

# World Council of Churches

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Press release



## Transformation Calls for Metanoia

by HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

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What steps must we take to achieve transformation?

In this article on the theme of the World Council of Churches' 9th Assembly "God, in your grace, transform the world," His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I addresses this question and reflects on self-discovery, the healing of the community and the earth.

### **Transformation as healing of the heart**

The Philokalia, a classical anthology of early Christian texts on prayer, underlines the astonishing paradox that transformation is achieved through silence: "When you discover silence in your heart, then you will discern God in the world entire!" In other words, transformation begins with the awareness that God is at the centre of all life. "Be still, and know God" (Psalm 44.1). Through silence, we realize that the grace of God is much closer to us, indeed does more to define who we are, than our own selves! The transformation of the heart is the profound awareness that "the kingdom of God is within" (Luke 17:21).

Inner transformation, however, requires radical change. In religious terminology, it requires metanoia - a change in attitudes and assumptions. We cannot be transformed unless we have first been cleansed of whatever stands in opposition to transformation, until we have understood what disfigures the human heart.

Such a process of self-discovery only results from God's grace, and leads ultimately to a genuine respect of human nature, with all its flaws and failures - both within ourselves and in others. It paves the way for respect towards every human being, irrespective of differences - within society and the global community. Through inner transformation, these differences are welcomed, honoured and embraced as unique pieces of a sacred puzzle; they constitute part of the deeper mystery of God's wonderful creation.

### **Transformation as healing of community**

The transformation of the heart arises in the healing of community. Transformation is a vision of connection and compassion. How unfortunate it is that we Christians often disassociate spirituality from community.

When our hearts are transformed by divine grace, we see the world differently and are impelled to act graciously. Through the transforming grace of God, we are empowered to seek solutions to conflict through open exchange, without resorting to oppression or domination.

Through divine grace, then, we have it in our power either to increase the hurt inflicted in our world, or else to contribute toward its healing. So when will we realize the detrimental effects of violence on our spiritual, social, cultural, and ecological environment? When will we recognize the obvious irrationality of military aggression, national conflict and racial intolerance, all of which betray a lack of imagination and willpower?

Transformation involves awakening from indifference and extending compassion to victims of poverty and all forms of injustice. As faith communities and religious leaders, we must imagine and initiate alternative ways, which reject violence and recognize peace. Our age will be remembered for those who dedicated themselves to the healing and transformation of community; our world will be molded by those who believe in and "pursue what makes for peace" (Romans 14:19).

This kind of transformation is our only hope of breaking the vicious cycle of violence and injustice - vicious precisely because it is the fruit of vice. War and peace are systems; they stand for contradictory ways of resolving conflict. Ultimately, however, they are choices.

Making peace is a matter of individual and institutional choice, as well as of individual and institutional change. It, too, requires metanoia - a change in policies and practices. Peacemaking requires commitment and courage; it demands of us a willingness to become communities of transformation and to pursue justice as the prerequisite for global transformation.

### **Transformation as healing of the Earth**

Over the last two decades, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has made the preservation of the natural environment a priority of its spiritual and pastoral ministry. The transformation of the heart and of the community is integrally linked with the healing of the earth. The relationship between the soul and its Creator, as well as among human beings, inevitably involves a balanced relationship with the natural world.

The way we treat each other is reflected in the way we treat our planet, just as the way we respond to other people is mirrored in the way we respect the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we consume. In turn, moreover, our protection of the natural environment reveals the measure of authenticity in our prayer and worship.

For whenever we narrow religious life to our own concerns, we overlook the prophetic calling of the church to implore God and to invoke the divine Spirit for the renewal of the whole polluted cosmos. Indeed, the entire cosmos is the space within which transformation is enacted.

When we are transformed by divine grace, we can properly discern the injustice in which we are active participants and not merely passive observers. When touched by the grace of God, we weep for the "dis-grace" that we have caused by failing to share the resources of our planet.

Therefore, like the transformation of the heart and of the community, ecological awareness also derives from the grace of God and requires a corresponding metanoia - a change in habits and lifestyles.

Paradoxically, we become more conscious of the impact of our actions on other people and on creation when we are prepared to surrender something. For in emptying our heart of our selfish desires, we allow space for the grace of God. Orthodox theology speaks of a kenosis of the Spirit.

This is why the ascetic ethos is a critical aspect of Orthodox Christian spirituality: in learning to give up, we gradually learn to give; in learning to sacrifice, we essentially learn to share. So often our efforts for reconciliation and transformation are hindered by an unwillingness to forego established ways as individuals or as institutions, by our refusal to relinquish either wasteful consumerism or prideful nationalism.

A transformed world view allows us to perceive the lasting impact of our ways on other people, especially the poor, as the sacred image of Christ, as well as on the environment, as the silent imprint of God.

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His All Holiness, Bartholomew I, archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome and ecumenical patriarch, is "first among equals" among the heads of Eastern Orthodox churches, which count an estimated 250 million faithful world-wide. His efforts to connect ecology and spirituality have earned him the title of "Green Patriarch", and he is known for his vigorous promotion of dialogue and reconciliation between the Christian, Islamic and Jewish worlds.