

# Speech of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW on the Environment

Havana, Cuba  
January 22, 2004

Your Excellency Comandante Fidel Castro,

Your Eminences,  
Your Excellencies,  
Dear Friends,

It is for us a very gratifying fact that during our visit to this beloved and exceptionally beautiful country of Cuba we can observe the how highly developed is the ineter [note: a technical term for a device that increases the safety of a system] of the Government and its progress-loving people for the natural environment, to the extent that there is a special Ministry of Science and Environment which extended to us the invitation to address you on an environmental theme.

At this moment we express our satisfaction for the intense interest which you express by your invitation and we congratulate those in positions of responsibility and the people for the care and research done to deal with the contemporary acute ecological problem, the consequences which will befall all of humankind for not taking proper measures, not only those who are guilty of pollution and other deteriorating actions against the environment.

Firstly, we are obliged to discern that our personal interest and that of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the environment does not emanate from a position of idolizing it, as is often the case with ecologists, but rather by believing that, along with the entire physical world, it is a work of God which He deemed "very good." And mankind, who in the person of Adam the first person created by God, receives the command "to cultivate and protect" the earthly paradise in which he was first placed, is obliged, even today and into the future, to cultivate and to protect the natural world which surrounds him, making it suitable for his lifetime and the future generations, by keeping it healthy, productive, fruitful and beautiful.

We are not moved by false ideas that humankind, the animal and plant world, and the rest of physical creation or the elements that pertain to it are things of equal value, because this would denote the downgrading of humankind, which is created by God as king of creation, to a condition unacceptable to Christians. We believe that the human principle dominates in nature, as the scientists specialized in this field confirm. In other words, everything is regulated by God for the purpose of assisting the life of humankind. Therefore, we constantly campaign for every human being and Government to become sensitive to the fact that we must not rearrange this divine order of the natural environment, because the long-term result will be to our own detriment.

The natural environment in which we live has a balance and the ability to regenerate and preserve itself should its natural order be disturbed, within, however, certain parameters. Humankind, for example, burns wood for warmth, but in this process large quantities of carbon dioxide are produced, which is harmful to human existence. But plant life absorbs and breaks down the components, exuding oxygen necessary for human life and utilizing the carbon for constructing its wooden-like shaft. However, this recycling is disrupted when a fire destroys a forest or when an area becomes desolate. In such cases, the environment is unable to provide humankind with conditions for survival and, thus, the perpetrator of this catastrophe is responsible for the consequence, which befalls his fellow man. The same things happen when waters are polluted to the degree that they are not drinkable, nor are they fit for watering, for the fish life living in them, or for other aquatic life and plants. This situation is created also when the atmospheric air of a region is polluted to a degree beyond calibration, etc.

It is true that the perfect plan of God regarding the air and the waters has foreseen their constant chaotic movement, which can be seen in the gradual uniform discharging of pollutants thrown in them. On the earth, this happens through the air; in the flow of waters this is caused by the movement of air upon the waters. This, naturally, leads to the reduction of pollution in one particular area from where the pollution emanated, and in the spreading of it, which in a way reduces the consequences with regard to the place of emanation. At the same time, however, it also leads to the broadening of legal responsibility regarding harmful emissions all the way down to the local level where naturally dispersed concentrations of pollution are harmful. From other more general views, it leads to the universality (widespread) of ethical responsibility of every human being for every aimless defect of the environment, even the most insignificant, because the many miniscule harmful actions can collectively provoke undesirable harmful consequences. Certainly, the discharge of an empty shell upon an unpolluted shore is not noticeable as a

substantial polluting act, but the discharge of a single empty shell every time it is washed or carried upon the shore can alter it into a place of pollution. Consequently, the perpetrator of this apparently insignificant polluting is jointly responsible for the result of the debilitated situation which is a collection of many similar acts. For this reason we try to persuade every fellow human being not to contribute to the destruction or worsening of the natural environment through his or her own minor harmful actions. Certainly, with even greater intensity, we try to persuade those who cause extensive pollution to find ways to avoid doing so, but this does not mean that the responsibility of the major polluters minimizes the responsibility and excuses the lesser polluters from their responsibility to be conscientious.

Our efforts are not limited to those opportunities we are given to speak. For many years now we organize ecological and environmental summer seminars on the island of Halki in the Holy Monastery of the Holy Trinity which housed our Theological School. Furthermore, in cooperation with the European Union we organized the International Environmental Symposia aboard ship sailing to the Aegean, the Black Sea, the River Danube, and the Adriatic and the Baltic Seas. The ocean or river waters in these regions are to a large extent receptors of pollution and toxic waste. The result of this is that they are found at the threshold of being inadequate for the continuance of life and the inability to purify themselves. It was for these reasons that they were chosen for special international cooperative study with the participation of specialist from all the shores and banks bordering these countries. The discussions were fruitful and constitute a prototype of collective research on environmental themes concerning many countries which cannot be dealt with by means taken by only one of these countries singularly.

Cuba is particularly endowed by extremely beautiful natural environment. Abundant waters, natural lakes, developed flora, extraordinary biological formations make her a country of rare natural and environmental characteristics. Even though the great problems of the environment - such as the reduction of the ozone, global warming, the expected vast glacial meltings, and the rising of the ocean water levels here, their pollution and that of the atmosphere through toxic waste, the careless disposal and maintenance of radioactive substances and the like - are of concern to the planet earth, there is room for initiative for the environment in every small and large community. For, as it is known, in each region local eco-systems and local environmental agreements have been created, the balancing of which is the responsibility of every local community.

Neglecting this responsibility wounds firstly those who cause the environmental destruction. The deliberate abuse of the earthly and marine wealth impedes its regeneration and denies the perpetrators of economic gain in the years to follow. The destruction of a forest causes floods, erosion on the surface of the earth's fertile soil, the drying of water sources, the reduction of earthly waters, the reduction of oxygen in the atmosphere, the distancing of the bird life and the wild animals, and, generally, the tendency to the desolation of the affected region. For this reason their natural and scientific regeneration is necessary, as soon as possible, whenever they are destroyed. However, the education of the masses in the prevention of their destruction is preferable.

We refer by example to this singular environmental issue, so as to emphasize how useful the awakening of the interest of every citizen for the environment is. We express our joy in that the consciousness of the citizens of this Country have become sensitive to this issue, which is timely for our civilization. It is our wish that this sensitivity will be widespread so that as a whole all of humanity will maintain the correct stance and take the proper measures for the preservation of the environment wherever it is still preserved. On the other hand, humankind must act appropriately to restore the environment wherever it has already suffered destruction or harmful intrusions.

Humankind, to whom God has given the responsibility "to cultivate and protect" the earthly creation, as well as its dominion, must behave toward it as its wise steward and not as its foolish destroyer. And this point is one of the criteria of the level of civilization of every society. We express again our joy that we have found here in beloved Cuba the vigilant conscience of the people and its leaders concerning the environment. And we wish that this interest will continue and increase, so that the most beautiful natural environment of Cuba, known worldwide, will be preserved and the Country, through her achievements, will become an example for other peoples.

The grace of God, who created the world and said: "it is good", and who asked of us to respect His creation receiving from it whatever is required for our existence without destroying its innate ability to reproduce these things forever for the generations to come, as it has until now, be with you all, our beloved.

Amen.

(Translation from the Spanish original)