

Patriarch Bartholomew Convenes Arctic Symposium on Climate Change

“WE BEGIN OUR SYMPOSIUM against a background of grave pronouncements from scientists about the consequences of climate change for every living thing on earth,” declared HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the opening of the Symposium on the Arctic and global climate change.

“We have called this symposium on the Arctic ‘the Mirror of Life’ because scientists tell us that the Arctic is a vivid reflection of the state of the planet. The ecological misdeeds committed by societies further south, such as chemical contamination or nuclear radiation, are clearly visible in the Arctic environment. The dramatic rise in global temperatures is having a palpable effect on the Greenland landscape.... The societies whose industrial activities and extravagance cause climate change are often blind to the consequences of their behavior.



But here in the polar region it is possible to see things much more clearly.

The Arctic is not a crude, man-made mirror; it is a brilliant and powerful one, given to us by God. // The climatic changes taking place in the Arctic... are an accurate and unavoidable image of human thoughtlessness. When we visit this island or sail its coast, we cannot hide our eyes either from the beauty of God’s creation or from the changes which human folly has already caused to this pristine place. Nor can we avoid pondering the terrible consequences for the remainder of the world, if glaciers continue to melt and sea-levels continue to rise.

With icebergs floating offshore, HAH related how Jesus Christ, like the Greenland Inuit, was a great story teller. When He was asked “who is my neighbor,” He told the story of the Good Samaritan. In this story a man was left wounded on the roadside and only received help from a person of a different religion. Today, “for better or worse, we are living in an age when the destinies of all humans and all communities are ever more closely intertwined. Patterns of behavior and consumption in one corner of the globe affect the lives and livelihoods of people who live at the other extremity of the earth. If the polar region is now changing at a

frightening pace, it is because of economic activities and energy choices in the industrialized world....”

Ironically “the alteration in the Arctic environment has the potential to inundate islands... or cities as far away as Shanghai or New York. Borrowing a phrase from modern journalism, what we are experiencing is “the death of distance.” There is no segment of the human race which can



isolate itself from the destiny of mankind, and of life on earth in general.’

At a time when climatic emergencies... are affecting hundreds of millions of people, we have no moral choice but to “bear one another’s burdens” as the New Testament (Gal. 6:2) enjoins us. Here in the Arctic, melting glaciers are threatening the way of life of traditional hunters. In our home region of southern Europe, we have seen an alarming combination of heat waves, drought, fires and floods. Scientists inform us that these phenomena are connected.

The Ilulissat glacier in west-central Greenland, 155 miles above the Arctic Circle, provided the setting for some of the symposium's scientific reflections. The glacier, a UN World Heritage Site, is huge: it is three miles wide and nearly one mile tall. It is also disappearing at a remarkable rate, having receded by a full nine miles over the past four years. The glacier's ice is flowing at a rate of nearly seven feet an hour, nearly three times the rate of just five years ago.

"The amount of ice pouring into the ocean in a day could provide the water supply for any of the largest cities in the world for an entire year," says Robert Corell, director of the global change program at the John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment, who has studied Greenland's glaciers for decades.

Some scientists have estimated that the sea rise from this melting of Greenland's glaciers could cause the world's oceans to rise by eight to 24 inches over the century. However Dr. Corell points out that the most recent data makes it clear that Greenland's ice cap is collapsing at a much faster rate than previously estimated, and that sea levels will rise more than three feet as a result. "The rate of melting is just phenomenal," he says.

Back on board the Norwegian cruise ship Fram, the symposium debated the different shapes that climate change might take. "We don't know how close we are to going over the edge of this waterfall," said Dr Jane Lubchenco from Oregon. She warned that the new inrush of fresh water could lead to a change in the North Atlantic currents, including the Gulf Stream.

Dr. Corell, chair of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, scorned the prediction of a sea-level rise of up to two feet; the figure now looks like a rise of three feet at the very least, and he showed a map of what that rise would do to Egypt, low-lying coastal



areas, and areas such as San Francisco Bay.

Svend Auken, minister for the environment in Denmark, dismissed the EU's forecast of a 2° increase in global temperature. It will be nearer 6°, and proposed measures to mitigate it are like "treating cancer with aspirin."

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Other religious leaders also signaled the need to work together. Cardinal McCarrick, Pope Benedict XVI's official representative, said "It is very, very key for as many voices from as many fields as possible to come together to present a common effort. Failure to address climate change, he said, "will mean the terrible suffering of millions of people."

"If there is one single message in all the information which we have received during our symposium," noted His All Holiness, "it is this: 'time is short.' The ice of the Arctic is shrinking at a frightening pace. That is what we are told by scientists, that is what we are told by Greenlanders who know the ice better than anybody. If all the ice in Greenland melts, the consequences for Greenland and the whole world could be devastating: a

Biblical catastrophe in the most literal sense. Some scientists tell us that we have ten years or less to limit the emission of greenhouse gases and hence limit the extent of global warming. Humanity does not have the luxury of quarreling over economic or racial or religious differences; it must act together, and it must act now.

"As Orthodox Christians, we use the Greek word *kairos* to describe a moment in time, often a brief moment, which has eternal significance. When Our Lord Jesus Christ began his preaching, he declared that a decisive moment, a *kairos* (Mark 1:14) had arrived in the relationship between God and mankind. The Mother of God, who prays for and protects mankind, experienced her moment of *kairos* when she received the angel Gabriel and replied, 'May it be according to your word' (Luke 1:38). As individuals we are often conscious of a *kairos*, a moment when we make a choice that will affect our whole lives.

"For the human race as a whole, there is now a *kairos*, a decisive time in our relationship with God's creation. We will either act in time to protect life on earth from the worst consequences of human folly, or we will fail to act.

"On behalf of all of us, allow me to offer up a public prayer: 'May God grant us the wisdom to act in time.'"



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