

† 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, 1993

CREATION *EX NIHILO*

Together with the other most holy sister Orthodox Churches, we have established September 1st of each year as a special day of concern for and commemoration of the natural environment that surrounds us. Again, this year, we are called to offer wholehearted praise to the Creator of everything both visible and invisible for having placed us as the ones first-fashioned in luscious paradise among all His own creation.

The most fundamental Orthodox doctrine – which addresses impartially the omnipotence, the omniscience, the extreme beneficence and the wakeful providence of the Creator, as well as the consideration and high regard in general for created beings and matter, with humanity as its crowning point – is indeed the doctrine of the creation of the world *ex nihilo* [literally, “out of nothing”].

Some people contemplate only what concerns the world and recognize the philosophical “web of the Athenians.” So they speak with irony of the conviction of faithful believers with regard to creation *ex nihilo*. In challenging this fundamental doctrine, they cite the merit of the corrupted and, in its redundancy, frivolous and

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.

refutable notion that “nothing can be amassed *ex nihilo*.” The only exception such people accept is that that, before there was absolute nothingness in relation to the world, God, as being without beginning or successor, and as being beyond and above space, time, quality, quantity, causal relationship or dependency, has always preceded and commanded everything.

In his epigrammatic statement that “God is love” (1 Jn. 4.16), St. John the Evangelist attributed to God, who lacks nothing and is without beginning, a compendious and comprehensive name, that of love, which is cardinal to all moral attributes. Therefore, we, who have received the revealed word of God, are justified in believing that everything has been created out of *absolute love* and in *absolute freedom* by God the Maker and Father of all who, according to St. Paul, calls “things from non-being into being” (Rom. 4.17).

In contemplating the creation of God within us and around us within this kind of God-given theological perspective, we are certainly justified in being overcome with total optimism, even when the elements of nature are faced with the greatest danger or when history is being gravely distorted. For, we recognize that “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them” (Wisdom of Solomon 3.1).

ADHERING TO THE PRECEPTS OF GOD

Therefore, before any abnormality in nature and history, the first requirement is not so much that we be wise and powerful in order to foresee in timely fashion and deal accordingly with certain earthquakes, floundering or some other usually unexpected calamity. Neither is it that we be armed with the provisions of worldly knowledge and science in order to drive back the powers marshaled against us by any enemy or invader. Rather, above all, we must be just, striving at every moment throughout our life to learn the *precepts* of God more perfectly and more profoundly.

This is why it is not incidental that, among the first things we do in Orthodox worship, is to praise the Lord, invoking Him that we be taught His immovable precepts which derive from Him only. Never are we so powerful and shielded from every unexpected force, as when we chant, as did the youths in the fire described in the Book of Daniel, the ode of the beloved: “Blessed are you, Lord, teach me your precepts.”

During this period, dear brothers and children in the Lord, we witness international organizations, interstate legislations and scientific research programs united in jeremiads and lamentations that toll the bell of danger in order that humanity might sober up in time before the coming of mass chaos. Such chaos, they say, would threaten universal order and balance in the various so-called “eco-systems,” not only of our planet, but also of the entire cosmos. Yet, during this same time, we, from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, address ourselves first to the conscience of every individual person, invite people each day and with innocent heart to taste the good things of God, partaking in trembling fear – though, simultaneously, in doxology and joy – of the good things of creation.

Panic has never allowed humanity to render judgments calmly or to balance justly its obligations towards itself, towards the world around, and towards the ever-watchful God above. However, it is precisely these obligations, as they have been coordinated from the very first moment of creation by the just-judging God, which constitute the “precepts” mentioned above. Usually, people speak out and go to great pains to mark and establish *human rights*, which, as a rule, are determined by self-interest and fear and always give rise to powers and demands, which separate persons from groups, from classes, from people.

The precepts of God, on the contrary, are by definition comprehensive and inclusive, as much of *the part* as of a *whole*. This is why, by learning and recognizing them, human beings are rendered, through God's grace, brothers and partakers

among themselves. Furthermore, through a eucharistic use of the world, they are rendered partakers of the world and of the infinite love of God, and not consumers, which the atheistic polity or eudemonistic instinct have taught through the hubristic progress of technology.

Thus, the first responsibility of the faithful is to examine and study continuously in greater depth the law and precepts of God. Thus, by becoming cheerful givers and grateful receivers of His wondrous things in this world, we may come to respect the balances of nature set up by Him.