

Message of His All Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch
BARTHOLOMEW
on the day of Prayer for the Protection of the Natural Environment
September 1, 1994

[Translation from the Greek original]

Brothers and children in the Lord,

On a number of occasions in the ecclesiastical year the Church prays that God will protect humanity from natural catastrophes: earthquakes, storms, famine and floods. But today we see the reverse. On September 1st, the day devoted to God's handiwork, the Church implores the Creator to protect nature from calamities of human origin, calamities such as pollution, war, exploitation, waste and secularism. It may seem strangely paradoxical that the body of believers, acting vicariously for nature, beseeches God for protection against itself, its own actions. But from this perspective the Church, in its wisdom, brings before our eyes a message of deep significance, one which touches upon the central problems of fallen humanity and its restoration. This is the problem of the polarization of individual sin against collective responsibility.

Scripture tells us that if one member of the body is infirm, the entire body is also affected (1 Cor. 12:26). There is, after all, solidarity in the human race because, being made in the image of the Trinitarian God, human beings are interdependent and co-inherent. No man is an island. We are 'members of each other' (Eph. 4:25) and so any action, performed by any member of the human race, inevitably affects all other members. Consequently, no one falls alone and no one is saved alone. According to Dostoevsky's Staretz Zosima in "The Brothers Karamazov", we are each of us responsible for everyone and everything.

How does this central problem relate to the matter of protecting the environment against mankind's actions? It has become painfully apparent that humanity, both individually and collectively, no longer perceives the natural order as a sign and a sacrament of God but rather as an object of exploitation. There is no one that is not guilty of disrespecting nature, for to respect nature is to recognize that all creatures and objects have a unique place in God's creation. When we become sensitive to God's world around us, we grow more conscious also of God's world within us. Beginning to see nature as a work of God, we begin to see our own place as human

beings within nature. The true appreciation of any object is to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Sin alone is mean and trivial, as are most of the products of a fallen and sinful technology. But it is sin that is at the root of the prevailing destruction of the environment. Humanity has failed in what was its noble vocation: to participate in God's creative action in the world. It has succumbed to a theory of development that values production over human dignity and wealth over human integrity. We see for example delicate ecological balances being upset by the uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant life or by a reckless exploitation of natural resources. It cannot be over-emphasized that all of this, even if carried out in the name of progress and well-being, is ultimately to mankind's disadvantage.

It is not without good cause, therefore, that nature 'groans and travails in all its parts' (Rom 8:22). For was it not originally seen by God to be good? Created by God, the world reflects divine Wisdom, divine beauty, divine truth. Everything is from God, everything is permeated with divine energy; in this is both the joy and tragedy of the world and of life within it. The hymns and prayers in the Office of September 1st composed by the gifted hymnographer of the Great Church, the late monk Gerasimos of the Holy Mountain, extol the beauty of creation but also remind us of our tragic abuse of it. They call us to repent for our actions against God's gift to us. We have made this world ever more opaque, ever more tortured. The consequences of nature's confrontation with humanity has indeed been an unnatural disaster of enormous proportions. Is it not, therefore, only right that we Christians act today as nature's voice in bringing its plea for salvation before the throne of God?

The Church teaches it is the destiny of mankind to restore the proper relationship between God and the world as it was in Eden. Through repentance, two landscapes, the one human, the other natural, can become the objects of a caring and creative effort. But repentance must be accompanied by soundly focused initiatives which manifest the ethos of the Orthodox Church.

There is the eucharistic ethos, which, above all else, means using natural resources with thankfulness, offering them back to God; not only them, but also ourselves. In the Eucharist, we return to God what is His: the bread and the wine. Representing the fruits of creation, they are no longer prisoners of a fallen world, but are returned liberated, purified from their fallen state, and capable of receiving Divine Presence within themselves. At the same time, we pray for ourselves to be sanctified, because through sin we have fallen away and have betrayed our baptismal promise.

Secondly, we have the ascetic ethos of Orthodoxy which involves fasting and other spiritual works. These make us recognize that everything we take for granted are in

fact God's gifts provided to satisfy our needs. They are not ours to abuse and waste simply because we have the ability to pay for them.

Thirdly, the liturgical ethos emphasizes community concern and sharing. We stand before God together and we hold in common the earthly blessings that He has given to all creatures. Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs, as a holy Father of the Church reminds us. We stand before the Creator as the Church of God which, according to Orthodox theology, is the continued incarnate presence of the Lord Jesus Christ on earth; His presence unto the salvation of the world, not just humanity but the entire creation.

The ethos of the Church in all its expressions denotes a reverence for matter; the world around us, other creatures, our own bodies. Hence, our Patriarchal message for this Day of Protection for the Environment is simply that we maintain a consistent attitude of respect in all our dealings with the world. We cannot expect to leave no trace on the environment. However, we must choose either to make it reflect greed and ugliness or to use it in such a way that its beauty shows God's handiwork through ours.

The grace and infinite mercy of the Creator of all things and Provident God be with all of you, beloved brothers and children of the Church.

September 1, 1994

Your beloved brother in Christ