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The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America



On Earth As It Is In Heaven

Keynote Address

St. Sophia's Cathedral, Washington, DC

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(abridged text)

It is a joy for me to be with you this morning.... 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 blessed and endorsed by our Assembly of Bishops. Indeed, in seeking to transfigure our parishes and parishioners, the Fellowship reflects at a Pan-Orthodox level the unified witness of our Church in this country. The subtitle of this gathering defines its aim and purpose as “Putting Orthodox Theology and Ecology into Practice.”

While the comprehensive invitation to and the inclusion of all Orthodox jurisdictions in this deliberation may be new, the focus of our discussion is not. It is something to which 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....

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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

Society has changed. Today, we are dealing with a different set of principles and attitudes, another set of priorities and forces that prevail in our time. We often now 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.

Similarly, we confront a perception of separation between God and the world, instead of a God who loves the world and the world is 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, distant and removed from the earth.

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 in being. Accordingly, the acquisition of material things becomes an end in itself, not because they are necessary for our existence, but because they are attractive for our identity and status.

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ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF WRONG PRIORITIES

Does all this really threaten our environment today? Threats to the environment are a common experience for all of us.... 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 waste....

The most recent scientific report on climate change, issued by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and compiled by hundreds of scientists, raised a number of concerns in dire conclusions which we cannot ignore. These include global warming, rising sea levels, increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases, and melting ice sheets. The human influence on the climate is evident from a variety of observations and analyses, while human influence has been the dominant cause of the temperature increases since the mid-twentieth century. 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.... In the last of his ecological symposia, 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 RESPONSIBILITY?

First, several studies outline in detail the wide-ranging impacts that climate change will have. People in warm climates, and dependent on agriculture or fishing for subsistence, will be vulnerable and bear the brunt of climate change impacts. Moreover, people with lower incomes will be the least capable of assuming adequate measures to protect themselves from harmful effects. This imposes a special burden and responsibility on us as persons of faith.

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protecting themselves from harmful effects.*

Second, we are obliged to be concerned about the inter-generational impacts of the ecological crisis. How will our actions 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, we are obliged “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 faithful. We must begin with prayer, invoking the grace of God on our initiatives and praying, even as we do on September 1st of every year, for the preservation of God’s creation. 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 is fruitful for inter-parish and inter-Orthodox collaboration on a local, diocesan and national basis so that every parish can embrace 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 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 sacrifice on our part, that we must embrace a more ascetic and simple way of life. . Indeed, we know that what we do to our neighbor, we actually do to Christ Himself (Matt. 25.40).

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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 said ten years ago: "The commitment of our Orthodox Church to protecting the environment must become a part of the local ministry of our parishes."

Our faithful must learn to apply Orthodox theology and ecological principles to their lives. Bishops and clergy must teach the Eucharistic and ascetic ethos of our Church tradition so that our faithful may learn to give thanks to God for all things, while treating the earth's resources respectfully. Moreover, we must cultivate a liturgical ethos 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 creation of 'green parishes' and 'green priests' throughout the world."

Dear friends, it is my sincere conviction that 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. 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).

