



## ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

### Putting Orthodox Theology and Ecology into Action

Keynote Address by His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios

St. Sophia's Cathedral, Washington, DC  
November 11, 2013

Distinguished participants, dear friends:

It is a joy for me to be with you this morning in order to address this gathering of clergy and laity, scholars and students, faithful stewards of God's creation in the launching of an effort to green our communities and help render them – as we say in the Lord's Prayer – “on earth as it is in heaven.”

I am grateful to the organizers, the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration, an organization formally blessed and endorsed by our Assembly of Bishops. Indeed, in seeking to transfigure our parishes and parishioners, the Fellowship reflects precisely what the Assembly of Bishops seeks to do on a Pan-Orthodox level for the unified witness of our Church in this country.

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The subtitle of this gathering defines its aim and purpose as “Putting Orthodox Theology and Ecology into Practice.” Harmony between heaven and earth, just as between creation and humanity, has always been a fundamental vocation and principle in the Judeo-Christian scripture and tradition, as well as in our Orthodox liturgy and spiritual life, based on the words of the Psalmist and the claim of St. Paul, that “the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.” (Ps. 24.1; 1 Cor. 10.26) This is among the reasons why, in 2001, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America established an Advisory Committee on Science and Technology, which is one of the sponsors of this

event, with one of its three subcommittees undertaking the subjects of energy, environment and economics.

While, therefore, the comprehensive invitation to and inclusion of all Orthodox jurisdictions in this deliberation may be new, the focus of our discussion is not. It is, in fact, something that we are called and commanded to from the very outset of the Book of Genesis, where our respect toward creation and our relationship toward God's creatures are mandated in detail. This foundational scriptural emphasis led to our liturgical conviction that God, the Holy Spirit is "everywhere present and filling all things," allowing for a vision of all things as being sanctified by God and inviting transfiguration by humankind. After all, in essence, everything is sustained by God, and not by human beings. However, at the same time, we must maintain everything as stewards, and not misuse them as proprietors. Therefore, we embrace a world filled with God's sacred presence and worship a God that imbues all of creation.

## ENVIRONMENT AND THE CHURCH

By the same token, the universe has not changed, but society has certainly changed. Today, we are dealing with a different set of principles and attitudes, another set of priorities and forces that prevail in our world and in our time. Sometimes these ideas conflict with the Orthodox Christian worldview. At other times, these values confirm the Orthodox Christian worldview.

For instance, we often encounter a hardened concept of *individualism*, which is foreign to our theology and tradition. In the Orthodox Church, we have always emphasized that we live and exist as human beings within a community and that we are saved as members of a community which is the Church.

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Similarly, we frequently confront a perception of separation between God and the world, instead of a God who loves the world and a world imbued by God. This gives rise to a form of *materialism* or *secularism*, where the world is understood in a utilitarian way in accordance with the mechanistic model proposed by the Enlightenment. Such materialism denies the intrinsic beauty and value of everything, proclaiming a world devoid of God and His Spirit, while ultimately desacralizing and devaluing all things. As a result, God is banished to a remote heaven, very distant and removed from the earth. Thus, we can no longer speak of things "on earth as in heaven." Yet, this is a vision that differs radically from our theology and practice. Finally, if we separate ourselves from

each other and from God, and if we isolate the material world from the heavenly reality, we inevitably induce an attitude of unrestrained *consumerism*, which obliges us to seek fulfillment in having, rather than being. Accordingly, the acquisition of material things becomes an end in itself, not because they are necessary for our existence and life, but because they are attractive for our identity and status. Things are no longer valuable in themselves or for others, but solely for our benefit and pleasure. The very negative consequences of such an attitude for the natural environment within which we live are obvious. Let us further discuss this issue.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF WRONG PRIORITIES

Does all this really threaten our environment today? It would be tantamount to belaboring the obvious even to raise this question. Threats to the environment are a common experience in everyday life for all of us as we observe and often experience the impacts of a multitude of ecological effects not only in our country but also, and especially, in other countries where many of us frequently travel and where environmental consciousness is less prevalent. Such affronts to the natural environment include: toxic water, suffocating air, despoiled land, diminishing forests, polluted oceans and rivers filled with pesticides, chemicals and plastic, and an avalanche of waste. In 2008, we observed the massive spill of coal ash in Tennessee; in 2010, we experienced the disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico; in 2011, we witnessed the catastrophic effects of the tsunami on nuclear power plants in Japan; in 2012, we were overwhelmed by the biblical floods caused by heavy rains in Pakistan; and, closer to home, we have felt the impact of the deadliest tropical cyclones when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 and Hurricane Sandy hit New Jersey in 2012; as well as the most numerous and most destructive forest fires in California over the last decade.

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The most recent scientific report on climate change and its effects, issued at the end of September 2013 by the International Panel on Climate change (IPCC) and compiled by hundreds of scientists from dozens of countries, raised a number of concerns in the form of dire conclusions, which we cannot afford to ignore. These include unequivocal deductions concerning climate change in the form of global warming, rising sea levels, increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases, and melting ice sheets. The human influence on the climate system is evident from a variety of observations and analyses, while it is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed temperature patterns and increases since the mid-twentieth century. Although skeptics cite climate variability, the long-term trend seems unmistakable and there is no excuse for complacency.

The Orthodox Church is blessed to have a leader, in the person of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who has been extremely sensitive to these concerns throughout his ministry, concentrating on raising ecological awareness and protecting the natural environment a primary goal of his pastoral mission. As is well-known, His All Holiness organized eight international conferences, five summer seminars and, to date, one Halki Summit in an effort to highlight the plight of the earth, while urging persons of all faiths and all disciplines to assume an active part in its preservation by changing their own lives and by pressing public policy-makers to take appropriate measures. In the last of his ecological symposia, convened in New Orleans, in October 2009, and entitled “the Great Mississippi: Restoring the Balance,” His All-Holiness observed that “humans have expanded their dominion over nature to the point where absolute limits to our survival are breached. We have lost half of the great forests of the world to the demand for timber and for conversion to agriculture without thinking that these giant wet sponges are responsible for the delivery of fresh water and oxygen.”

#### WHAT IS OUR RESPONSE AND RESPONSIBILITY?

First, as we have already noted, several studies outline in detail the multitude of wide-ranging impacts that climate change would have. As a result, people living in already warm climates, coastal areas, and most dependent on agriculture and fishing for their subsistence will be most vulnerable and are expected to bear the brunt of climate change impacts. Moreover, people with lower incomes, who are struggling for their survival, will also be the least capable of assuming adequate measures to protect themselves from harmful effects. Therefore, the ecological problem of pollution is invariably connected to the social problem of poverty; indeed, all ecological activity is ultimately measured and properly judged by its impact and effect upon the poor. This imposes a special burden and poses a heavy responsibility on us as persons of faith, if we take seriously the Christian teaching to care for the disadvantaged and marginalized among us.

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Second, we are obliged to be concerned about the inter-generational distribution of rewards and impacts emerging from the ecological crisis. How will our actions of today affect the generations to come – our children and grandchildren? Do we have the right to exploit the earth’s resources selfishly and carelessly while bequeathing the impacts of our actions, which according to the forecasts of climate change could be serious or even devastating? Studies clearly indicate the long-term impacts of today’s greenhouse gas emissions; many of the changes we are witnessing today are essentially irrevocable. To quote the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report: “Most aspects of climate change will persist for many centuries even if emissions of carbon

dioxide are stopped.” It is not too late to respond – as people, as parishes, and as a planet. We could steer the earth toward our children’s future. However, we can no longer afford to wait; we can no longer afford not to act.

Third, as people of faith, and particularly as Orthodox Christians, we are – first and foremost – obliged and called “to put our own household in order” (2 Sam. 17.23). We must address the environmental priorities and needs in our own parishes and among our own faithful. We must begin with prayer, invoking the grace of God on our initiatives and praying, even as we do on September 1<sup>st</sup> of every year, for the preservation of God’s creation. Nonetheless, alongside prayer, we can initiate education programs on all levels, from Sunday Schools to catechetical instruction as well as from the preaching of sermons to the preparation of materials. This focus renders itself especially fruitful for inter-parish and inter-Orthodox collaboration on a local, diocesan and even national basis so that every parish – both large and small – can at least embrace fundamental programs and opportunities for recycling, energy and water conservation, as well as auditing of properties and facilities.

## CONCLUSION

We assume these responsibilities not because it is easy; nor again because it is politically correct. We do so because it is the right thing to do; because we have chosen to bear the Cross of Christ. We care for God’s creation because we have been commanded “to cultivate and care for the earth,” to serve and to preserve the earth. (Gen. 2.15) We recognize that this involves a certain sacrifice on our part, that we must embrace a more ascetic and simple way of life, that we are called to care for and share with “the least of our brothers and sisters.” Indeed, we know that what we do to our neighbor, we actually do to Christ Himself (Matt. 25.40). This means that, whatever we do to this earth, we do to heaven itself.

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Thus we return to the theme of our conference: “*On earth as it is in heaven: Putting our theology and ecology into practice.*” St. Paul tells us: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now,” “awaiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. (Rom. 8. 22, 19).

We must commence this “revelation” in the local parish, learning to live in harmony with God’s creation. As I have said some ten years ago: “The commitment of

our Orthodox Church to protecting the environment must become a part of the local ministry of our parishes.”

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Against much of the secular culture that surrounds us, our faithful must learn how to apply Orthodox theology and ecological principles to their lives. Bishops and clergy must teach them about the Eucharistic and ascetic ethos of our Church tradition in order that our faithful may learn to give thanks to God for all things, while treating the earth’s resources respectfully and sensitively. Moreover, we must cultivate a liturgical ethos in our communities in order that sharing becomes central to our lives as Christians.

In his foreword to *Greening the Orthodox Parish*, published by the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew remarked: “From the outset of our ministry, it has been our hope and prayer that the various ecological initiatives developed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate would result in the parallel creation of ‘green parishes’ and ‘green priests’ throughout the world.”

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Dear friends, it is my sincere conviction that, here in the United States of America, we have a wonderful opportunity to respond to this call. The choice is ours. Will we hear the word of God and obey it? Will we prove responsible stewards?

The world is watching. The world is waiting. And time flies. Paraphrasing St. Paul we could say: *Behold, now is the acceptable time for action, behold now is the day of salvation of the environment* (2 Cor. 6.2).

