

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

FAITH AND ENVIRONMENT: AN INSPIRATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

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Your Excellencies, Your Eminence Joris Vercammen, Most Reverend Hierarchs, Ladies and Gentlemen, Beloved in the Lord,

It is a joy to be in your presence today in order to offer our thoughts on Faith and Environment, which is a theme that is very close to our heart as well as to our ministry. We thank you for this gracious invitation and hope that this exchange will be mutually enriching for the benefit of God's creation.

Introduction: The Wonder of Creation

The Psalmist David tells us that “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the creation of His hands.” (Psalm 19.1) And one of the most ancient liturgical texts in the Orthodox Church, the Liturgy of St. James, which is celebrated only once a year in the Orthodox calendar, affirms the same conviction:

The heavens declare the glory of the heaven; the earth proclaims the sovereignty of God; the sea heralds the authority of the Lord; and every material and spiritual creature preaches the magnificence of God at all times.

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Nature is a book, opened wide for all to read and to learn. Each plant, each animal, and each micro-organism tells a unique story, unfolds a wonderful mystery, relates an extraordinary harmony and balance, which are interdependent and complementary. The same dialogue of communication and mystery of communion is detected in the galaxies, where the countless stars betray the same mystical beauty and mathematical inter-connectedness. We do not need this perspective in order to believe in God or to prove His existence. We need it simply to breathe; we need it for us simply to be. This is

why, in the seventh century, St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662) spoke of a “cosmic liturgy.”

How unfortunate it is that we lead our life without even noticing the environmental concert that is playing out before our very eyes and ears. In this orchestra, each minute detail plays a critical role, and every trivial aspect participates in an essential way. No single member – human or otherwise – can be removed without the entire symphony being deeply affected. No single tree or animal can be removed without the entire picture being profoundly distorted, if not destroyed. Is it any wonder that Orthodox theology underlines the sacredness of the natural environment and our responsibility for its preservation?

Religion and the Environment

In its foremost and traditional symbol and declaration of faith, the Orthodox Church confesses “one God, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” An Orthodox Christian perspective on the natural environment derives from the fundamental belief that the world was created by a loving God. The Judaeo-Christian Scriptures state, in the opening book of Genesis, that “God saw everything that was created and, indeed, it was very good.” (Gen. 1.31) Indeed, all of creation was granted by God to humanity as a gift, with the command to “serve and preserve the earth.” (Gen. 2.15)

If the earth is sacred, then our relationship with the natural environment is sacramental; that is to say, it contains the seed and trace of God. In many ways, the “sin of Adam” is precisely his refusal to receive the world as a gift of communion with God and with the rest of creation. St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans emphasizes the consequences of the Fall, observing that “from the beginning till now, the entire creation, which as we know has been groaning in pain” (Rom. 8.22), “awaits with eager longing this revelation by the children of God.” (Rom. 8.19)

It is from this fundamental belief in the sacredness and beauty of all creation that the Orthodox Church proceeds to articulate the concept of transfiguration. This emphasis of Orthodox theology on personal and cosmic metamorphosis is especially apparent in its liturgical feasts. The Feast of Christ’s Transfiguration, celebrated on August 6th, highlights the sacredness of all creation, which offers a foretaste of the final resurrection and restoration of all things in the age to come. The Homilies of St. Macarius underline this connection between the Transfiguration of Christ and the sanctification of human nature:

Just as the Lord’s body was glorified, when he went up the (Tabor) mountain and was transfigured into glory and into infinite light ... so, too, our human nature is transformed into the power of God, being kindled into fire and light. (Homily XV, 38)

And the hymns of the day further extend this divine light and transformative power to the whole world:

Today, on Mt. Tabor, in the manifestation of your light, O Lord, You were unaltered from the light of the unbegotten Father. We have seen the Father as light, and the Spirit as light, guiding with light the entire creation.

They echo the hymns of the Feast of Epiphany, a feast of renewal and regeneration of all of creation, on January 6th:

The nature of waters is sanctified, the earth is blessed, and the heavens are enlightened ... so that by the elements of creation, and by the angels, and by human beings, by things both visible and invisible, God's most holy name may be glorified.

Orthodox Theology and Global Sustainability

Orthodox theology takes a further step and recognizes the natural creation as inseparable from the identity and destiny of humanity, because every human action leaves a lasting imprint on the body of the earth. Human attitudes and behavior toward creation directly impact on and reflect human attitudes and behavior toward other people. Ecology is inevitably related in both its etymology and meaning to economy; our global economy is simply outgrowing the capacity of our planet to support it. At stake is not just our ability to live in a sustainable way, but our very survival. Scientists estimate that those most hurt by global warming in years to come will be those who can least afford it. Therefore, the ecological problem of pollution is invariably connected to the social problem of poverty; and so all ecological activity is ultimately measured and properly judged by its impact and effect upon the poor, as the Lord Himself warns us in Matthew, chapter 25.

It is clear that only a cooperative and collective response – by religious leaders, scientists, political authorities and financial corporations – will appropriately and effectively address these critical issues of our time. For this reason, on September 1st, 1989, our predecessor, the late Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios (1972-1991) issued an encyclical letter to all Orthodox Churches throughout the world, establishing September 1st, the first day of the ecclesiastical year, as a day of prayer for the protection and preservation of the natural environment. This dedication was embraced by all Orthodox Churches, the European Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches. We have continued to demonstrate the same sense of urgent concern for the environment by raising popular awareness and rendering international consciousness more sensitive to the irreversible destruction that threatens the planet today.

The diverse initiatives of our Ecumenical Patriarchate over the last twenty-five years include the creation of the Religious and Scientific Committee in 1995, the organization

of eight inter-disciplinary and inter-religious symposia to this day and, more recently, inaugurating a series of Summits on the island of Halki to bring global environmental discussion to a higher level. In June 2012, the Halki Summit on Global Responsibility and Environmental Sustainability engaged leading scientist, ethicists, activists, as well as prominent business leaders in an international conversation focused on changing values and practices. At the heart of this discussion was the conviction that no effort can be successful without a fundamental and radical change in ethical values and spiritual ethos. In this way, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is able to contribute to the reservation of the world around us.

Orthodox Spirituality: A Eucharistic and Ascetic Ethos

Ecological problems are worldwide. Pollution of the environment is not limited by national boundaries, since its consequences effect on all living beings. It does not only concern this generation, but also those to come. Our planet is one in common and the violation of nature in a certain part of the world has unpreventable effects on the rest of the planet.

Our Church monitors the initiatives and acknowledges the contribution of contemporary ecological movements for the protection of creation. Certainly, our ecclesial interest for the environment springs from different roots and has a much broader perspective.

Orthodoxy's interest and theology concerning the protection of the environment and its spirituality really differ from contemporary deep ecology. The difference lies not so much in the level of desire to preserve and to protect the natural resources of the world, which should be the priority of all human beings – from political leaders to individual citizens. It lies primarily in the worldview that is espoused. The difference may be detected less in the way we perceive the end result, which must certainly be sought and achieved by everyone and for the sake of everyone. Rather, it is discerned as the starting-point of our attitudes and actions.

Orthodox theology believes stewardship of creation is marked by a profound sense of justice and moderation. It underlines the priority of human beings as thankful to God for the gift of creation and as frugal in life with the resources of creation. In brief, it describes human beings as “Eucharistic” and “ascetic.” This means that the whole of material creation is properly perceived and preserved through the eyes of the liturgy. Each believer is called to celebrate life in a way that reflects the words of the Divine Liturgy: “Thine own from Thine own we offer to Thee, in all and for all.”

Let us reflect briefly on these two critical words: “eucharistic” and “ascetic.” The implications of the first word are quite easily appreciated. The term derives from the Greek word eucharistia, meaning “thanks” and is understood also as the deeper

significance of liturgy. In calling for a “eucharistic spirit,” the Orthodox Church reminds us that the created world is not simply our possession, but rather a gift of wonder and beauty. Therefore, the proper response, upon receiving such a gift, is to accept and embrace it with gratitude and thanksgiving. The abuse of this gift is identified with Adam’s “original sin,” which is the result of selfishness and greed.

The Eucharistic use of the world is exactly opposite from consumerism’s utilization of the world. To consume literally means to spend, to exhaust. In the mindset of consumerism the “goods” are just mere objects. They do not bear a particular sacredness, neither do they relate to the Creator and sustainer of all. With the cutting of and independence of things from God, we lose also the meaning of the ‘other’ as our neighbor, who is now experienced as a competitor, since he or she claims the same things. That is how the meaning of community (*koinonia*), as well as the idea that man is a communicant (*koinonos*) is lost, and therefore we return to the war of all against all (*bellum omnium contra omnes*).

In our tradition, in opposition to the consumer is the ‘communicant’ against consumerism, is the Eucharistic ethos. A eucharistically minded person understands that God created the world, not for it to disappear, but rather for it to be transformed. He did not create humans to be the owners or exploiters of creation, but rather priests of Creation, who use all of its ‘goods’ eucharistically, not by destroying creation, but by beautifying it. He or she does not own things, but participates in them, while being in communion with the others, as sharers of common life.

Thanksgiving, then, is a distinctive and definitive characteristic of human beings. A human is not merely a logical or political being. Above all, human beings are eucharistic creatures, capable of gratitude and endowed with the power to bless God for the gift of creation. Without such thanksgiving, we are not truly human.

The second term, “ascetic,” derives from the Greek verb *askeo*, which implies the discipline of living simply. Thus, the ascetic ethos of the Orthodox Church is required of all believers and not only of monastics, and enables us to recognize that God’s gifts are provided in order to satisfy our needs when they are shared fairly among all people. However, they are not ours to abuse and waste simply because we have the desire to consume them or the ability to pay for them. The ascetic ethos is the struggle for self-restraint and self-control, whereby we no longer willfully consume everything, but instead manifest a sense of frugality and abstinence from certain things. This protection and the self-restraint as well as sharing are expressions of love for all of humanity and for the entire creation. The ascetic way “is the moving away from what we want as individuals to what the world needs as a whole. It is valuing everything for itself, and not simply for ourselves. It is regaining a sense of wonder and being filled with a sense of goodness” (Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer, 360).

Then we are able to embrace all people and all things – not with fear or necessity, but with love and joy. Then, we learn to care for the plants and for the animals, for the trees and for the rivers, for the mountains and for the seas, for all human beings and for the whole natural environment. Then we discover joy – rather than inflicting sorrow – in our life and in our world. As a result, we become instruments of peace and life, not means of violence and destruction. Then, creation and humanity are no longer in contradiction or conflict or competition. Then everything assumes its original vision and purpose, as God intended it from the moment of creation.

Ecology and Economy

Concern, then, for ecological issues is directly related to concern for issues of social justice, and particularly of world hunger. A Church that neglects to pray for the natural environment is a Church that refuses to offer food and drink to a suffering humanity. At the same time, a society that ignores the mandate to care for all human beings is a society that mistreats the very creation of God, including the natural environment. It is tantamount to blasphemy.

The terms “ecology” and “economy” share the same etymological root. Their common prefix “eco” derives from the Greek word *oikos*, which signifies “home” or “dwelling.” It is unfortunate and selfish, however, that we have restricted the application of this word to ourselves, as if we are the only inhabitants of this world. The fact is that no economic system – no matter how technologically or socially advanced – can survive the collapse of the environmental systems that support it. This planet is indeed our home; yet it is also the home of everyone, as it is the home of every animal creature, as well as of every form of life created by God. It is a sign of arrogance to presume that we human beings alone inhabit this world. Indeed, by the same token, it is also a sign of arrogance to imagine that only the present generation inhabits this earth.

In our efforts, then, for the preservation of the natural environment, how prepared are we to sacrifice some of our greedy lifestyles? When will we learn to say: “Enough!”? When will we learn that treating all people, including the poor, in a just manner is more beneficial than charitable acts of good will? Will we direct our focus away from what we want to what the world needs? We may offer bread to the hungry – indeed, we may feel a sense of self-gratification in so doing – but when will we work toward a world that has no hunger? Moreover, do we endeavor to leave as light a footprint as possible on this planet for the sake of future generations? There are no excuses today for our lack of involvement. We have the information in abundant details; the statistics are readily available and alarming. We must choose to care. Otherwise, we do not really care. Otherwise, we become aggressors, betraying our inherent prerogatives as human beings and violate the rights of others.

Conclusion

The 20th century was the most violent century in the history of humankind. So as much in reference to the brutality of people toward other people, but also regarding violence against the natural environment. Some have said that after two extremely bloody world wars, the third world war is currently waging against the natural environment.

The paradox is, that although we understand very well the consequences provoked by the continued destruction of the environment which threatens the survival of the human race and life on our planet, we continue to act as if we do not realize this threat. Indeed, many times aside from the indifference, knowledge coexists with the illusion of a utopia, that nature can endure even more exploitation since it has the strength to limitlessly reproduce.

How is it possible for us to believe that there can be real economical progress and the elevation of the living standard at the cost of the natural environment and human life and dignity? Unfortunately, even science as the greatest power of our era, which offered and offers so much in terms of advancement and which continuously assists in the surpassing of many formerly believed to be “fatal” situations, acts as a servant of economy.

We deem that the failures of contemporary humans are consequences of sin and the self-deification of the human-being, which has anthropological, social, and cosmical dimensions and consequences.

It is self-evident that, the surpassing of the crisis and the journey toward a society centered on oiko (oikokentrikos) and not on ego. is very complex and demanding. Multi-level mobilization, cooperation, solidarity, and the participation of all persons, of all humanity is needed to overcome the obstacles. A radical change of the mentality, a spiritual transformation, a transition from the irresponsible possessive attitude to an ethic of sharing and responsibility, demonstrating an authentic metanoia (repentance) is needed. The destruction of the environment and social injustice begin inside of the human mind. This is where healing is needed first. This is where change needs to take place. Man’s conversion from having to being. To this conversion can surely contribute religious faith which bears crucial values and truths for the human being and his precious gift of freedom.

This is where the importance of Orthodox Tradition, theology, the experience of its Eucharistic and ascetic ethos, which expresses man’s relationship with God, himself, with his fellow man and the world, is hidden but also demonstrated. Orthodox ethos is person-centered and oiko-centered. The Church’s entire life is a witness of how we can live without exploiting and without destroying it. Ecclesial being is the response of man to God’s calling (klesis) to live eucharistically and ascetically to be true in love, to protect and preserve creation, which we will offer back with humility to the Creator.

The ecological involvement of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is a matter of faithfulness to this richness and deepness of Orthodox Tradition.

The natural environment – the forest, the water, the land – belongs not only to the present generation but also to future generations. We must frankly admit that humankind is entitled to something better than what we see around us. We and, much more, our children and future generations are entitled to a better and brighter world, a world free from degradation, violence and bloodshed, a world of generosity and love. It is selfless and sacrificial love for our children that will show us the path that we must follow into the future.

May we all learn from our past errors and ways; may we all change our indulgent and wasteful lifestyles; and may we all strive for the transformation of the divine gift of creation in order to offer it back to God in thanksgiving and bequeath it to our children in love.

Thank you.