

Letter sent to NRCCC  
for the book  
*WITNESS FOR THE EARTH*  
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## FOREWORD

by  
His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon fatal explosion and ensuing tragic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico attracted the attention of the world for a second time to the coast of Louisiana, where only five years earlier Hurricane Katrina had devastated the same region and exposed the social injustices of our world. As a church leader and a citizen of God's creation, we perceive these monumental disasters on our planet as a sign of how far we have moved from the purpose of God's creation.

Although we are halfway around the world from these incidents, our interest in it is deeply personal. We visited Louisiana and its bayous only four months after its devastation by Hurricane Katrina and we returned there in October 2009 to convene our Eighth Religion, Science, and the Environment Symposium, "Restoring Balance: The Great Mississippi," in New Orleans.

We have repeatedly stated that the crisis that we are facing in our world is not primarily ecological. It is a crisis concerning the way we envisage or imagine the world. We are treating our planet in an inhuman, godless manner precisely because we fail to see it as a gift inherited from above; it is our obligation to receive, respect and in turn hand on this gift to future generations. Otherwise, the unquenchable greed of our generation will constitute a mortal sin resulting in destruction and death. This greed in turn will lead to the deprivation of our children's generation, in spite of our desire and claim to bequeath to them a better future. Ultimately, it is for our children that we must perceive our every action in the world as having a direct effect upon the future of the environment.

This is precisely the source of our optimism. As we declared some years ago in Venice (on June 10, 2002) with the late Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II:

It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now, with God's help and blessing.

The same sentiments were jointly communicated with the current Pope, Benedict XVI, during his official visit to the Ecumenical Patriarchate on November 30, 2006:

As religious leaders, we consider it one of our duties to encourage and to support all efforts made to protect God's creation, and to bequeath to future generations a world in which they will be able to live.

At first glance, however, it may appear strange for religious institutions and faith communities, which are primarily concerned with "sacred" values, to be so profoundly involved in "worldly" issues like climate change. After all, what does preserving the planet have to do with saving the soul? It is commonly assumed that global climate change and the exploitation of our nature's resources are matters that concern politicians, scientists and technocrats. At best, perhaps, they are the preoccupation of special interest groups or naturalists.

So the preoccupation of the religious leaders with the environmental crisis may come as a surprise to some people. Yet, there are no two ways of looking at either the world or God. There can be no double vision or worldview: one religious and the other profane; one spiritual and the other secular. In our worldview and understanding, there can be no distinction between concern for human welfare and concern for ecological preservation.

As the range of individuals and contributors to this book clearly demonstrate, we are all in this together. *Witness for the Earth* provides a series of theological reflections from various denominational and creedal perspectives as well as a range of related statements from a number of faith communities and religious organizations. For, the natural environment unites us in ways that transcend doctrinal differences. We may differ in our conception of the planet's origin, whether biblical or scientific. But we all agree on the necessity to protect its natural resources, which are neither limitless nor negotiable.

We can no longer afford to wait; we can no longer afford not to act. People of faith must assume leadership in this effort; citizens of the world must clearly

express their opinion; and political leaders must act accordingly.

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**Biographical Note:** His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians, is 270<sup>th</sup> successor of St. Andrew the apostle, who founded the 2000-year-old church of Constantinople. His efforts to promote human rights and religious tolerance, together with his pioneering work for international peace and environmental protection, have placed him at the forefront of global visionaries, earning him the title "Green Patriarch," for which *Time* magazine named him as one of the world's most influential people.