

Orthodox Ecological Perspectives

Consumerism

A Root Cause of Resource Depletion and Degradation of God's Earth

Instead of the eucharistic and ascetic spirit with which the Orthodox Church brought up its children for centuries, we observe today a violation of nature for the satisfaction, not of basic human needs, but of man's endless and constantly increasing desire and lust, encouraged by the prevailing philosophy of the consumer society.

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch +Dimitrios, 1989

A Christian is guided toward a balanced use of material goods in temperance and contentment (1 Tim. 6:6-8). Excessive acquisitiveness... is responsible for a large part of the ecological destruction of our planet and in the final analysis this destruction proves to be at the expense of all humanity, including those who desire to enrich themselves.

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 1998

The liturgy... 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 point of view to a fuller, spiritual vision: "In Him all things live, move, and have their being" (Acts 17.28)... The liturgy is the eternal celebration of the fragile beauty of this world. This... [implies] a way of life that is respectful of the divine presence in creation. 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...

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2006

CONSUMERISM IS DEFINED AS A MATERIALIST ATTITUDE TOWARD THE world in which satisfaction is sought through material goods more than from the things of God, the virtues or the spiritual life. It identifies a lifestyle in which a large number of individuals obtain more than is needed, more than is necessary for fulfillment, and more than what God's Earth can sustainably provide.

Consumerism is also a social and economic condition in which artificial desire is deliberately created that causes individuals to purchase goods and services in ever greater amounts beyond what they require and beyond what the earth can provide. Planned obsolescence, mass marketing and most advertising promote this artificial and manipulated condition in which people desire more things than they need.

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew probes deep into this problem and describes consumerism as "...issuing from a worldview of estrangement from self, from land and from God. Consuming the fruits of the earth unrestrained, we become consumed ourselves by avarice and greed. Excessive consumption leaves us emptied and out-of-touch with our deepest self." (Santa Barbara, November 8, 1997)

Consumerism represents a critical cultural predicament because it so pervasively afflicts western civilization, intensifies pollution, and degrades God's Creation. This artificially cultivated lifestyle is central to what Christians are called to confront if we are to be good stewards of God's earth. As Orthodox Christians, we have a responsibility to protect the sacred gift of creation. How we live our lives and make purchasing decisions have profound impacts upon the condition of the world.

A principle in the Scriptures is that people can never be satisfied when they live solely by economic development - nor can they find satisfaction by pursuing the artificial development of false needs. At the same time excessive acquisitiveness is responsible for a large part of the ecological destruction of our planet. His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew brings this situation into sharp focus:

Man takes from the natural world not only that which is necessary, but he often seeks to satisfy false needs.... Twenty percent of humanity consumes eighty percent of the world's wealth and accounts for an equal percentage of the world's ecological catastrophes.

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, June, 1997

This observation introduces the disparities in how our society divides and distributes the world's materials. The most recent studies show that the wealthiest 20% of the world's population - living primarily in North America, Western Europe and Japan - account for about 78% of total consumption. The poorest 20% use a tiny 1.5%.

If we examine the data on resource distribution one step further, we find that the wealthiest 10% in the world are responsible for 59% of consumption while the poorest 10% account for just 0.5%.

Looking just at the United States, Americans are only 4% of the world's population, but we take far and away the largest slice of the world's resources as we use between 25% and 30% of its energy and materials.

This disparity in resource distribution is the evidence of gross imbalance; some say it the evidence of injustice. This brings into focus the problem of consumerism. A debate exists over whether the problem of overconsumption arises because the world's population is steadily increasing, or because wealthy people are taking an unjustly large slice of the world's resources.

Research indicates that both factors are important. In balance however it appears that the behavior of people is more important than the total numbers. To understand this relationship, contrast what the world would be like in the following two scenarios: If the world's people had the high productivity of the Swiss, the frugal habits of the Chinese, the high educational level of Canadians, the egalitarian instincts of Swedes, and the social discipline of the Japanese, the planet could support many times its present population without deprivation. Alternatively, if the world had the productivity of Somalia, the consumption habits of the United States, the educational level of Sudan, the inequality of India, and the social discipline of El Salvador, the planet could not support anything near its present population. Population numbers, while important, are not as significant as individual behavior.

The behavior of citizens is driven by their values and needs. The values of people are what determine their choices. As Orthodox Christians, we need to recall our Church's teaching about use of the world, and distinguish between that view and the view that is promoted by the commercial culture. Jesus Christ taught that where our heart is, there also is our treasure. He tells us, "*keep your eye single that your bodies might be filled with light*" (Matt 6:22). This implies putting God first in all things. He informs us that we cannot go in two directions, loving God but also loving mammon, "*for no one can serve two masters*" (Matt 6:24). Christ concludes this sequence with a broad but penetrating conclusion: "*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all else shall be added unto you*" (Matt. 6:33). This guidance gives us direction into an ascetic way of life that addresses the problem of consumerism. This means a lifestyle in which one uses what is necessary for health, sustenance and shelter, but it does not mean acquisition to excess.

This teaching is crucial for the life and health of the world. Humans now take more from the planet than it can sustain. Overconsumption by a minority results in underconsumption and deprivation by many others. It further results in a reduction of the planet's ability to sustain a stable social order because the world's resources are limited. Both problems are serious and create further consequences. Excessive demand

on the world's resources results in pollution, degradation and destruction to the biological systems that support human life and all other life. The deprivation of basic necessities to poor people exacerbates inequalities, causes social and political unrest, and becomes the basis for wars and rebellions that keep the world in turmoil and violence. What makes this so serious is that inequalities are accelerating and environmental pollution is becoming more intense. If the present trends continue, the serious problems of the past decade will intensify and become much more serious.

To see deeper into this situation, consider the following emerging condition. Over the past century America has led the world in innovation, industry and enterprise. Alongside its wealth of material goods it has given the world an unattainable striving for more physical things and the assumption that these things are keys to "the good life." This model has spread around the world and taken hold in many developing nations.

China now has a population four times larger than the United States. This emerging superpower provides a closeup view on the world's changing realities. For years, China's city streets were a virtual sea of people on bicycles. As recently as 1980, private cars were rarely seen. By 2000, five million cars moved people and goods around its cities. Just ten years later, General Motors reports that more cars were sold in China during 2010 than in the U.S. This boom in auto sales has given Chinese cities, like many western cities, terrific traffic jams – and air pollution far more intense than any American city. As China increases its reliance on the automobile, this will mean more pollution, more traffic, more fossil fuel use, and more demand on a crucial but dwindling global resource base. Cars, trucks, and other forms of transportation account for over sixty percent of global oil consumption. With transportation systems over-reliant on fossil fuels, analysts forecast a rise in oil prices and a future collision with the reality of finite resources. What then for society?

The problem is more than energy. China – along with much of the developing world – is changing its diet. Following the western example, China is transiting from a predominantly vegetarian diet to one with an emphasis on meat. Worldwide about one-third of all grain feeds livestock. In the U.S. seventy to eighty percent of grain goes to livestock. This dietary shift will translate into tremendous new demands for land and water because it takes several hundred times more water to grow a pound of beef than a pound of tomatoes. This shift will place greater environmental demands on water and land supplies. Already China is reaching the end of its ability to feed its huge population. The same is true in India, Pakistan, Egypt, Honduras and many other nations.

Consumerism Distorts Values

Consumerism is not only depriving some people of basic necessities while it degrades the earth, it is also distorting our values and perspective. As an example of misplaced priorities, The Worldwatch Institute reports that worldwide annual expenditures for cosmetics totals \$18 billion. In comparison the cost estimate for the elimination of hunger and malnutrition worldwide is roughly \$19 billion.

For another comparison of priorities, U.S. and European expenditures on pet food and pet grooming total \$17 billion a year. The estimated cost for providing clean drinking water, immunizing every child against preventable diseases, and achieving universal literacy is \$16.3 billion.

Because values are distorted, additional issues arise as a direct result of consumerism. As Christians we may call unbridled, profligate consumption a form of sin, a condition caused by a lack of justice resulting in a misplaced order of priorities. Social scientists and psychologists use a stronger term. Health professionals consider consumerism a form of addiction. Clinical psychologists observe that habitual energy use and out-of-control consumption in the U.S. is quite similar to the well-known behavioral patterns of substance abusers. Epidemiologist Dr. Richard Eckersley, MD, elaborates on this theme.

Addiction is a hallmark of our era.... It reflects that we don't have culturally promoted kinds of deeper forms of meaning and purpose in our lives. So we make up for it by consuming more. But the evidence is overwhelming that people who are characterized by materialistic attitudes and values actually experience lower well-being, lower happiness, more depression and anxiety and anger than people who aren't materialistic.

[in Chas. Shaw, "Are You Unhappy? Is It Because of Consumer Addiction?" AlterNet, April 11, 2008]

Somehow our modern culture responds differently to the idea of sin than to the idea of addiction. As a society it may be that we have grown so complacent by the casual use of the term "sin" that it has lost its historical power to trigger repentance. The word addiction sounds more serious to the modern mind. In some ways the concept of addiction now appears to have the power that the word sin once conveyed.

When we look at environmental pollution and degradation, we are looking at the consequences of millions of people and their addiction to consumerism and energy. The degradation of the environment is the evidence of this collective addiction. An individual addicted to some controlled substance primarily harms his or her own life.

When an entire society becomes addicted, it causes a far more serious predicament because it perpetuates a way of life that is unsustainable and literally consuming ourselves out of house and home.

A difference between an addict to a controlled substance and an individual addicted to consumerism is that the consumer doesn't feel like an addict. A person caught up in consumerism may regularly participate in Church services, donate to good causes, take regular showers, buy organic food and supplies at local stores, and obey the law. This woman or man feels clean and hasn't done anything dishonorable. Nevertheless the consumer lifestyle that this person is living is destroying the planet. This points out how one of the first marks of addiction is disbelief or denial. We don't want to believe it because to some extent the action is enjoyable.

A second mark of addiction is a sense of helplessness. We don't know how to get out of the situation that we have created. Life without the addiction appears so bland and dull and primitive as to not be worth living. For those of us in the thrall of consumerism, we can scarcely imagine life without our conveniences and the fossil fuels that allow transportation and unfettered access to places and people. It is hard to break out of overconsumption because the economy itself is addicted to energy and our

economic system sends us messages designed to reinforce our addiction into higher and higher levels of consumption. For instance, a banner at a gas station reads, "We fuel your freedom." But there is no such thing as an external fueling of freedom! It is a huge lie!

That slogan may be effective as advertising, and it may touch a deep yearning for freedom, but without responsibility for the effects of our actions, there is no genuine freedom. Instead, we let ourselves be manipulated into attitudes and actions that hold our families and future generations in servitude to support the excesses in our present economy. The truth is that no matter how clean we may feel, no matter how healthy and righteous we may consider ourselves, we are part of a society-wide addiction to creature comforts and energy. We can't live sustainably with it and we don't think that we can live without it - and this is the condition which is destroying the planet. Until we face this addiction to consumerism, we're not going to realize that we are not free, but rather fueling future destruction, even an apocalypse of our own making.

There is an irony hidden in this in this dilemma. A study at the University of Chicago found that middle class Americans were not as happy nor as satisfied with their lives as poor Cubans. The Cubans possess far fewer creature comforts, but they enjoy life more, especially a warm and supportive connection to their neighbors and families. What does this tell us about our high-energy, consumer-driven way of life?

An End of Our Own Making

Our failure to live with restraint and sensitivity to justice in distributing the wealth of the planet is leading our country and the world to the brink of a massive human-created disaster. Almost twenty years ago this problem was alarming leading scientists at the U.S. National Academy of Science. To alert the public, they issued a stern warning to humanity telling us that fundamental changes were urgent:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.

- World Scientists Warning to Humanity (1993)

To keep scientific findings in perspective, reports such as this one are crucial for society. Peer-reviewed science serves as the eyes of society. Scientists are highly skilled at measuring changes in the world. They tell us what is happening. This should be distinguished from telling us what is right and wrong; that is the job of religion.

As scientists assess the consequences of overconsumption, they report that population growth interacts with consumption habits to intensify environmental problems and compound human suffering. Here are a few of their major observations:

- Worldwide, 800 million people are malnourished. As population grows, it will be even more difficult to produce sufficient food for all. A 2005 U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) study found that in 64 out of 105 low-income countries, food production is lagging behind population growth. As food production per person falls, hunger increases.
- More than 386 million people in 31 countries now face water shortages and scarcity. As population grows, as climate change intensifies and increases the frequency of droughts, water shortages will intensify.
- Habitat loss is the single greatest threat to animal diversity throughout

the world. Habitat loss is caused by expanding human settlements, by the irresponsible logging of forests and unsustainable resource extraction, and by environmentally harmful trade practices. Species are being lost at rates one hundred to one thousand times faster than the natural rate of extinction. The loss of plant and animal species within an ecosystem irrevocably alters the environment in unpredictable and potentially devastating ways.

- In addition forests are shrinking; ocean fisheries are declining, and in some areas near collapse; topsoil is eroding; and the climate is changing and heading into increasing levels of turmoil and disruption.

These are some of the effects of overconsumption. They are happening while world population is increasing by about 81 million people per year. This rate of growth makes it difficult for low-income countries to improve their economic conditions.

While these problems are ecological and social in appearance, at their core they are moral and ethical problems. The roots of these conditions lie in the attitudes of the human heart. To solve these problems, we must solve the prior and deeper problem of selfish behavior. Some reflection is helpful here. In the Gospel of Saint Matthew Jesus lists only one criterion for salvation. He declares, *“as you do it to the least of these my brethren, you do it unto me.”* We are to treat each person as if he or she is Jesus Christ. The Church in her wisdom has given us the Divine Liturgy so that we may access the heavenly realm and taste the joys and blessedness of heaven. This nurtures an ability to treat each person as Christ. It helps us to repent and make those changes that may be necessary so that we may do God’s will *“on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Significantly the Apostle John in the Book of Revelation gives us a second criterion for the Judgement and salvation. In blunt language, he says that the prophets go into the Kingdom and so do the saints. But then he declares, *“those that destroy the earth, God will destroy”* (Rev. 11:18). In other words how each one of us deals with the issues of earth stewardship go to the very heart of our purpose on earth. We are to have dominion, which means we are to treat the world (and each person) as Jesus Christ would treat it.

Products and goods are necessary in our lives, but there is a spiritual test here: We may not allow the acquisition of products and goods to become the driving force in our lives. Consumer goods are required for health, shelter and the necessities of life, but no person should keep acquiring them needlessly to feel better or to compete with friends and neighbors. Instead, Christians should seek a simpler lifestyle with sharing

and caring for the whole so that the natural environment can be sustained and damage to God's creation minimized.

Healing the Disease of Consumerism

How shall we heal consumerism in our lives? The issue is so massive that no one action is adequate to overcome this modern monster. To confront the demon of overconsumption, a special strategy is required. We need to put on the full complement of our Orthodox tradition. Saint Paul says it better. We need to put on "*the whole armor of God.*" To get us started, here are three easy-to-use tools, three inter-related sets of guidance, presented as "themes." Consider these three as akin to a team, like "the three musketeers." They must work together to achieve success. When these interlocking tools are juxtaposed and their guidance woven together, they put families and parishes on the road to a Christian healing of our lifestyle and at the same time, they foster the development of authentic Christian culture.

It should go without saying that these "tools" are only effective when they are picked up and used. Like a hammer and nails, or a hand saw, they will not - and cannot - operate by themselves. It takes human skill, will, ingenuity, determination, and even art to apply them in such a way that they can cut away the disease that lies at the core of our national addiction and provide a redirection in our lives and the lives of our parishes. But, when equipped with these tools, our parishes can become models of healing and constructive action rather than sheep-like captives to the consumer culture.

These "tools" are simple and involve the following:

- (1) The traditional Orthodox ethos
- (2) A Code of Conduct, called "Ten Pathways for Healing"
- (3) The Call of the Church

This latter quality is presented through the clarion voice of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew together with all the other Orthodox patriarchs as they provide spiritual direction to address this pernicious problem. These three, woven together, are essential if we are going to be successful in addressing the disease of consumerism.

1. The Traditional Orthodox Ethos

Let us first recall the *ethos* of the Church. *Ethos* is a Greek word that describes the character or spirit of a culture or faith. Ethos is essentially theology applied to daily life. For Orthodox Christians our ethos gives us direction on how to live our beliefs - in a

way that is consistent with our life in Christ and the Church. The Orthodox ethos guides us into fulfilling our purpose in the world. The Church has always taught that human purpose is to restore a proper relationship between God and the world.

The traditional *ethos* of the Church shows us how to apply our faith in a manner that is consistent with human purpose and all that Jesus Christ taught. This ethos, when applied to consumerism, includes a eucharistic ethos, an ascetic ethos, and a liturgical ethos. Each of these facets of faith addresses the consumer mentality from a different perspective and with a distinct emphasis.

◆ The ***EUCCHARISTIC ETHOS*** begins with thanksgiving. This aspect of Christian practice prayerfully thanks God for food and all that sustains life. It continues with thankfulness for what God places into human care and experience. It deepens as we commend back to God all that we have and are in a loving consecration of ourselves and the things of the world back to God. This helps us remember that our role is as servants doing His will in creation. As this takes place, a loosening of worldly attachments happens along with increased realization that all good gifts and blessings are from above.

In the Divine Liturgy the priest consecrates bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This action epitomizes the eucharistic ethos. Christ and the Holy Spirit infuse these worldly substances in such a way that each partaker is quickened in the life and presence of Christ. This quickening helps each recipient to imitate the consecrating action of the priest and Jesus Christ in his or her own sphere. A eucharistic mentality develops which encourages the observant Christian to respect all things in the world as God's gift. A sacred awareness emerges regarding our brothers and sisters in Christ and all the things which God has placed into human care.

Our Orthodox eucharistic ethos leads to a vision by which we regard all things as holy; they become "fruits of creation" to which are due respect. This causes us to treat them with care, consciousness, remembrance of their origin, and concern for their destiny. Once this sacred vision of creation is awakened, it weans us from the consumer mentality which can be characterized as a superficial, material and acquisitive attitude toward the world and all that is in it. The more that this eucharistic ethos is practiced, the more it awakens a realization that *"in Him we live and move and have our being."*

◆ The Church also gives us an ***ASCETIC ETHOS***. An ascetic ethos involves fasting and self-denial. Fasting teaches us to voluntarily limit our food requirements and to cleanse ourselves of carnal desire so that desire can recover its original character as a yearning for God and love of neighbor. The ascetic ethos over time cultivates a mental

and spiritual transformation from an exploitive relationship with nature and people to one which is modeled on the Eucharist.

With an ethos of asceticism and the spirit of fasting Christians can realize the absurdity of advertising which encourages false needs and the acquisitiveness which underlies consumerism. Asceticism provides perspective on the instinct to possession, the drive for power and the flight to hedonism. Asceticism becomes essential if we are to limit our desires and thereby increase our respect for the earth and its life. This becomes foundational for the restoration of the parish as community. Humanity needs a simpler way of life, a renewed and revitalized asceticism, for the sake of creation.

Asceticism, it should be recalled, is not a flight from the world. It is just the opposite. It is a corrective practice that holds a vision of repentance that can lead us through the problems that material mindedness has created. The more we study and embrace asceticism, the more it opens visions of new possibilities in healing the earth. The ascetic ethos provides a perspective that places technology into its proper context so that we can address the invasion of electronic communications and other applications of science. Asceticism empowers us to fight, on behalf of truth and goodness, the temptation to construct the world as a closed system devoid of God. If Christians can restore a cosmic sense to their lifestyle, their sacramental life, and their asceticism, they can show the way to address many of the perplexing issues of our time.

◆ The Church teaches a *LITURGICAL ETHOS*. The liturgical ethos emphasizes cooperation, community, and sharing while referring all of creation and human endeavor back to God. The liturgical ethos is a human amplification of the song of creation which continually praises its Maker. It fosters cooperation and associations which allow Christians to counter the social structures of sin with structures of virtue, harmony, and peace with the land. It can fuel new forms of cooperation for food cultivation and communities that can embody the Orthodox ethic of creation care.

The liturgical ethic confronts the lie of individualism which is a pillar of the consumer mentality. Individualism isolates people from each other and causes them to seek their own gain, separate from their neighbors and fellow parishioners. The liturgical ethos will cultivate a new sense of beauty which is inward, which is of God, and which is noetically sensed as filling all things - in contrast to the worldly concept of beauty which glorifies glitz and glamour and denies the sacred in material things. Through the liturgical ethos of the Church Christians can join together in an inspirational song of cooperation and thanksgiving, holding festivals that celebrate the goodness of life, and knowing that we all share the same air, water and land.

The fathers of the Church speak of a cosmic liturgy. The Scriptures tell us of the praise that trees and all creation have for their Creator-Maker. We are to enter into that cosmic liturgy of praise and worship in such a manner that all of our actions give witness to God and a vision of human life integrated into the ecosystem of the planet.

The Orthodox Tradition has historically summarized these manifestations of our Eastern Christian ethos as prayer, fasting and almsgiving. This commentary embroiders upon this summarization in a way that fits the necessity of our time.

In summary the ethos of the Orthodox Church observes a movement of spiritual energy from God, through humanity as priest of creation, back to God in a worship and praise that is both material and spiritual. In the midst of this grand, circular movement of creation from God, of humans recognizing their place in creation, and finally of each person consecrating and returning all things back to God, we enter a sort of “priesthood training” - i.e., the priesthood of all believers - through a progression of realizations and action. This begins by respecting all things material, in fact every thing in the world, including ourselves and our neighbors, and being thankful for it all. This thankfulness initiates us into a grand vision that is somewhat hidden, but not entirely. This is the vision of Christ and the Holy Spirit filling all things. Our task is to draw out this hidden potentiality latent in material things and to let that latency shine forth in splendor and goodness and harmony to the fullest extent possible. This combines spiritual sensitivity and *theosis* with art and poetry, and with science and technical knowledge. We can't yet discern all of what this will involve, but we can do our part through embracing our traditional Orthodox Christian ethos which will expedite that coming forth.

2. Ten Pathways for Action

Once we have gained awareness of the traditional Orthodox ethos and have started to embrace its implications, we bring another layer, another dimension, to our arsenal of weapons by which we will reduce the force of consumerism in our lives. The next theme involves a set of ten actions that blend spiritual virtue with practical activity in such a manner that a “code of conduct” emerges. This code focuses our efforts to develop a frugal and self-reliant way of living. As you review these principles, note that there is nothing complicated here. These actions are all simple and easy to understand.

◆ Live your faith

Apply your faith to every dimension of life. Follow the ascetic examples of the saints of the Church who minimized their use and abuse of the world. We enjoy their blessings today because they loved God and spread His love and presence to all around them, including our own generation.

◆ Pay attention to what you eat

As much as possible, avoid foods that are grown with pesticides, nurtured in feedlots, or produced at a great distance from where you live. Vote with your dollars for clean food and against the spread of toxins in our bodies, on the land, and in the water. For perspective, exotic foods shipped from distant places around the globe will use about ten times more energy than food grown near your home.

◆ Reduce, Reuse, Repair and Recycle

The following code of words reshapes our attitudes and behavior.

Reduce: Avoid buying what you don't need — and when you do purchase that dishwasher or lawnmower or new toilet, spend the extra money for an energy efficient model.

Re-use: Buy used goods whenever possible, and wring the last drop of usefulness out of everything you own. In the beginning acquire durable quality things that will last and endure.

Recycle: Send consumable materials back for reuse. Recycle everything. This is the biblical principle of restoration - or renewal. We may take from the earth, but we are to return and restore all that we can back to usefulness.

Repair: Fix it when you can. If you can't fix it, find someone who can.

◆ **Minimize fossil fuel use**

Remember that all internal combustion engines are polluting, and their use should be minimized. Find alternatives. By paying attention to how you use energy, you reduce your contribution to global climate change.

◆ **Encourage agriculture and industry to improve environmental practices**

The choices we make about what to consume must encourage and support good business and good ecological behavior. Our political choices must support sound government regulation in the public interest. Our conversation must encourage and cultivate wider awareness of these goals.

◆ **Support thoughtful innovations in manufacturing and production**

Use alternative forms of energy. Encourage your parish to support the same. It should be obvious that drilling for more oil is no longer an innovation.

◆ **Prioritize what you consume**

Think before you buy, especially large expensive objects. Don't drive yourself mad by fretting over the smaller items. It's easy to be distracted by questions like the paper bag versus plastic puzzle, but an energy-hog refrigerator or a gas-guzzling vehicle are much more worthy of attention.

◆ **Vote your beliefs**

Political engagement enables the spread of environmentally conscious policies. Without thoughtful action on public policy, conscientious individuals are swimming upstream against the cultural current.

◆ **Reduce travel**

Work close to home to shorten your commute; eat locally grown food; patronize local businesses; walk whenever possible. Avoid unnecessary trips or vacations to distant locations. These steps will reduce your consumption of energy and improve your connection to your community and local parish.

◆ **Enjoy the world and all things beautiful**

There is goodness in the world, and we should train ourselves to be stewards of God's creation and not despotic owners. Share what you have. Enjoy the inspiring beauties of the natural world. Make an effort to get out into wild nature and experience the blessings of fresh air, flowing water, growing trees and birds and wildlife. These are among life's enduring pleasures.

These “pathways” are easy to understand. If we absorb these principled actions into our attitudes and behavior, they shape a lifestyle that can help make us champion stewards of God’s creation as opposed to champion consumers and degraders of the world.

Rather than trying to embrace them all at once, take them one at a time, perhaps one new “pathway” each week or each month. Study their implications and set up a framework to apply them, one at a time. Parish discussion groups can be helpful. By applying a disciplined “divide and conquer” approach, a path emerges that allows the gradual integration of these steps to a richer and more spiritually fulfilling way of life.

We are establishing goals for a form of repentance that deals with how we live in the world and use its materials. The key to success comes from a change of heart in how we relate to God’s creation. The heart, by its nature, does not change without some commitment out of love for God to heal the world, beginning with our own behavior. The task is a change in lifestyle, away from unsustainable habits of consumption and energy use, and toward a life that harmonizes with the ecosystem of the planet. Genuine change requires prayer and a fervent act of will. The *metanoia* (or change in thinking) to which Christ calls us implies a change in how we see the world, in how we think about it, and in how we respond to it and each other. In this way we submit to God’s original plan for the world and our purpose in it.

These “pathways for action” help us to step away from the unintentional destruction that is hidden in the consumer lifestyle. This separation is essential if we are to recover community and a more comprehensive Orthodox Christian way of life. If we can do this, we will also recover and find a greater measure of joy and fulfillment in our lives. This is part of the legacy that we will hand on to future generations.

3. The Call of the Church

Along with our Orthodox *ethos* and the pathways into ecological action, we must listen to the voice of the Church. That voice is most clearly articulated in the words of the Orthodox patriarchs across all jurisdictions. On these issues of a right relation to God’s creation, the patriarchs are speaking with one, strong, clear and unified voice. They call the faithful to learn about environmental issues and to take action in accordance with our theology. They emphasize that we must repent and change our lives so that we are not participants in the defilement of God’s world.

Out of hundreds of statements, here are ten key themes on which the Orthodox patriarchs are giving spiritual direction to the Church and calling the faithful to action.

In their spiritual direction they invite us - bishops, priests, parishioners, all people who will listen - into a right ordering of our behavior and lifestyle so that a more intentionally Christian way of life can emerge.

The following statements summarize their “calls” to the Church. They are titled for identification; each call is embellished with an additional patriarchal declaration to give it depth and definition. In blunt language the patriarchs tell us what we must do to live our faith with integrity in the modern world.

◆ Education

“Our first duty is to sensitize the human conscience so that people realize that when they utilize the resources of the planet, they should do this in a devout and eucharistic way.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, New York, 2000

“We challenge each Church and religious community to educate its own members through preaching, teaching, and example. They should encourage men and women of faith actively to participate in the work of environmental justice whatever their walk of life”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Halki, 1997

◆ An Ascetic ethos

“Acquire an ascetic ethos, bearing in mind that everything in the natural world, whether great or small, has its importance for the life of the world, and nothing is useless or contemptible.”

+HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, 1990

“Asceticism is necessary to fight against the instinct of possession, blind power and... hedonism. Asceticism is indispensable if we are to achieve that limitation of desires which will make it possible to respect the earth and its life, and to bring into operation sharing on a planetary scale.... Asceticism is also necessary as a basis for that profound sympathy with nature which is often experienced by today's youth, who have no other way toward the mysterious other than the beauty of nature.

- HB Patriarch Ignatius IV, Switzerland, 1989

◆ Love God's creation

“Regard yourselves as being responsible before God for every creature and treat every thing with love and care.”

+HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, 1990

“Let us proceed with much love toward the natural world that surrounds us... In the end, people protect only that which they truly love.”

- HB Archbishop Anastasios, Albanian Orthodox Church, 2002

◆ Transfigure the world

“We must understand the need to work together for the transfiguration of this wonderful land...”

+HB Patriarch Alexey, Moscow, 2000

“We need to recover, with a view to the transfiguration of nature, the three traditional forms of asceticism: fasting, charity and vigilance.”

- HB Patriarch Ignatius IV, Switzerland, 1989

◆ Future generations

“We should hand [the material world] on to the generations that come after us... enhanced and with greater capacity for supporting life.”

- HB Patriarch Maxim, Bulgarian Orth. Church, 1997

“In the years ahead, 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... will benefit future generation by leaving behind a cleaner, better world. We owe it to our Creator. And we owe it to our children.

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2003

◆ Take action on climate change

“We call on the world’s leaders to take action to halt the destructive changes to the global climate that are being caused by human activity.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 1997

“We paternally urge everyone to come to the realization of their responsibility and do whatever they can to avert the increase of the temperature on the earth and the aggravation of environmental conditions.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2002

◆ Unity

“Christians must call upon humanity to come together in a united effort for the safeguarding of the earth and for its revitalization.”

- HB Patriarch Ignatius IV, March, 1989

“We call upon all of you, beloved brethren and children in the Lord, to take part in the titanic and righteous battle to alleviate the environmental crisis, and to prevent the even worse results that derive from its consequences.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2010

◆ Address consumerism

“Whatever the manner of our overconsumption, let us take action, each one from his own position and setting, giving every effort to an amelioration of senseless consumption.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2006

“By reducing our consumption, in Orthodox Theology "*enkratia*" or self-control, we ensure that resources are also left for others in the world.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 1997

◆ Practicality

“Our attention must be given to developing programs of practical application.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 1994

“Tree-planting initiatives must be undertaken.... Groups of students can cultivate gardens, while others can care and tend to forest regions. Along with lectures, seminars should be organized intended on enlightening students concerning planting procedures, gardening and similar activities. Groups of children in secular, parochial and catechetical schools may adopt vegetable or flower gardens, forested regions, church compounds, abandoned properties, farm regions cultivated for the common good, or areas with natural beauty which they will care for on a voluntary basis. Their example can sensitize their parents and elders who can then be motivated to do likewise.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 1994

◆ Participate in this work

“Christians will act by example, showing the cultural, social and ecological richness of traditional ascetic values.... This will be a common task if, on the initiative of Christians.... This joint effort of revitalization will provoke a spiritual revolution, the repercussions of which will gradually be inscribed in social and economic life.

- HB Patriarch Ignatius, Switzerland, 1989

“We call on all of you to join us in this cause. This can be our important contribution to the great debate about climate change. We must be spokespeople for an ecological ethic that reminds the world that it is not ours to use for our own convenience.”

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 1997

From all that has been presented, it should be clear that consumerism is not merely some minor economic or technological miscalculation. This is a major moral and spiritual issue. If we are going to address this problem successfully, we have to see this as a challenge to our ability to live connected to Jesus Christ and the way of life which that implies. It will not be enough merely to want change to take place. Integrity demands that we must each become the change that we wish to see in the world.

One of the obvious conclusions from this analysis is that we are called to a more intentionally Christian way of life. The patriarchs of the Church have spoken to this problem – especially Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Their witness has been prophetic in ways strikingly similar to the calls of the Old Testament prophets. The reluctance of Church members, including some clergy, to act on their message shows the extent to which we have become captives to the consumer culture. Now, after more than twenty years of prophetic witness, isn't it time that we acknowledge that the patriarchs have been right? Shouldn't this also mean that we need to become far more serious about changing the attitudes that determine how we live?

During the 2002 Symposium on the Adriatic Sea, sponsored by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the question of how to address consumerism was raised by the gathered religious leaders. To provide broad direction to Church and society, HAH signed a declaration which offered this guidance:

“What is required is an act of repentance and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation....

“A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine *conversion* in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act.”

- The Common Declaration of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope John Paul II, June 10, 2002

We have now heard from our Orthodox patriarchs. We have read of the serious problems that addiction to consumption causes. We have heard how much more of the world's resources is required to support an American than people in other parts of the world. We have seen the data which shows that we are destroying our planet and hope for the future. We should know that each of us is responsible for the future. We can recall the fate of those who ignored the prophetic voices of the past, such as righteous Noah before the Flood. What more does it take to motivate us into action?

*The grace and infinite mercy of the Creator of all things and
Provident God be with all of you, beloved brothers and sisters
and children of the Church.*

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
September 1, 1994