

2015 Steward of God's Creation Award

Presentation to His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

On August 6th, the Eastern Orthodox Feast of the Transfiguration, members of the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care (NRCCC) gathered in Istanbul, Turkey, to extend to His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew the 2015 Steward of God's Creation award.



For this award we traveled some twenty miles south of Istanbul by ferry boat to the Princess Islands in the Sea of Marmara. There we attended a special liturgical service at the Prinkipos Monastery where His All-Holiness was presiding before a crowded church. After the liturgy our first meeting with Patriarch Bartholomew took place. We were ushered into a special room where His All-Holiness was seated before a low table festooned with Turkish and Greek h'ors dourves and cookies.

With dignitaries from the monastery and the local Church on the Island of Buyukada present plus members of the patriarch's inner circle of advisors present, Fred Krueger, NRCCC executive coordinator, introduced members of the award delegation to HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and thanked him for his ecumenical vision and inspiration for people of all faith backgrounds.

After perhaps fifteen minutes of introductory conversation, the group moved to the formal reception room of the Prinkipos monastery.



The Reverend Tom Carr, an American Baptist minister from Suffield, Connecticut and the director and co-founder of the Interreligious Eco-Justice Network in Connecticut, was the first speaker. In his presentation before Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew he describes why this award is being extended to His All-Holiness and how he understands his message, which he says, “Applies to all people of good will.”

“For almost three decades, yours has been an unwavering voice to people of faith everywhere calling us to open our eyes, particularly the eyes of our hearts, to the fate of Earth and all her creatures....

“Your words and actions have been a message of Love, which is the very ground and heart of existence. Yours has been a call to action to Christians and people of all religious traditions to recognize what scientists have been saying for decades that humans and the environment ‘form a seamless garment of existence, a complex fabric’ that our faith tells us was and continues to be fashioned by God....

“You have repeatedly reminded us of “the Christocentric reality of the cosmos and nature.” As a Christian, I have to tell you those words make my heart sing for many reasons for they mean that because of the sacred nature of all life, all existence, to care for people and all life is primarily a spiritual and moral task.

Dr. Lise Van Susteren MD, from Bethesda, Maryland, spoke next. She is a forensic psychiatrist and medical doctor and represents the new Interfaith Moral Action on Climate (IMAC) organization in Washington DC. She is one of its founders and now serves as its national president.



Dr. Van Susteren established the IMAC organization several years ago when it became apparent that climate change down at its core is primarily a moral and ethical problem, yet many people were having a hard time recognizing this. The IMAC organization promotes the urgent need for all people to address climate change and it brings together many organizations to step up into a more vigorous engagement with the climate issue. Dr. Van Susteren opened her remarks with a poem:

TO HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

Out of the sparkling blue Aegean from the island of *Imbros*
Emerged a mighty and humble man
- The whole world to *engross*.
They called him: *Demetrios*.

He became a prescient and galvanizing force for the
stewardship of the Planet,
a man of conviction
and... *healing*

Dedicated to protecting Mother Earth,
and all her creatures,
from more of the storms and fires, and floods,
from which we are *now reeling*.

In truth, YOU were the first climate activist - with an encyclical
letter and messages and conferences urging leaders to take *action*
With so much to lose – you asserted
“How can there be justice with any *distraction*?”

For your leadership and inspiration
we are here with a profound sense of gratitude,
And on behalf of all climate activist kindred spirits, To convey

Our deepest sense of honor

As we bring our personal gift:a promise...
In your name "Green...Patriarch...*Bartholomew*"
That we shall not quit
Until the world has the wisdom to *follow you*.

What an honor it is for us to be here! We are deeply grateful for the vision which you have given us and the insights on how to address the problems of the natural world. Because of the power and force for goodness which you represent, we are kept working when we might otherwise become tired and despondent over so many challenges and assaults on our world.

Your efforts to uplift the natural world are an inspiration to all of us, and help us carry on our efforts for the protection of the environment.

Dr. Thomas English is the Creation Care Educator for the Presbyterian Church's Synod of Southern California and Hawaii. He is President of the TESSI Endangered Species Institute, and frequently lectures on climate and environmental issues before university, civic, industrial, and church groups. Tom serves on the Board of Directors for World Stewardship Institute and is a member of the Steering Committee of the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care. He is a member of the Citizens Climate Lobby and previously served as an advisor to President Carter's Office of Science and Technology Policy.



"I bring greetings to His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew from the Presbyterian Church.... Our present time marks the beginning of a new geologic age – The Anthropocene. We now have a planet that has been significantly transformed by humanity.

Unfortunately, we appear to lack the wisdom that will allow us to manage the transformation in beneficial ways.

“Fortunately, God has sent us messengers like Patriarch Bartholomew to help guide us through the transition. HAH has pointed out that: ‘How we treat the earth and all of creation defines the relationship that each of us has with God.’

“As you have stated ‘For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation... for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its forests, or destroying its wet lands... for humans to contaminate the Earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances... these are sins against God.’

“At stake is not just our respect for biodiversity, but our very survival....” Yes, the survival of humanity appears unlikely if we continue in our current ways. Many eminent scientists, such as Harvard’s E. O. Wilson, believe that we are in the beginning of the Earth’s sixth mass extinction, in which over half of the plant and animal species that God has put on this earth will be driven to extinction during this century. The Presbyterian Church has a policy entitled “Call to Halt the Mass Extinction” which describes actions to stop the destruction of the Earth’s enormous number of food webs.

“At a recent summit organized by the Orthodox Church, former NASA climate scientist Professor James Hansen observed, ‘Our parents honestly did not know that their actions could harm future generations. But we, our current generation, can only pretend that we did not know.’

“In the midst of these dire threats, we are indeed fortunate to have a prophet like Bartholomew guiding our way. As a gesture of our appreciation for your many decades of guidance through these difficult times, the National Religious Coalition for Creation Care is privileged to present you with the 2015 ‘Steward of God’s Creation Award.’”



Carlos Agnesi is from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, where he is the former president of Mexico's Interreligious Council (*Consejo Interreligioso de Mexico*). He has provided an important service to his country by coordinating the ecological education of Mexico's Catholic bishops. Carlos has also worked with NRCCC members and raised over \$92 million in grants from the World Bank for the restoration of his country's once great tropical forests. This has catapulted Mexico into a position of world leadership in forest planting. His message was delivered by email.

“It is with great privilege and joy that we come today on the celebration of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ to present you with this 2015 Steward of God's Creation award....

“Today, I remember the beautiful Symposium on the Adriatic Sea where the Common Declaration on the Environment was signed by Pope John Paul II and Your All-Holiness at the Palazzo Ducale in Venice. That document explained how Almighty God envisioned a world of beauty and harmony, and he made every part of our world an expression of His wisdom and love.

“Now, thirteen years later, we find ourselves in the midst of an ecological emergency. Climate change is already responsible for 60 million refugees; a record-breaking heat index of 154 degrees F has just been reached in the Middle East; and hundreds of fires from Alaska down to California are due to record-breaking drought.

“The Venice document said that ‘God has not abandoned the world.’ What is required is an act of repentance and an attempt to view ourselves, one another and the world around us from the perspective of the divine design for creation.

“A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo a radical inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and repentance from unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. Only a genuine conversion to Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act.”

“Thank you very much, Your All-Holiness, for the wonderful work you have done on behalf of all humanity and for your vision of divine order within our world, to redirect our awareness toward an ascetic way of life and an inner transformation towards God, following the example of Christ’s transfiguration for humanity.”

Following these comments, the 2015 Steward of God’s Creation award was presented to His All-Holiness by all of the presenters together with their spouses. See the image below.



Photos by Alicia Krueger

After the award presentation, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew delivered a most gracious and encouraging response.

Dear and distinguished friends,

Welcome to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and to the Holy Metropolis of the Princess Islands. We have just observed the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ, which took place some 2,000 years ago on Mount Tabor in Palestine.... Today, we celebrate the

beautiful and bountiful presence of God's energies that radiate in all of creation. This is why this morning you witnessed a beautiful tradition in our Church: Each year, on August 6th, we bless the first-fruits of the vineyard as a sign of thanksgiving to God for the gift of grapes and wine, of food and drink.

The Christian Gospel underlies this same joy and splendor that permeates all creation.



And today's hymns and icons reveal the effect of God's transfiguration and illumination upon the whole creation. Because salvation and healing are not just spiritual enterprises; they are also material events. Every part and every particle of this world is elevated and embraced, lifted up and enlightened by God's power and presence. This means, as St. Ephraim the Syrian writes: "Wherever you turn, you will see a symbol of God; wherever you look, you can read the handwriting of God."

How fitting, then, that you should travel from such a great distance – as members of the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care in the United States of America – in order to pray with us on this special occasion, which reflects so profoundly the Orthodox spiritual teaching about the sacredness and beauty of all creation. You represent a broad range of faith communities and church confessions; you embrace the religious and scientific worlds; and you respect both the biblical heritage and ethical principles behind the protection of God's creation. We are deeply grateful for your presence.

As you know, our personal interest and patriarchal involvement in promoting awareness on creation care began many years ago and continues to this day with the organization of regular ecological summits on an international level and the establishment of critical alliances with important institutions (such as the United

Nations) and individuals (including Pope Francis). In all that we do and say, we strive for an inter-religious and inter-disciplinary approach. Precisely because we are convinced that we can only achieve change when we work together, moved by the inspiration of God that created this universe and our planet out of love, and motivated by the preservation and protection of our world for the sake of future generations.

Of course, this world is not just a gift from God; it is a challenge for humanity. We have at last come to learn the truth that we have mistreated the natural environment and its resources. The consequences are plain and painful. They are evident in the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, the food that we consume, the emotional and physical problems that we face in our health, but also in our relationships with each other on the local, regional, national and global levels. This is precisely why we have decided to attend in person the COP 21 conference in Paris later this year and why we have accepted President François Hollande's invitation to participate actively in the various preparatory meetings. In this regard, we are also pleased to learn of the very recent Clean Power Plan of President Obama, which is a significant step in the right direction for the United States of America and which is already approved by the U. N.

However, this is a day and moment of celebration. We are extremely grateful for your presence, sincerely humbled by your gracious remarks, and greatly honored by your award, the 2015 Steward of Creation Award. May God continue to strengthen the efforts of the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care; may God always strengthen you in your invaluable ministries in the religious as well as in the secular worlds; and may you and your loved ones enjoy the gifts that God has showered on and entrusted to His creation. God bless you all.

After this inspired presentation, His All-Holiness surprised the NRCCC delegation as he presented each with a replica copy of the Congressional Medal of Honor medallion which he received from U.S. President Bill Clinton when he was extended this award in 1997.

Afterwards we retired to the dining room where we enjoyed a magnificent luncheon served by the members of the local parish.

For all of us it was a most memorable and inspiring occasion. Even though our purpose was to honor the work and achievements of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, in fact we all received more than we expected.

A collection of photos follows below and on successive pages that depict various events and aspects of our time with HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.



HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew presents blessed grapes to Jonathan Kempner at the end of the Liturgy on the Feast of the Transfiguration, Prinkipos Monastery, Island of Buyukada, Turkey.

The Greek Island of Buyukada is off the west coast of Turkey in the Sea of Marmara. The monastery of Prinkipos sits at the top of the hill overlooking the harbor and in the distance the Turkish mainland. To preserve peace and quiet, almost all travel on the island is done with horse-drawn carriages.



Members of the NRCCC interfaith delegation have their initial meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew before a table covered with Greek and Turkish desserts and confections. Members of the local parish joined our group and are seated at the left side of this photo. This was a relaxed and most enjoyable introduction.

The award ceremony begins with NRCCC Executive Coordinator Fred Krueger explaining the history of the Steward of God's creation award and the process involved in determining awardees. Religious leaders from across America vote to determine who will receive this annual award. The Steward of God's Creation award is based on the U.S. Congressional Medal of Honor.





Reverend Tom Carr provides a formal statement of how the words and actions of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew have informed his own ministry and helped provide a sense of direction and encouragement as he addresses the problem of climate change. Reverend Carr is a past recipient of the Steward of God's Creation award.

Dr. Lise Van Susteren MD is one of America's top psychiatrists and has developed her own analysis of how global climate change will impact American attitudes. In her presentation she thanks Patriarch Bartholomew for the inspiration and strength that she has gained from his message of our human responsibility to take good care of the earth.



Dr. Tom English has led the Presbyterian Church USA to develop a policy of protection for endangered species. His research shows that climate change will accelerate the loss of species which in turn will diminish the food chain's ability to provide sufficient food for the world. In his presentation he thanks Patriarch Bartholomew for his prophetic witness to the seriousness of global climate change.



In response to his award of the Steward of God's Creation, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew delivered an elegant statement to the crowd which gathered for this special program. He told the individuals present, "In all that we do and say, we strive for an inter-religious and inter-disciplinary approach. Precisely because we are convinced that we can only achieve change when we work together, moved by the inspiration of God that created this universe and our planet out of love, and motivated by the preservation and protection of our world for the sake of future generations."

He then added, "This world is not just a gift from God; it is a challenge for humanity. We have at last come to learn the truth that we have mistreated the natural environment and its resources. The consequences are plain and painful. They are evident in the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, the food that we consume, the emotional and physical problems that we face in our health, but also in our relationships with each other on the local, regional, national and global levels."

He then concluded, saying "This is a day... of celebration. We are extremely grateful for your presence, sincerely humbled by your gracious remarks, and greatly honored by your award.... May God continue to strengthen the efforts of the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care; may God always strengthen you in your invaluable ministries in the religious as well as in the secular worlds; and may you... enjoy the gifts that God has showered on and entrusted to His creation. God bless you all."

We presumed the award program was now over. Patriarch Bartholomew had a surprise for us. In 1997 he was the recipient of a special Congressional Medal of Honor. He now handed duplicate copies of this unique medal to each of us as a memento of this unique day.



Here is a photo of the award plaque which the NRCCC gave to Patriarch Bartholomew.



Special Thanks

The NRCCC extends special thanks to Fr. Nephon on Patriarch Bartholomew's staff; to Fr. John Chrysavgis for his advice and guidance and all that he did to make our visit a most memorable and enjoyable time; and to Alicia Krueger who served as NRCCC's event photographer.



The NRCCC delegation relaxes during dinner in Istanbul (below)

