Saving the Soul of the Planet

Address of
His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW

The Brookings Institution
Direct Archdiocesan District
Washington, DC

November 4, 2009

Esteemed President Strobe Talbott,
Distinguished Guests,

It is a pleasure and a privilege to address members and guests of this renowned center of political study and thought. At first glance, it may appear strange for the leader of a religious institution concerned with spiritual values to speak about the environment at a secular institution that deals with public policy. What exactly does preserving the planet or promoting democracy have to do with saving the soul or helping the poor? It is commonly assumed that ecological issues – global climate change and the exploitation of nature's resources – are matters that concern politicians, scientists, technocrats, and interest groups.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate is certainly no worldly institution. It wields no political authority; it leads by example and by persuasion. And so the preoccupation of the Orthodox Christian Church and, in particular, her highest spiritual authority, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, with the environmental crisis will probably come to many people as a surprise. But it is neither surprising nor unnatural within the context of Orthodox Christian spirituality.

Indeed, it is now exactly twenty years since our revered predecessor, Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, sparked the ecological initiatives of our Church by issuing the first encyclical encouraging our faithful throughout the world to pray for and preserve the natural environment. His exhortation was subsequently heeded by the member churches of the World Council of Churches.

What, then, does preserving the planet have to do with saving the soul? Let us begin to sketch an answer by quoting an Orthodox Christian literary giant,

Fyodor Dostoevsky, echoing the profound mysticism of Isaac the Syrian in the seventh century through Staretz Zossima in The Brothers Karamazov:

> Love all God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light! If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Everything is like an ocean, I tell you, flowing and coming into contact with everything else: touch it in one place and it reverberates at the other end of the world. [1]

This passage illustrates why, with respect to the priority and urgency of environmental issues, we do not perceive any sharp line of distinction between the pulpit and this lectern. One of our greatest goals has always been to weave together the seemingly disparate threads of issues related to human life with those related to the natural environment and climate change. For as we read the mystical teachings of the Eastern Church, these form a single fabric, a seamless garment that connects every aspect and detail of this created world to the Creator God that we worship.

For how can we possibly separate the intellectual goals of this institution – namely, the advancement of democracy, the promotion of social welfare, and the security of international cooperation – from the inspirational purpose of the church to pray, as we do in every Orthodox service, "for the peace of the whole world," "for favorable weather, an abundance of the fruit of the earth," and "for the safety of all those who suffer"?

Over the past two decades of our ministry, we have come to appreciate that one of the most valuable lessons to be gained from the ecological crisis is neither the political implications nor the personal consequences. Rather, this crisis reminds us of the connections that we seem to have forgotten between previously unrelated areas of life.

It is a kind of miracle, really, and you don't have to be a believer to acknowledge that. For, the environment unites us in ways that transcend religious and philosophical differences as well as political and cultural differences. Paradoxically, the more we harm the environment, the more the environment proves that we are all connected.

The global connections that we must inevitably recognize between

previously unrelated areas of life include the need to discern connections between the faith communities. We must also perceive the connections between all diverse disciplines; climate change can only be overcome when scientists and activists cooperate for a common cause. And, finally, we can no longer ignore the connections in our hearts between the political and the personal; the survival of our planet depends largely on how we translate traditional faith into personal values and, by extension, into political action.

That is why the Orthodox Church has been a prime mover in a series of inter-disciplinary and interfaith ecological symposia held on the Adriatic, Aegean, Baltic, and Black Seas, along the Amazon and Danube Rivers, as well as on the Arctic Ocean. The last of these symposia concluded only a few days ago in New Orleans, seeking ways to restore the balance of the great Mississippi River.

The mention of New Orleans brings to mind another truth. Not only are we all connected in a seamless web of existence on this third planet from the Sun, but there are profound analogies between the way we treat the earth's natural resources and the attitude we have toward the disadvantaged. Sadly, our willingness to exploit the one reflects our willingness to exploit the other. There cannot be distinct ways of looking at the environment, the poor, and God.

This is one of the reasons why we selected New Orleans as the site of our latest symposium; and this is why our visit there was in fact the second since the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. There, images of poverty abound, too close for comfort. We witnessed them in August of 2005 on the Gulf of Mexico; they are still evident over four years later – not only sealed forever in our memory, but soiling the Ward 9 to this day! How could the most powerful nation on earth appear so powerless in the face of such catastrophe? Certainly not because of lack of resources. Perhaps because of what St. Seraphim of Sarov once called "lack of firm resolve."

The truth is that we tend – somewhat conveniently – to forget situations of poverty and suffering. And yet, we must learn to open up our worldview; we must no longer remain trapped within our limited, restricted point of view; we must be susceptible to a fuller, global vision. Tragically, we appear to be caught up in selfish lifestyles that repeatedly ignore the constraints of nature, which are neither deniable nor negotiable. We must relearn the sense of connectedness. For we will ultimately be judged by the tenderness with which we respond to human beings

and to nature.

Surely one area of common ground, where all people of good will – of all political persuasion and every social background – can agree is the need to respond to those who suffer. Even if we cannot – or refuse to – agree on the root causes and human impact on environmental degradation; even if we cannot – or refuse to – agree about what would define success in sustainable development, no one would doubt that the consequences of climate change on the poor and disadvantaged is unacceptable. Such denial would be inhumane at the very least and politically disadvantageous at worst.

Of course, poverty is not merely a local phenomenon; it is also a global reality. It applies to the situation that has existed for so long in such countries as China, India, and Brazil? To put it simply, someone in the "third-world," is the most impacted person on the planet; yet, that person's responsibility is incomparably minute: what that person does for mere survival neither parallels nor rivals our actions in the "first-world."

Many argue that the wealthy nations of the West became so by exploiting the environment – they polluted rivers and oceans, razed forests, destroyed habitats, and poisoned the atmosphere. But now that that the poorer nations are developing and improving the quality of life for their citizens – like the West did during the 19th and 20th centuries – all of a sudden the rules are being changed and developing nations are being asked to make sacrifices the nations of the West never made as they were developing. They are being asked to reduce their impact on the environment – in other words, to curb their development. They are being asked to drive fewer cars, consume less oil, build fewer factories, raze fewer forests, and harm fewer habitats – all in the name of protecting the environment.

Brothers and sisters – this simply cannot be. Not only is it unfair to ask the developing nations to sacrifice when the West does not – it is futile. They care not what we say – they watch what we do. And if we are unwilling to make sacrifices, we have no moral authority to ask others, who have not tasted the fruits of development and wealth, to make sacrifices.

Fortunately, the West, and in particular America, is now showing that it recognizes this "inconvenient truth" – that if we are to save our planet, sacrifices must be made by all. The Obama administration, as you know, has been very

active in this regard. The President has signed an Executive Order challenging government agencies to set 2020 greenhouse reduction goals, and using the government's $500 billion per year in purchasing power to encourage development of energy-efficient products and services.

There are also many promising developments at the global level. Representatives of the 16 countries that emit the highest levels of greenhouse gases met recently in London to discuss the amount of aid they will give less-developed nations to help them adopt cleaner energy technology. And there are growing expectations that meaningful progress can be made as a result of the United Nations Climate Change Conference scheduled to take place in Copenhagen next month.

Sacrifices will have to be made by all. Unfortunately, people normally perceive sacrifice as loss or surrender. Yet, the root meaning of the word has less to do with "going without" and more to do with "making sacred." Just as pollution has profound spiritual connotations, related to the destruction of creation when disconnected from its Creator, so too sacrifice is the necessary corrective for reducing the world to a commodity to be exploited by our selfish appetites. When we sacrifice, we render the world sacred, recognizing it as a gift from above to be shared with all humanity – if not equally, then at least justly. Sacrifice is ultimately an expression of gratitude (for what we enjoy) and humility (for what we must share).

For our part, in addition to our international ecological symposia, the Orthodox Church has decided to establish a center for environment and peace. Hitherto, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has endeavored to raise regional and global awareness on the urgency of preserving the natural environment and promoting inter-religious dialogue and understanding. Henceforth, the emphasis will be educational – on the regional and international levels.

The Center for Environment and Peace is planned to be housed in a historical orphanage, on Büyükada, one of the Princess Islands near Istanbul. The building was once the largest and most beautiful wooden edifice in Europe, and it will embody a new direction in the initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Whereas the orphanage was at one time forcibly closed by Turkish authorities in an act of religious intolerance, it is highly expected to be returned to the Ecumenical Patriarchate through a just process in the European Court of Human

Rights, which ruled in favor of returning this historic property of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The purpose of the Center will be to translate theory into practice, providing educational resources to advance ecological transformation and interfaith tolerance.

The Center will focus on climate change and the related changes needed in human behavior and ethics. It will serve as a source of inspiration and awareness for resolving religious issues related to the environment and peace, in cooperation with universities, and policy centers on both local and international levels.

Dear friends, as we humbly learned very early on, and as we have repeatedly stressed throughout our ministry over the last twenty years, the environment is not only a political issue; it is also – indeed, it is primarily – a spiritual issue. Moreover, it directly affects all of us in the most personal and the most tangible manner. We can no longer afford to be passive observers in this crucial debate.

In 2002, at the conclusion of the Adriatic Symposium, together with His Holiness, the late Pope John Paul II, we signed a declaration in Venice that proclaimed in optimism and prayer. Our conclusion was that:

It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now.

Because – "nen o kairos" -- now is the kairos – the decisive moment in human history, when we can truly make a difference.

Because now is the kairos – when the consciousness of the world is rising to the challenge.

Because now is the kairos – for us to save the soul of our planet.

Because now is the kairos – there is no other day than this day, this time, this moment.

Indeed, let it start now.

May God bless all of us to bring our labors to fruition.

Thank you.

Notes:

[1] The Brothers Karamozov (Harmondsworth UK: Penguin, 1982), vol. 1, 375-376 376.