

† B A R T H O L O M E W

By the Mercy of God,

Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome, and Ecumenical Patriarch,

To all the Faithful of the Church:

Grace, mercy, and peace from the Creator of all Creation

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ¹

*September 1, 1992*²

MATTER AND SPIRIT

The beginning of the ecclesiastical year, sanctified by the traditional celebration of the *Indictus*, also constitutes a characteristic juncture in the life of the entire creation that surrounds us. This juncture is known, at least to those residing in the northern hemisphere of our planet, as the commencement of autumn; to those living in the southern parts of the world, it is known as the beginning of spring.

Thus, “autumn” and “spring,” which to the average person usually signify diametrically opposed factors, actually converge and coincide in the inauguration of the ecclesiastical year as *one entity* established by God.

The faithful, therefore, are able to recognize that, in essence, beginning and end constitute two aspects of the same created reality, which is bound to march toward its final destination in both “glory” and “infamy.” Therefore, we should not allow the shape and rhythm of the present world to frighten us. In accepting this fundamental truth, we become steadfast and immovable upon the rock of faith. Thus, our sorrowful journey through whatever is “passing” and whatever is “stable” is

¹ The customary address and introduction of encyclical letters on the occasion of the opening of the ecclesiastical year on September 1, which also marks the prescribed day of prayer for the protection and preservation of the natural environment in the Orthodox Church.

² There was no encyclical published in September, 1991. Patriarch Dimitrios died on October 2nd and Patriarch Bartholomew was elected on October 22nd.

delivered, at the very outset, from the moral danger which ever lies in ambush, namely, that of elevating ourselves to the whim of power which starts from the ground up or else of sinking impiously into the obscurity of despair out of worldly weakness.

In the language of the Church Fathers, the human person “stands at the border” between material and spiritual creation. Humanity is a “borderer” with regard to space and time as well; thus, in “an hour of temptation,” one is able courageously to foretaste the “day of salvation.”

However, through the sacred correlations mentioned above, creation is by no means at all reduced to a level of irresponsible relativity or relativism. On the contrary, in this way, creation emerges in its God-pleasing uniqueness and sacredness. Thus, “summer” and “winter,” “light” and “darkness,” “greatness” and “smallness,” “instant” and “eternal,” “material” and “spiritual;” “divine” and “human,” are proven not to be contrary to each other, but rather to be deeply correlated. For, the redeeming will of the benevolent God, who is beyond all things, is realized gradually in time and in space through all of these things.

It is, however, precisely within the framework of the sacred connection and correlation of these ideas that God has not allowed humanity to be a mere spectator or an irresponsible consumer of the world and of all that is in the world. Indeed, humanity has been called to assume the task of being primarily a partaker and a sharer in the responsibility for everything in the created world. Endowed, therefore, from the beginning with “the image of God,” humanity is called to continual self-transcendence so that, in responsible synergy with God the Creator, each person might sanctify the entire world, thus becoming a faithful “minister” and “steward.”

MINISTER AND STEWARD

It is clear that the concepts of *minister* and *steward*³ by far exceeds the contemporary and internationally accepted ideal of the person called “an ecologist.” Usually, we know neither how such an ecologist understands the concept of *oikos* [the Greek word for “house”] nor how that person regards *logos* [the Greek word for “word”]. Today everyone speaks of the dangers facing the “ecosystem” as numbering in the thousands; yet few make any reference at all to the God who “constituted” all things. There are those who anxiously keep records of constantly perishing “deposits” of the main elements of life and movements in nature, again without uttering a word about God, who in His infinite goodwill and beneficence is the “depositor” of all His goods for our use and nourishment. In wisdom God “established heaven and earth,” thus abundantly enriching the universe with every kind of source of living water.

At any rate, being God’s minister and steward over all of creation does not mean that humanity simply prospers or is happy in the world. This would be crude self-sufficiency and impious minimalism. The main and lasting benefit of these qualifications is that, by using the world in a pious manner, humanity experiences the blessed evolution from the stage of “divine image” to that of “divine likeness.” In similar fashion, every other good element of the universe is transformed, by the grace of God and even without human intervention, from the stage of “potentiality” to that of “actuality,” in fulfillment of the pre-eternal plan of the entire divine economy.

In addressing these pious thoughts to the faithful of our Church and every person of goodwill, it is our desire, in a manner that is worthy of and pleasing to God, to commemorate and celebrate the inauguration of the *Indictus* as the special day for the protection of all creation. This day was established three years ago by the

³ The Greek word for “steward” is *oikonomos*.

Mother Holy Great Church of Christ and has now been accepted by all Orthodox throughout the world. Having done so, we should like to take the God-given opportunity to invite and encourage every person, and above all the faithful, to constantly watch over his or her fellow human beings and the world, for the benefit of us all and for the glory of the Creator.

Our words on this auspicious day, and the sacred thoughts, which reach beyond these words, are even more timely inasmuch as they are addressed from the sacred center of the Phanar⁴ on the occasion of the first and historic assembly of all the hierarchs in active service of the most venerable Ecumenical Throne. Through this sacred assembly the Mother Church seeks more direct cooperation and better coordination by the Holy and Sacred Synod with the hierarchs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate throughout the world, namely with those who shepherd dioceses and those who serve in some other capacity. This assembly of our hierarchy, which the Holy Synod decided to convene on a bi-annual basis, brings numerous blessings, such as closer communication and communion among brothers who share responsibility, as well as an exchange of information and a mutual support. However, it further provides great comfort and encouragement to the children of the Church scattered in the four corners of the earth and represented here by their spiritual leaders. When the faithful around the world from time to time see all of their hierarchy presented and represented as one body, then they recognize it as “divine intervention” against the temptations, sorrows and dangers in the world, and thus feel greater security in God.

⁴ *Phanar*, meaning ‘lighthouse’ in Greek, refers to the old lighthouse quarter of Istanbul and it is also the main quarter for Greeks. The name is also seen as coterminous with the Ecumenical Patriarchate since the residence, administrative offices, and cathedral of the Patriarch are there.