

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I
Archbishop of Constantinople and New Rome

Message on the Day of Protection of the Environment

September 1, 2004

Fifteen years ago, our venerable predecessor, the late Patriarch Demetrios issued the first official decree for the preservation of the natural environment, an encyclical letter to the *pleroma* of the Church, formally establishing September 1st as a day of prayer for the protection of the environment. That historical proclamation emphasized the significance of the eucharistic and the ascetic ethos of our tradition, which provide a corrective for a consumer lifestyle and an alternative to the prevailing philosophy of our age.

The Church Fathers have always insisted on the importance of self-examination as a precondition for spiritual growth. Echoing the classical Oracle of Delphi, Clement of Alexandria exhorts, "Know yourself! If you know yourself, you will know all things." Evagrius of Pontus states, "He who knows himself, knows God."... Therefore, let us consider what we have learned as a Church over the past fifteen years. What knowledge have we gained? What failures have we experienced? And what direction should we now assume?

"As Orthodox Christians our greatest vulnerability is in the practice of our theory."

In the five summer seminars that were held annually from 1994-1998 at the Theological School on the Island of Halki, we learned about the close connections between environmental issues and education, ethics, communication, justice, and poverty. And in the international symposia held since 1995, we have explored the impact of our wasteful lifestyle on the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, the Danube River, the Adriatic Sea, and the Baltic Sea. Together with [many others], we recognized the responsibility that we all bear – before one another and before our God – for the destruction of our world's natural beauty, for the depletion of the earth's resources, and for the devastation of our planet's diversity.

More especially, we have appreciated how preservation of the natural environment is intimately related to the cessation of warfare, to the restoration of social justice and to poverty. We have learned how the way that we treat human beings is directly reflected in the way that we relate to the natural environment, as well as to the worship that we reserve exclusively for God. It should come as no surprise that we misuse the material creation when we abuse our fellow-human beings....

When it comes to theological reflection, there is no doubt that our Orthodox Church has a great deal to contribute to the debate concerning ecology.... Where, however, as Orthodox Christians we reveal the greatest vulnerability is in the practice of our theory.

It is always easier to lay blame on development and technology for the ills that we confront in our world. And it is always a temptation to believe that we hold the solution to problems that we face, or else to ignore the imminent danger that we face globally. What is more difficult – and yet also more noble – is to discern the degree to which we constitute part of the problem itself.

Just how many of us examine the foods that we consume, the goods that we purchase, the energy that we waste, or the consequences of our privileged living?

How often do we take the time to scrutinize the choices that we make on a daily basis, whether as individuals, institutions, parishes, communities, societies, and even nations? More importantly, how many of our Orthodox clergy are prepared to assume leadership on issues concerning the environment?

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How many of our Orthodox parishes and communities are prepared to materialize the knowledge that we have accumulated by practicing ecologically-sensitive principles? How do the decisions of any local community and parish reflect on a practical and tangible level the experience that we have gained on a theoretical level? In an age when information is readily available, there is surely no excuse for ignorance or indifference.

To overlook these considerations is to shut our eyes to an ever-increasing reality. Former generations and cultures may have been unaware of the implications of their actions. Nevertheless, today, more than any other time or age, we are in a unique position. Today, we stand at a crossroads, at a point of choosing the cross that we have to bear. For, today, we know fully well the ecological and global impact of our decisions and actions, irrespective of how insignificant these may be.

It is our hope and fervent prayer that more and more of our Orthodox faithful will recognize the importance of a crusade for our environment, which we have so selfishly ignored. This vision, we are convinced, will benefit future generation by leaving behind a cleaner, better world. We owe it to our Creator. And we owe it to our children.

May we be strengthened by God to make the right decisions, and may the grace and infinite mercy of our Lord and God Jesus Christ be with you all.

