

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I
Archbishop of Constantinople and New Rome

Sacrifice: The Missing Dimension

Address at the Closing Ceremony of the
Religion, Science and the Environment Symposium on the Adriatic Sea

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As we come to the close of our Fourth Symposium on Religion, Science and the Environment, we offer thanks to God for the fruitful proceedings as well as for your invaluable contribution. We recall the prophetic words of our predecessor, Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I of blessed memory. In his historic encyclical letter of 1989, urging Christians to observe September 1st as a day of prayer for the protection of the environment, he emphasized the need for all of us to display a “eucharistic and ascetic spirit.”

Let us reflect on these two words eucharistic and ascetic. The implications of the first word are easy to appreciate. In calling for a “eucharistic spirit,” Patriarch Dimitrios was reminding us that the created world is not simply our possession, but it is a gift from God the Creator, a healing gift, a gift of wonder and beauty – and that our proper response on receiving such a gift, is to accept it with gratitude and thanksgiving. This is surely the distinctive characteristic of ourselves as human beings: humankind is not merely a logical or a political animal, but a “eucharistic animal,” capable of gratitude and endowed with the power to bless God for the gift of creation. Other animals express their gratefulness simply by being themselves, by living in their own instinctive manner; but we human beings possess self-awareness, and so consciously and by deliberate choice we can thank God with eucharistic joy. Without such thanksgiving we are not truly human.

But what does Patriarch Dimitrios mean by the second word, “ascetic”? When we speak of asceticism, we think of such things as fasting, vigils and rigorous practices. That is indeed part of what is involved; but askesis signifies much more than this. It means that, in relation to the environment, we are to display what the Philokalia and other spiritual texts of the Orthodox Church call *enkrateia*, “self-restraint.”

That is to say, we are to practice a voluntary self-limitation in our consumption of food and natural resources. Each of us is called to make the crucial distinction between what we want and what we need. Only through such self-denial, through our willingness sometimes to forgo and to say “no” or “enough,” will we rediscover our true human place in the universe.

The fundamental criterion for an environmental ethic is not individualistic or commercial. The acquisition of material goods cannot justify the self-centered desire to control the natural resources of the world. Greed and avarice render the world opaque, turning all things to dust and ashes. Generosity and unselfishness render the world transparent, turning all things into a

sacrament of loving communion – communion between human beings with one another, communion between human beings and God.

This need for an ascetic spirit can be summed up in a single key word: sacrifice. This is exactly the missing dimension in our environmental ethos and ecological action.

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in our consumption of food and natural resources.”*

We are painfully aware of the fundamental obstacle that confronts us in our work for the environment. It is precisely this: How are we to move from theory to action, from words to deeds? We do not lack technical scientific information about the nature of the ecological crisis. We know, not just what needs to be done, but also how to do it. Yet, despite all this information, unfortunately little is actually being done. It is a long journey from the head to the heart, and an even longer journey from the heart to the hands.

How shall we bridge this gap between theory and practice, between ideas and actuality? There is only one way: through the missing dimension of sacrifice. We are thinking here of a sacrifice that is not cheap, but costly: ‘I will not offer to the Lord my God that which costs me nothing’ (2 Samuel 24:24). There will be a transforming change in the environment if, and only if, we are prepared to make sacrifices that are radical, painful and unselfish. If we sacrifice nothing, we shall achieve nothing. Needless to say, as regards both nations and individuals, so much more is required from the rich than from the poor. Nevertheless, all are asked to sacrifice something for the sake of their fellow humans.

*“...the real crisis lies not in the
environment, but in the human heart.”*

Sacrifice is primarily a spiritual issue and less an economic one. In speaking about sacrifice, we are talking about an issue that is not technological but ethical. Indeed, environmental ethics is a central theme of this symposium. We often refer to an environmental crisis; but the real crisis lies, not in the environment, but in the human heart. The fundamental problem is to be found not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem but in the way we think.

The root cause of all our difficulties consists in human selfishness and human sin. What is asked of us is not greater technological skill but deeper repentance, metanoia, in the literal sense of the Greek word, which signifies “change of mind.” The root cause of our environmental sin lies in our self-centeredness and in the mistaken order of values which we inherit and accept without any critical evaluation. We need a new way of thinking about our selves, about our relationship with the world and with God. Without this revolutionary “change of mind,” all our conservation projects, however well-intentioned, will remain ultimately ineffective. For, we shall be dealing only with the symptoms, not with their cause. Lectures and international conferences may help to awaken our conscience, but what is truly required is a baptism of tears.

Speaking about sacrifice is unfashionable, and even unpopular in the modern world. But, if the idea of sacrifice is unpopular, this is primarily because many people have a false notion of what

sacrifice actually means. They imagine that sacrifice involves loss or death; they see sacrifice as somber or gloomy. Perhaps this is because, throughout the centuries, religious concepts have been used to introduce distinctions between those who have and those who have not, as well as to justify avarice, abuse and arrogance.

But if we consider how sacrifice was understood in the Old Testament, we find that the Israelites had a totally different view of its significance. To them, sacrifice meant not loss, but gain; not death, but life. Sacrifice was costly, but it brought about not diminution, but fulfilment; it was a change, not for the worse, but for the better. Above all, for the Israelites, sacrifice signified not primarily giving up but simply giving. In its basic essence, a sacrifice is a gift – a voluntary offering in worship by humanity to God.

“Sacrifice... is the missing dimension in our environmental ethos and ecological action.”

Thus in the Old Testament, although sacrifice often involved the slaying of an animal, the whole point was not the taking but the giving of life; not the death of the animal but the offering of the animal's life to God. Through this sacrificial offering, a bond was established between the human worshiper and God. The gift, once accepted by God, was consecrated, acting as a means of communion between Him and His people. For the Israelites, the fasts – and the sacrifices that went with them – were “seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful festivals” (Zechariah 8:19).

An essential element of any sacrifice is that it should be willing and voluntary. That which is extracted from us by force and violence, against our will, is not a sacrifice. Only what we offer in freedom and in love is truly a sacrifice. There is no sacrifice without love. When we surrender something unwillingly, we suffer loss; but when we offer something voluntarily, out of love, we only gain.

When, on the fortieth day after Christ's birth, His mother the Virgin Mary, accompanied by Joseph, came to the temple and offered her child to God, her act of sacrifice brought her not sorrow but joy, for it was an act of love. She did not lose her child, but He became her own in a way that He could never otherwise have been.

Christ proclaimed this seemingly contradictory mystery when He taught: “Whosoever wishes to save his life must lose it” (Matt. 10:39). When we sacrifice our life and share our wealth, we gain life in abundance and enrich the entire world. Such is the experience of human kind over the ages: Kenosis means plerosis; voluntary self-emptying brings self-fulfillment.

We need to apply all of this to our work for the environment. There can be no salvation for the world, no healing, no hope of a better future, without sacrifice. Without a sacrifice that is costly and uncompromising, we shall never be able to act as priests of the creation in order to reverse the descending spiral of ecological degradation.

The path that lies before us, as we continue on our spiritual voyage of ecological exploration, is strikingly indicated in the ceremony of the Great Blessing of the Waters, performed in the Orthodox Church on January 6th, the Feast of Theophany, when we commemorate Christ's

Baptism in the Jordan River. The Great Blessing begins with a hymn of praise to God for the beauty and harmony of creation:

Great art Thou, O Lord, and marvelous are Thy works. No words suffice to sing the praise of Thy wonders.... The sun sings Thy praises; the moon glorifies Thee; the stars supplicate before Thee; the light obeys Thee; the fountains are Thy servants; Thou hast stretched out the heavens like a curtain; Thou hast established the earth upon the waters; Thou hast walled about the sea with sand; Thou hast poured forth the air that living things may breathe....

Then, after this all-embracing cosmic doxology, there comes the culminating moment in the ceremony of blessing. The celebrant takes a Cross and plunges it into the vessel of water (if the service is being performed indoors in church) or into the river or the sea (if the service takes place outdoors).

“Without the Cross, without sacrifice, there can be no blessing and no cosmic transfiguration.”

The Cross is our guiding symbol in the supreme sacrifice to which we are all called. It sanctifies the waters and, through them, transforms the entire world. Who can forget the imposing symbol of the Cross in the splendid mosaic of the Basilica of Saint Apollinare in Classe? As we celebrated the Divine Liturgy in Ravenna, our attention was focused on the Cross, which stood at the center of our heavenly vision, at the center of the natural beauty that surrounded it, and at the center of our celebration of heaven on earth.

Such is the model of our ecological endeavors. Such is the foundation of any environmental ethic. The Cross must be plunged into the waters. The Cross must be at the very center of our vision. Without the Cross, without sacrifice, there can be no blessing and no cosmic transfiguration.

Amen.

