

Speech of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

July 14, 2006

Part 2

It is a wonderful privilege to be presented with a degree *honoris causa* in a part of the world where the sensitive and appropriate use of human knowledge will make such a huge difference to the destiny of mankind. Here in the Amazon region we are continually reminded of the beauty, richness and complexity of God's Creation, and we are conscious that understanding this complexity is an awesome challenge, even for the most brilliant human minds. An even greater challenge lies in deciding how to respond to this complexity, how to harness human knowledge and husband the gifts of God which are so abundant here in Brazil.

We accept this honor not on our own behalf, but on behalf of an ancient institution, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, whose origins go back to the very dawning of the Christian era, a time when people were struggling to hold in balance many different forms of knowledge and understanding.

Indeed, some of the most heroic moments in that struggle occurred in the fourth century of the Christian era, soon after our Patriarchate was established. An outstanding role was played by three great teachers and hierarchs of the Church whom we regard as the patron saints of literacy and education: Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and St John the Golden-Mouthed, or in Greek, Chrysostomos.

These three teachers were deeply versed in the formal learning of the classical world, both Greek and Roman. They were trained in the philosophy, science and literature of the classical age, an age whose achievements are still ranked among the finest accomplishments of the human spirit. Indeed, it is commendable that the languages and culture of ancient Greece and Rome have been studied at a very high level here in Brazil.

But as well as formal book-learning, the three saintly patrons of Christian education understood something else. They knew that the highest form of knowledge comes through humility, self-discipline and the contemplation of God. This kind of understanding is entirely accessible, in some ways especially accessible to people who are not educated in the formal sense.

This sort of knowledge – the contemplation of God and His creation – does not require great intellectual or rhetorical feats. If human beings achieve some glimmering of the mystery of God, they do so not by studying books, but by humbling themselves before their Creator and overcoming the vanity and self-love which are a perpetual temptation for all human beings, especially those who are intelligent and well-read. The fathers of the Church respected formal education as an appropriate use of the talents we are given by God, but they warned against the spirit of pride which can become a trap for those who are endowed with particular intellectual gifts.

As well as counseling against intellectual arrogance, those early hierarchs were defenders of the poor. They found the courage to criticize those who held power and privilege in the world with no regard for the less fortunate, and they also helped the poor in practical ways by establishing hospitals and distributing food to those who had none. In their writings, the three hierarchs combine intellectual brilliance and zeal for the truth with the compassion and humility which flows from a sense that the greatest mysteries of all, the mysteries of God, can never fully be expressed in human language.

This delicate relationship between wisdom of the kind which is pursued in universities, and the divine wisdom which surpasses all human categories, was also understood by the late Pontiff, His Holiness John Paul II. In November 2004, during the final months of his Papacy, he made an important act of reconciliation between Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian people. Pope John Paul agreed to the transfer, from the Vatican to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, of the earthly remains of two of the three hierarchs, Saints John Chrysostom and Gregory the Theologian. This gesture, made in a spirit of pure goodwill, was profoundly appreciated by Orthodox Christian people, especially those in our home city where both saints had served as Archbishops of Constantinople. In this country which is home to more Roman Catholics than any other, we salute this hugely important act of reconciliation.

By their teaching and example, the early patrons of Christian education bore witness to an important principle: the pursuit of knowledge is of course a noble human enterprise, but we should never forget to ask hard and searching questions about the purpose for which knowledge is being pursued. Are we seeking knowledge for the enduring benefit of mankind and all living things, in all generations? Or is the purpose of pursuing knowledge simply to gain material or perhaps military advantage for a small group of people, even if this advantage is obtained at the expense of the people who are less powerful? In the 20th century, we saw unprecedented and terrifying evidence of the extremes of good and evil which the pursuit of knowledge can bring about. On one hand, mankind developed wonderful new ways to relieve suffering by conquering disease and malnutrition; at the same time man acquired the ability to destroy every living thing on earth, by the use of devastating weaponry, or simply by the reckless pursuit of economic advantage without regard for the earth's ecological system and its delicate equilibrium.

To understand this equilibrium, there is no better place to look than the Brazilian rainforest, which has been called the "library of life" because of its extraordinary variety of animals, trees and plants, all of them closely and miraculously interconnected. The indigenous peoples of this region are the stewards and guardians not only of the forest itself, but also of a vast store of knowledge about the forest. They know the properties, and potential uses, of every living thing around them. The outside world is jealous of that knowledge, and the peoples of the Amazon are understandably, and justifiably, cautious about sharing it.

It is not the task of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to write laws or contracts, or to pre-judge the outcome of commercial or diplomatic negotiations. But we stand with the people of the Amazon as they consider how, and on what terms, to share their knowledge of the rainforest with the rest of mankind.

At the Patriarchate we are perpetually conscious of walking in the footsteps of saintly

predecessors who understood, and fought for, the principle that science and learning must be carefully and wisely husbanded, with regard for the all potential beneficiaries, and victims, of that knowledge.

The peoples of the Amazon understand that principle too; they do not need lectures or sermons from us, but they have our prayers, our understanding, and our unconditional moral support.

In the ancient Patriarchates of the Christian world, we have often faced the task of looking after libraries in the usual sense of the word: collections of manuscripts which represent the sum total of human learning and achievement in past eras. We extend our hand in friendship and prayerful support to the peoples of the Amazon, who are worthy guardians and stewards of the library of life.