

Message for the Day of the Protection of the Environment

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By the Mercy of God

Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarchate

To the Plenitude of the Church

Grace and Peace from the Creator, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

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Beloved children in the Lord,

God's grace renders us worthy today to commence yet another ecclesiastical year, one more festive cycle, within whose blessed opportunities we are called to struggle spiritually in order better to evaluate the potential that we have been granted for growing "in the likeness" of God so that we also might become His saints.

However, today, on September 1st, the first day of the church year, is also dedicated – at the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate – to prayer for the natural environment. This pioneering decision is by no means unrelated to the beginning of the new ecclesiastical year inasmuch as the spiritual struggle that brings about the good transformation of the human person contributes to the improvement of our relationship with the environment and the cultivation of our sensitivity for its protection and preservation.

Therefore, today, we praise the holy name of God for granting to humanity the gift of nature, which he preserves and sustains, as the most suitable environment for human beings to develop in body and spirit. At the same time, we cannot remain silent about the fact that humanity does not properly honor this divine gift and instead destroys the environment through greed and other selfish ambitions.

As we know well, our environment consists of land, water, sun, air, but also of fauna and flora. Humankind can take advantage of nature for its own benefit, but only up to a certain point, so that it may blossom and so that it may have the opportunity to propagate the consumed energy resources as well as the living, animal creatures. In any case, the proper exploitation of nature comprises a commandment of God both before and after the fall of Adam. Yet, the extreme exploitation – which is, unfortunately, a phenomenon of the last two centuries in human history – destroys the balanced harmony of nature and leads to the exhaustion and destruction of nature as well as of humanity itself, since we cannot survive in an ecosystem whose balance has been irreversibly injured. The result of this phenomenon is the appearance and proliferation of illnesses caused by the pollution of nutritional goods

through human actions.

In our time, there is appropriate emphasis on the vast significance of forests and generally of plants for the flourishing of the earth's ecosystem as well as for the protection of water resources. But we cannot undermine the crucial importance of animals, too, for the orderly function of the world. Animals have always been friends of humanity and servants of human needs, providing food, clothing, transportation but also protection and affection. Man's relationship with animals has been very close, as demonstrated by the fact that they were created on the same day as Adam and Eve (Gen. 1.31) and by God's commandment to Noah to save each species of the animals in pairs before the great flood (Gen. 6.19). It is characteristic that God reserves special care for the preservation of the animal kingdom. In the lives of the saints, there are numerous stories about the excellent relations between saints and wild beasts, which would not normally be associated with friendliness toward human beings. This, of course, is not due to an evil nature on the part of animals but to our resistance to God's grace and the consequences of this for our relationship with the elements and animals. After all, one of the results of Adam and Eve breaking their relationship to their Creator God was the disruption of their relationship with the environment: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken." (Gen. 3.17-19) Man's reconciliation with God results in man's reconciliation with nature.

After all this, it is clear that our good relationship with the environment develops parallel to our proper relationship with God. We all know the story from the lives of the saints about the experience of St. Anthony the Great, who at the age of ninety decided, with the guidance of the Lord's angel, to enter the deeper desert of the Nile in search of another hermit, St. Paul of Thebes, in order to benefit spiritually from the latter. After walking for three days and following the tracks of animals, he came across a lion that bowed before St. Anthony and turned around to lead him to St. Paul's cave, where he found the hermit being served by animals. A crow would bring him his daily bread! In fact, on the day of St. Anthony's visit, the crow brought a double portion so as to provide for the visitor!

These saints developed a good relationship with God, which meant that they also enjoyed a good relationship with all of nature. The creation of such a good relationship with God should become our foremost priority, while the attending good relationship with the animal, natural and inanimate world should flow spontaneously from this. In this perspective, love for animals will not simply comprise a sterile social expression of compassion for our favorite animals, which might even sadly be accompanied by indifference for suffering human beings, who are created in the image of God, but the result of our good relationship with the Creator of all.

May the Creator of the "very beautiful" universe (Gen. 1.31) and the wonderful earthly ecosystem inspire all of us to treat all the elements of nature with affection, with a

compassionate heart for all human beings, animals and plants, just as Abba Isaac the Syrian once replied to the question: “What is a merciful heart?” “It is a heart burning for the sake of the entire creation, for men, for birds, for animals, for demons and for every created thing; and by the recollection and sight of them the eyes of a merciful man pour forth abundant tears. From the strong and vehement mercy gripping his heart and from his great compassion, his heart is humbled and he cannot bear to hear or see any injury or slight sorrow in creation.” (Ascetic Treatise 81)

Through such compassion toward the natural creation we shall honor our divine dignity as stewards of creation, concerned with paternal love for all its elements, which will obey us when they discern our benevolent disposition as they realize their own commission to serve our needs.

September 1st, 2011

Your fervent supplicant before God,
+BARTHOLOMEW of Constantinople