

Opening Address by

His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

July 14, 2006

Part 1

"Symposium on the Amazon, Source of Life"

The Fragile Beauty of the World

Manaus, Brazil

It is with great pleasure that we welcome you... to the official opening of Symposium VI, entitled "Amazon, Source of Life." Since 1995, five water-borne symposia have been organized in major water bodies of Europe: the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, the Danube River, the Adriatic Sea, and the Baltic Sea. The participation of regional and international representatives of the scientific, religious, and media worlds ensure that the message and outcomes of our symposium, with regard to crucial and specific issues will be brought to the attention of the world community. The present Symposium is honoured by the joint patronage of His Excellency Mr Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations.

This symposium is in many ways both historical and unique. It is the first time that our initiatives have ventured beyond European boundaries, but our gathering underlines – on a broader, global level – the critical role of the Amazon River for the future of our planet. This river comprises a microcosm of our planet. In its waters, we observe many of the world's ecological issues. We are humbled in its presence. We have come to listen to its story, to learn from its history, to admire its fragile beauty, and to gain hope for the entire world from its resilience.

We are conscious of the consequences of human activity on the Brazilian rainforest. Environmental issues are very much at the forefront of daily news. We hear of air and water pollution, of global warming and the threatened extinction of numerous animal or plant species. The statistics are indeed alarming. How should we react? What do they mean for development, and for the ways we are accustomed to living?

Every product we make and enjoy (from the paper we work with, to processed meat and the soy beans that sustain its industry), every tree we fell, every building we construct, every road we travel, definitively and permanently alters creation. At the basis of this alteration – or perhaps we should characterize it as abuse – of creation is a fundamental difference between human, natural, and divine economies. In the Orthodox tradition, the phrase "divine economy" is used to describe God's extraordinary acts of love and providence toward humanity and creation. "Economy" is derived from the Greek word "oikonomia," which implies the management of an environment or household (*oikos*), which is also the root of the word "ecology" (*oikologia*). Let us consider, however, the radical distinction between the various kinds of economy. Our economy tends to use and discard; natural economy is normally cyclical and replenishes; God's economy is always compassionate and nurturing. Nature's economy is profoundly violated by our wasteful economy, which in turn constitutes a direct offence to the divine economy. The prophet Ezekiel again recognized this abuse of the natural eco-systems when he observed:

Is it not enough to feed on good pasture? Must you also trample the rest with your feet?

Is it not sufficient to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?

Our perspective is neither that of a scientist nor that of an economist; our principles are derived from the altar of the Church and the heart of theology. In this respect, the liturgy provides for us a mystical basis for a broader, spiritual worldview. It both reflects the way we respond to creation and moulds the way we respect creation.

Perhaps no other place in the world reflects so apparently or records so articulately both the sacred beauty of creation and the consequences of human choices. A spiritual worldview should inform our concept of creation and define our conduct within this world. This worldview is neither a political plan nor an economic strategy. It is essentially a way of reflecting on what it means to perceive the world through the lens of the soul.

Let us consider our own presence on this great river. The question we must address to ourselves in all honesty is: have we come here as pilgrims or as travellers? What have we come here to see?

Seeing clearly is precisely what the liturgy teaches us to do. Our eyes are opened to see the beauty of created things. The world of the liturgy reveals the eternal dimension in all that we see and experience. It enables us to hear new sounds and behold new images as we travel along the Amazon River. It creates in us a mystical appreciation and genuine affection for everything that surrounds us. The truth is that we have been inexorably locked within the self-centered confines of our own individual concerns with no access to the world beyond us. We have violated the sacred covenant between our selves, our world, and our God.

The liturgy restores this covenant; it reminds us of another way and of another world. It offers a corrective to a wasteful, consumer culture that gives value only to the here and now. The liturgy converts the attentive person from a restricted, limited point of view to a fuller, spiritual vision

"in Him through whom all things live, move, and have their being" (Acts 17.28). It provides for us another means of comprehension and communication. The liturgy is the eternal celebration of the fragile beauty of this world.

In practical terms, this would naturally imply a way of life that would be respectful of the divine presence in creation. We should not be blindfolded by personal interests, but be sensitive to the sacredness of every peninsula and every island, every river and every stream, every basin and every landscape.

If we are guilty of relentless waste, it is because we have lost the spirit of liturgy and worship. We are no longer respectful pilgrims on this earth; we have been reduced to careless consumers or passing travellers. How tragic it would be, for us all as delegates of this symposium, if we were simply to pass through the Amazon, like the indifferent priest in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We must be responsible and responsive citizens of the world; we must be careful and caring pilgrims in this land. If we are not in fact moved to compassion, bandaging the wounds of the earth, assuming personal care, and contributing to the painful costs, then we might easily be confronted with the question, which of these do you resemble: the Good Samaritan or the indifferent priest?

The liturgy guides us to a life that sees more clearly and shares more fairly, moving away from what we want as individuals to what the world needs globally. This in turn requires that we move away from greed and control and gradually value everything for its place in creation and not simply its economic value to us, thereby restoring the original beauty of the world, seeing all things in God and God in all things.

Esteemed dignitaries and fellow participants, perhaps for the first time in the history of our world, we recognize that our decisions and choices immediately impact the environment. Today, we are able to direct our actions in a caring and compassionate way. It is up to us to shape our future; it is up to us to choose our destiny.

Breaking the vicious circle of ecological degradation is a choice with which we are uniquely endowed, at this crucial moment in the history of our planet. This conference is a golden opportunity for us to recognize the unique role of every individual and every organization, in order that we may respect those more vulnerable in this situation, and in order that we may be prepared to assume responsibility for the health of our planet, an issue of critical significance and urgency.

As we officially declare the opening of Symposium VI: "Amazon, Source of Life," may we all be inspired by grace and justice, guided by reason and responsibility, and filled with selflessness and compassion. May we be poised in the expectation to learn from the fragile beauty of God's creation, and from the unparalleled dynamism of the great Amazon River.