how it is also a crime against humanity.

Notice how HAH bluntly calls the lack of action on climate change “a crime against humanity.” One must hear the cries of pain and suffering from the people in the tropical nations of the world to appreciate the human dimensions of climate change. These are people who are now experiencing extreme droughts, crop failures and hunger. They are facing devastating flooding from deluges of rain and storm intensities never before experienced.

On November 14, 2013, to the delegates assembling in Warsaw, Poland, for COP-19, HAH described some of the root causes and consequences of climate change.

Scientists estimate that those most hurt by global warming... are those who can least afford it. According to the Gospel of St. Matthew, the questions that will be asked of us at the final moment of accountability will not be about our religious observance but on whether we fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, comforted the sick, and cared for captives.

Our reckless consumption of the earth’s resources – energy, water, and forests – threatens us with irreversible climate change. Burning more fuel than we need in an overpopulated city, we may contribute to droughts or floods thousands of miles away.

To restore the planet we need a spiritual worldview, which brings frugality and simplicity, humility and respect. We must constantly be aware of the impact of our actions on all of creation. We must direct our focus away from what we want to what the planet needs. We must choose to care for creation....

In our efforts to contain global warming, we are ultimately admitting just how prepared we are to sacrifice some of our selfish

and greedy lifestyles. When will we learn to say: “Enough!”? When will we understand how important it is to leave as light a footprint as possible on this planet for the sake of future generations?

After all, we are all in this together. Our planet unites us in a unique way. While we may differ in our conception of the origins or purpose of our world, and while we may disagree on social or political ideology, surely we can all agree on our responsibility and obligation to protect its natural resources – which are neither limitless nor negotiable – for future generations.

It is not too late to respond – as a people and as a planet. We could steer the earth toward our children’s future. Yet we can no longer afford to wait; we can no longer afford to be idle. The world has clearly expressed its opinion; our political leaders must accordingly act with urgency. Deadlines can no longer be postponed; indecision and inaction are not options. We have a choice to make. The time to choose is now.

In 2014, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa opened the Orthodox Church’s first climate office in Alexandria, Egypt. Reports by climate change organizations show that Africa, which has contributed the least to global warming will be impacted more than any other region of the world. In a letter to Orthodox hierarchs, HE Archbishop Seraphim of Zimbabwe, the new director of the Climate Office, appealed to other Orthodox Church leaders:

Climate change is causing extreme droughts and unpredictable weather, resulting in powerful storms, declines in food production, the melting of polar ice caps and mountain glaciers, insect explosions, the arrival of new diseases, and a growing acidity to the oceans.

Even ordinary citizens testify they are seeing more intense storms that devastate crops, destroy homes, and make seasonal weather unpredictable. Other reports indicate that unusually harsh droughts are devastating food producing areas, especially in Brazil, Australia and California.

An increasing frequency of powerful, record-breaking winds have lashed Alaska, the Philippines and Asia, and brought terrible hardships to people. The seriousness of this climate predicament is amplified because there is no precedent in human history for understanding these catastrophic changes. These changes are an early warning that what is happening most visibly in the world’s tropical and polar regions will soon be impacting people’s lives and communities in *every* part of the world.

Scientists, serving as the eyes of society, tell us that the primary cause for these changes is the burning of fossil fuels. These fuels, when burned in tens of millions of locations around the world, release so much carbon dioxide that the atmosphere is changed in such a way that more warmth from the sun is retained. The measurable increases in carbon dioxide are precisely what is causing disruptions to the world's climate. The good news is that scientists tell us that we can correct this situation if we act now. Changing our behavior, switching to clean, alternative forms of energy, such as solar and wind, and maintaining a simpler way of life, can halt the rise in carbon dioxide and the prospect of even more serious changes in our communities.

We are, therefore, asking for your help. Science may document the seriousness of climate change, but it cannot answer the questions about how to respond. This is because the questions of a right response are moral and ethical. As Christian leaders, you represent the voice of the Church and the moral conscience of society. We know that humans are responsible for these climate changes because of our misuse and overuse of fossil fuels.

Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. This love requires sacrifice and service.... We must change the ways that we have participated in an energy system that cannot continue without causing further harm to our neighbors and to the entire world. The responsible conclusion is that all of us must now change how we live – and we must teach this change as a matter of Christian integrity.

In the words of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Climate change affects everyone. Unless we take radical and immediate measures to reduce emissions stemming from unsustainable... excesses in the demands of our lifestyle, the impact will be both alarming and imminent.”

For the benefit of all people, especially those not yet born, it is necessary to take action now on climate change. Priests and parishes must be informed that climate change is an urgent moral issue. Our brothers and sisters in Africa are already dying from excessive heat, food shortages, and extreme storm intensities, and the natural world on which we depend is being irreparably changed....

It is through our personal commitments to obey God, to love our neighbors, and to steward the Earth that we may transform and renew our daily life so that the wonder and majesty of God's creation continues for generations to come.

On December 8, 2015, HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew delivered the following message to the delegates assembling for COP-21 in Paris.

In recent decades, the world has witnessed alarming ecological degradation, increasing failure to implement environmental policies, as well as an ever widening and scandalous gap between the rich (predominantly of the north and west) and the poor (predominantly in the south and east). As we have repeatedly emphasized, these vital challenges are not primarily political or economic. They are profoundly spiritual and ethical.

Our deep-felt conviction is that all of us – as citizens of this delicate planet – are involved in this crisis. No single region or nation can be blamed for its cause, just as no single institution or discipline can resolve the crisis.... We are all obliged to respond.... We will surely be judged by the urgency with which we respond to the ecological crisis of our age. The earth still has the resilience to heal, but only if we allow it to survive.

Unlike former generations, today we have no excuse. We have all the data and resources at hand. Yet the crisis that we face has less to do with the environment and more to do with the way we perceive and treat the world. We are treating this earth in an inhumane and godless manner precisely because we see it in this way. Unless we radically change the way we perceive the world, unless we voluntarily transform our consumption, then we will simply be dealing with symptoms, rather than their causes.

The responsibility of political leaders in Paris ... is crucial and urgent.... Their responsibility is compelling and desperate, particularly... when we consider the rise in temperatures and sea levels, the extinction of forests and species, or the extreme changes in weather and excessive impact of mining.... The entire world is still watching. The entire world is still waiting. The entire world is still wishing.

If political leaders have hitherto been cautious -- uncertain at best and unresponsive at worst -- then it is time to represent their people and nations. If political policy has hitherto been slow... then it is time to speak out and take measures.

Political leaders must choose and act with responsibility, clarity, and commitment.... And religious leaders must persist in recalling and revealing the mystery of creation... It is the moral obligation of us all to rediscover and reaffirm this compassionate vision of God's gift of creation.

Like the prophets of old, our patriarchs and hierarchs are telling that we must change the ways we use and abuse the earth. They bluntly tell us that global climate change is fostering a massive “crime against humanity,” to quote HAH Patriarch Bartholomew. We are being called to change how we live. This time, will we listen to the prophets of God?