

His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

## **"Caretakers of the Environment"**

International Conference

30 June 2004

To the Esteemed Participants of the Caretakers of the Environment International (CEI) Conference, our Modesty's beloved in the Lord: Grace and peace from God.

It is with great pleasure that we convey this message to the secondary school teachers and students at the international conference entitled: "School and Agenda 21: Educating young people for their sustainable future." Unfortunately, owing to prearranged commitments, we are unable to be in attendance in order to deliver this message to you personally. Nevertheless, our paternal prayers and blessings are with you throughout your discussions and deliberations.

Caretaking of the earth is a central aspect of the global network CEI that has organized this assembly. Indeed, caretaking is a fundamental principle of all religions of the world. For the Christian Church in particular, caretaking comprises the essential characteristic of God Himself in His relationship toward the world (we call it "providence") as well as the glue that binds together all of God's creatures (we call it "love").

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Therefore, it is a source of sincere joy to us that this conference relates to the way in which young people are able to raise awareness about the environmental concerns of our time and to promote the caretaking of the earth. So often in recent academic and ecological gatherings, it has become evident that the consequences of our environmental crisis will directly affect and impact upon the generations to come.

It has taken the adult generation a very long time to realize just how destructive our selfish lifestyle has been for the earth and just how depleting our arrogant ways have proved for its resources. We are the generation that had to learn the hard way. In the word-play of Aristotle, we understood our errors by undergoing the pain of watching the ecological damage we have brought upon the world around us and witnessing the irrevocable extinction of many of its species.

The younger generation, however, has grown up during these years of turmoil. You have learned by osmosis, appreciating much more readily the importance of a simple life for the very survival of the planet. You recognize much more humbly how the world is indeed an interdependent

environment. This is precisely why, although we know that we have to change for the earth to be saved, this knowledge is part and parcel of your philosophy and behavior.

In past centuries, people might perhaps have taken for granted many of the issues that you will explore during your conference in an effort to discover solutions to critical environmental problems. Yet today, we cannot take for granted the significance of our caretaking of the environment. Jesus Christ spoke of birds in the sky; today oil slicks wash them ashore. He referred to the beauty of the flowers in the fields; today chemicals and wars leave entire lands barren. Christ mentioned fruit in the parables that He used; today the lifestyles of the rich are supported by the crops of the poor. He could assume that foxes had homes; today so many of our fauna do not survive. Christ multiplied loaves of bread and fishes to feed the hungry; today 800 million people worldwide, many of them young children, are clinically undernourished.

In your search then for common solutions to common problems, the Orthodox Church proposes two central concepts, namely compassion and community. An essential element of caretaking is compassion, which is the very experience and expression of caretaking. To be cared for by God and to care for God's creation entail showing compassion for every living being and for every living thing. A compassionate heart, writes a seventh-century mystic, St. Isaac the Syrian:

Burns with love for the whole of creation – for human beings, for birds and beasts, for all of God's creatures.

So we need to be compassionate, which is to say full of passion and full of concern for every detail of God's creation. If we remain indifferent to humanity's injustice against the earth and its resources, if we are not involved in the correction of the abuse we cause to our planet, then we do not properly reflect God's care and concern for us and the whole world.

There are, of course, no excuses for our lack of interest and involvement. In our age, the information is readily at hand. We know the facts; the statistics are alarming. We can no longer remain apathetic to the cry of the poor and "the groaning of creation" (Rom. 8.22). As we well know, we are – all of us – so profoundly and intimately involved in and interconnected with each other's destiny. So we must choose to care. Otherwise, we are not being fair to the environment.

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Moreover, receiving care obliges us to provide care. Caretaking is a circle: of what we have received, we are called to give. We cannot hope to be nurtured for by the environment if we do not in turn nurture this environment in an intimate way. Therefore, in addition to the element of compassion, we must recognize the importance of community. Far too long have we limited our understanding of community, reducing it to include only human beings. It is time that we extend this notion also to include the living environment, to animals and to trees, to birds and to fishes. Embracing in compassion all people as well as all of animal and inanimate creation brings good news and fervent hope to the whole world.

This sense of community obliges us to stand for and support the most vulnerable aspects of creation, those parts of the world that have no human voice and whose rights can easily be trampled. Who will speak for the way we treat the resources of our planet? The earth is a part of our flesh, inseparable from our story and destiny. For “everything that breathes praises God” (Psalm 150.6).

If we are honestly concerned about future generations, then we must also be caring toward the earth. We must feel a sense of responsibility for our attitudes and practices in relation to the environment. For the first time, perhaps, in the history of the world, human beings are in a position to decide about our actions and to direct our influence in a way that shapes our environment. What will we choose?

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These are some of the issues that you are called to grasp as you seek to be educated for a sustainable future – our own future, ultimately your own future! The English word “education” derives from the Latin prefix *e* meaning “outside” and the verb *duco* meaning “lead out.” The Greek term for education is *paideia*, which contains the same root as the term for child (*paidion*).

This implies that you are to seek practical and tangible ways that lead us all out of the environmental impasse that we – especially we adults – have created. Clearly, the way out of the environmental crisis that we face lies to a great extent in your hands.

Our fervent prayer and at the same time our heartfelt conviction is that, guided by the enlightening and empowering grace of God, you will prove worthy of the legacy with which you have been entrusted. The very welfare of our planet depends on it!

At the Patriarchate, 30 June 2004

Your fervent supplicant before God,

+ BARTHOLOMEW  
Archbishop of Constantinople,  
New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch