

Remarks
of
His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
on receiving The Franklin D. Roosevelt
Freedom of Worship Medal
May 12, 2012
Middelburg, Netherlands

“To worship freely is to breathe.”

In the fourth century, our venerable predecessor on the Throne of Constantinople, St. Gregory the Theologian, identified the capacity to remember God in prayer with the ability to breathe.

Your Majesty,
Esteemed Mrs. Anna Eleanor Roosevelt,
Honorable board members of The Roosevelt Foundation,
Beloved fellow laureates,
Distinguished brothers and sisters,

It is a profound privilege and sincere delight to stand beside other esteemed recipients of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Freedom Awards in order to accept the Freedom of Worship Medal.

Three dimensions of our life and ministry have inspired us over the years to pursue with sacred passion the goal of religious freedom.

The first dimension is the experience and expression of the Orthodox Christian faith and spirituality under difficult conditions on our native island of Imvros, where so many of our properties were unfairly confiscated over the last century, and, later, in the historical Theological School of Halki in Turkey, which was forcibly closed forty years ago. Over the last two decades, we have consistently – albeit humbly and respectfully – defended the fundamental rights of our Church to train its leaders and educate its clergy in order to maintain the spiritual legacy of the Church of Constantinople for over seventeen centuries.

Our childhood reminiscences of discussions in our parents' village coffee shop and our memorable formation through worship and study in our alma mater on the mountaintop of the quaint island of Halki, instilled in us the desire and advocacy for religious tolerance and freedom. This is much more than simply a theory or ideology; it is a conviction and a way of life, learned through conversation and deliberation as a small minority in a predominantly Muslim nation. And we know that such an exchange can bear fruit precisely because we have lived the results of good will and moral integrity, which can sometimes silently accomplish far more than political pressure or legal coercion.

The second dimension that shaped our ministry with regard to freedom of worship is the mission of the Ecumenical Patriarchate through the centuries. Søren Kierkegaard once said: "The most tremendous thing granted to the human being is choice, freedom."

Indeed, authentic humanity is only realized through the free act of relationship with others. Freedom is a natural and inherent trait; however, it is also a divine gift and an ongoing task acquired through much effort and dialogue. Freedom is never solitary but always social. As we stated after the tragedy of September 11 on the site of "ground zero" in New York City: "On this planet created by God for us all, there is room for us all."

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has historically assumed a pioneering role in establishing and encouraging theological dialogues with other Christian confessions and religious deliberations with other faith communities. We consider it true to the Orthodox tradition – despite the fact that we often face severe criticism and slander – diligently and deliberately to avoid any form of propaganda or proselytism. What we seek at all times is honest encounter and humble engagement with every human being as our neighbor. After all, the identity of our Church as "ecumenical" implies an opening of windows to other churches and religions. Surely this is an essential feature of relating "free worship" to "breathing."

Finally, the third dimension that has guided our tenure is the appreciation of the beauty of God's creation. This is why we have perceived and proclaimed the intimate connection between the natural environment and the freedom of worship; for "the heavens declare the glory of God." (LXX Psalms 18.1) Our inter-relationship as human beings not only embraces all our fellow humans but also extends to the entire created order. Humankind and the natural world comprise a seamless garment, which we can perceive when we open the eyes of our heart to the beauty of the world as created by God, who "saw everything that He had made and, behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1.31), altogether beautiful. There is a cosmic aspect to freedom of worship; in the seventh century, St. Maximus the Confessor spoke of "cosmic liturgy."

We have persistently emphasized that the roots of the so-called "ecological crisis" are not primarily economic or technological, but spiritual and ethical. The crisis lies not so much in the environment itself, but in our awareness and treatment of our planet's resources. Therefore, there is a direct link between the way we relate to the creation and the way we worship God. The world is nothing less than a gift of God and a sacrament of divine presence.

Dear friends, none of us has the right to withhold the fundamental birthright and innate prerogative of every human being to worship freely. To stifle religious freedom is to deny human life. For, to worship freely is to breathe. May God bless you all.