

His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

Symposium on the Arctic: The Mirror of Life

Opening Address (1 of 3)

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Ilulissat, Greenland
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It is a great privilege and blessing to be standing on the soil of this magnificent island at the start of a fresh deliberation on the fate of the earth. This is the seventh symposium we have organized, and it is in many ways the most important. Not only because the danger of an avoidable environmental catastrophe is now more acute than ever, but also because we are gathering in a place whose awesome but fragile beauty is at once an inspiration and a warning to anyone who cares about the future of our planet.

As we begin our symposium, against a background of grave pronouncements from scientists about the consequences of climate change for every living thing on earth, it is above all to the people of Greenland that we look for guidance. On behalf of the ecologists, policymakers, journalists and religious leaders who have gathered in Greenland, we thank you for inviting us to this marvelous land. We ask for your wisdom and counsel as we reflect together on the spiritual and physical consequences of the profound ecological changes which are already affecting the whole of our planet and the polar regions in particular. And we offer the people of Greenland our prayers, our friendship and solidarity as you deliberate on the dilemmas which you may face as a result of sharp alterations in a physical landscape whose grandeur, power and delicate equilibria are better understood by you than by any outsider.

It is now more than a decade since we began holding symposia on Religion, Science and the Environment with a particular emphasis on the waters of the earth. In the early days of our endeavor, many people were puzzled by the links we were trying to establish. Religious people were relatively indifferent, or even hostile, to science. Many scientists and ecologists could see little relationship between their world and the world of faith. Now, as some of those connections have become more obvious, there is hardly a religious leader in the world who is not preoccupied by the problems of pollution and climate change. And this is the reason why we have among us today distinguished representatives of many faiths. As more and more people now realize, religion and environmental science are both concerned with ultimate matters, with the final destiny of mankind, the earth and the whole of creation.

We have called this symposium the Mirror of Life because scientists tell us that the Arctic is a stark and vivid reflection of the state of the planet as a whole. The ecological misdeeds committed by societies further south, such as chemical contamination or nuclear radiation, are clearly visible in parts of the Arctic environment. Above all, the dramatic rise in

global temperatures is having a palpable effect on the landscape of Greenland, even though it has not been caused by anything that Greenlanders have done. The societies whose industrial activities and extravagance do cause climate change are often blind to the consequences of their behavior. But here in the polar region it is possible to see all manner of things much more clearly.

The idea of a mirror as a reflection of reality, which may be relatively accurate or inaccurate, is familiar to Christians. No man-made device is perfect, and in the earliest days of the Christian faith, man-made mirrors were much cruder than they are today. That is why Saint Paul warns us that in our present, fallen state, we can only see the world in a mirror, or as one translation puts it, we observe reality “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In the same verse, Saint Paul offers us the hope that one day we will see far more clearly: we will stand face to face before the glory of God, and hence have a complete understanding of everything else. We will finally realize where we stand in relation to our Creator.

Saint Paul’s words refer to the spiritual hope of a Christian, that the glory of God will be fully visible to human beings. But they take on a new meaning for any human being who comes to Greenland. The Arctic is not a crude, man-made mirror; it is a brilliant and powerful one, given to us by God. Its silent beauty offers one brilliant reflection of the glory of God while the abundance of life in the Brazilian rainforest, which we had the privilege of observing last year, offers another. At the same time, the climatic changes now taking place in the Arctic, and the contamination of certain parts of its food chain, are an accurate and unavoidable image of human thoughtlessness. When we visit this island or sail along its coast, we cannot hide our eyes, either from the beauty of God’s creation or from the changes which human folly has already caused, and may cause in the future, to this pristine place. Nor can we avoid pondering the terrible consequences for the remainder of the world, if glaciers continue to melt and sea-levels continue to rise.

Dear friends from Greenland, we ask you to forgive us if we, as visitors, seem slow to see and understand things which are obvious to you. We will need your help. Not just this week, as we reflect on the challenges which face this region, and the rest of the world in a rapidly warming planet. Long after this symposium is over, we will still need to be guided by your resilience, wisdom and faith if we are to cope with the bewildering environmental dislocations which are now in progress in every part of the earth.

To you, the people of Greenland, the idea that the natural world is awesome, mysterious and worthy of care must be too obvious. Forgive us, then, if we have allowed ourselves to forget what is so clear and self-evident to you. ...

Later in the week, we will have the extraordinary blessing of performing an Orthodox Christian act of worship in a church that is approximately 1,000 years old, and therefore predates the tragic split between the Christian east and the Christian west. We thank the people of Greenland for making it possible for these profoundly important acts to take place, and we ask them to pray with us. If mankind as a whole can emulate that spirit of courage, determination and deep respect for God’s creation which the Greenlanders have always shown, then there is hope for our planet after all.