

† 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, 1994

ALL OF CREATION GROANS

On a number of occasions in the ecclesiastical year, the Church prays that God may protect humanity from natural catastrophes: from earthquakes, storms, famine and floods. Yet, today, we observe the reverse. On September 1st, the day devoted to God's handiwork, the Church implores the Creator to protect nature from calamities of human origin, calamities such as pollution, war, exploitation, waste and secularism. It may seem strangely paradoxical that the body of believers, acting vicariously for the natural environment, beseeches God for protection against itself, against its own actions. Nevertheless, from this perspective, the Church, in its wisdom, brings before our eyes a message of deep significance, one that touches upon the central problems of fallen humanity and its restoration. This is the problem of the polarization of individual sin against collective responsibility.

Scripture informs us that if one member of the body is infirm, the entire body is also affected (1 Cor. 12.26). There is, after all, solidarity in the human race because, made as they are in the image of the Trinitarian God, human beings are interdependent and co-inherent. No man is an island. We are all "members one of

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.

another” (Eph. 4.25). Therefore, any action, performed by any member of the human race, inevitably affects all other members. Consequently, no one falls alone and no one is saved alone. According to Dostoevsky’s Staretz Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, we are each of us responsible for everyone and everything.

How does this central problem relate to the matter of protecting the environment against humankind's actions? It has become painfully apparent that humanity, both individually and collectively, no longer perceives the natural order as a sign and a sacrament of God but rather as an object of exploitation. There is no one that is not guilty of disrespecting nature. To respect nature is to recognize that all creatures and objects have a unique place in God’s creation. When we become sensitive to God’s world around us, we grow more conscious also of God’s world within us. In beginning to see nature as a work of God, we begin to see our own place as human beings within nature. The true appreciation of any object is to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Sin alone is mean and trivial, as are most of the products of a fallen and sinful technology. Yet, it is sin that is at the root of the prevailing, destruction of the environment. Humanity has failed in what was its noble vocation: to participate in God’s creative action in the world. It has succumbed to a theory of development that values production over human dignity and wealth over human integrity. We see, for example, delicate ecological balances being upset by the uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant life or by a reckless exploitation of natural resources. It cannot be over-emphasized that all of this, even if carried out in the name of progress and well-being, is ultimately to humankind’s disadvantage.

It is not without good cause, therefore, that “the whole of creation groans and travails” (Rom 8.22). Was it not originally seen by God to be good? Created by God, the world reflects divine wisdom, divine beauty and divine truth. Everything is from God, everything is permeated with divine energy; in this lies both the joy and

tragedy of the world and of life within it. The hymns and prayers in the Office of September 1st, composed by the gifted hymnographer of the Great Church, the late monk Gerasimos of the Holy Mountain,² extol the beauty of creation but also remind us of our tragic abuse of it.³ They call us to repent for our actions against God's gift to us. We have made this world ever more opaque, rendering it ever more tortured. The consequences of nature's confrontation with humanity have indeed been an unnatural disaster of enormous proportions. Is it not, therefore, only right that we Christians act today as nature's voice in raising its plea for salvation before the throne of God?

AN ECOLOGICAL ETHOS

The Church teaches that it is the destiny of humankind to restore the proper relationship between God and the world, just as it was in the Garden of Eden. Through repentance, two landscapes, the one human and the other natural, can become the objects of a caring and creative effort. However, repentance must be accompanied by three soundly focused principles, which manifest the ethos of the Orthodox Church. There is, first, *the eucharistic ethos*, which, above all else, means using the earth's natural resources with thankfulness, offering them back to God; indeed, not only them, but also ourselves. In the Eucharist, we return to God what is His own: namely, the bread and the wine. Representing the fruits of creation, the bread and wine are no longer imprisoned by a fallen world, but returned as liberated, purified from their fallen state, and capable of receiving the divine presence within

² Fr. Gerasimos was the elder of a community at Little St. Anne's Skete on Mt. Athos. A refined and renowned hymnographer of the Orthodox Church, he died in 1991.

³ See the *Office of Vespers for the Preservation of Creation* in *Orthodoxy and Ecology: Resource Book*, Bialystok: Syndesmos, 1996.

themselves. At the same time, we pray for ourselves to be sanctified, because through sin we have fallen away and have betrayed our baptismal promise.

Second, we have *the ascetic ethos* of Orthodoxy that involves fasting and other spiritual works. These make us recognize that everything we take for granted in fact comprise God's gifts provided in order to satisfy our needs. They are not ours to abuse and waste simply because we have the ability to pay for them.

Third, *the liturgical ethos* emphasizes community concern and sharing. We stand before God together; and we hold in common the earthly blessings that He has given to all creatures. Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs, as one of the holy Fathers of the Church reminds us. We stand before the Creator as the Church of God, which, according to Orthodox theology, is the continued incarnate presence of the Lord Jesus Christ on earth; His presence looks to the salvation of the world, not just of humanity but also of the entire creation. The ethos of the Church in all its expressions denotes a reverence for all matter: for the world around us, for other creatures, and for our own bodies.

Hence, our Patriarchal message for this day of protection for the environment is simply that we maintain a consistent attitude of respect in all our attitudes and actions toward the world. We cannot expect to leave no trace on the environment. However, we must choose either to make it reflect our greed and ugliness or else to use it in such a way that its beauty manifests God's handiwork through ours.