

† 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, 1996

A SPIRITUAL, NOT A SCIENTIFIC PROBLEM

Praise and thanksgiving and glory unto our God, venerated in the Holy Trinity, who has deemed us worthy to celebrate once more the commencement of the ecclesiastical year and the traditional feast of the new Indiction.

At the initiative of our Ecumenical Throne, September 1st has been established, as is well known, as a day of prayer and supplication for the protection of our surrounding natural world. Indeed, this has now become established throughout the entire Orthodox world with the consent and accord of the other Most Holy Sister Orthodox Churches. We are hopeful that, with time, the rest of Christendom will come to embrace this proposition and request in order that, before the imminently expiring second millennium in Christ, all Christians may consecrate congruent prayers on the same day. In this way, even from now, in every land inhabited by humankind, we may glorify with thanksgiving in the future the all-holy name of our God, Creator of heaven and earth.

It has become an established tradition, as well, that on this auspicious day of celebration our modesty directs anew to the entire congregation of the Church a

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.

paternal admonition toward perpetual prayer for our natural environment, stressing in this way all issues deemed timely and necessary.

It is well known to us all that, unfortunately, many such issues arise each year. Naturally, we do not at all overlook the positive efforts made by others on this account. Yet, we observe that the ecological problem has become in many respects more complicated and that the ecological darkness has become even more extensive, which is to say that there is still a substantial ignorance by many and a skilful propaganda on the part of the few, who delight in their alliance with the forces of darkness. These facts result in many fallacies regarding ecology, in purposeful concealment and even distortion of the truth on ecological matters and, indeed, ecological terrorism in the form of exaggeration or abusive intervention in the natural order of things, at times even to the point of exercising interstate threat and violence. This has resulted also in the brutal contravention of international conventions on necessary ecological arrangements and the stubborn refusal to accept the financial burdens of elementary and essential ecological discipline as well as a plethora of other violations, which threaten directly the very air that we breathe.

THE WAY OF RECONCILIATION

All of this may be summarized in the sorrowful realization that, despite the painful current experiences and the concerted efforts of many, extremely few positive steps have been made on the arduous path toward a true and stable reconciliation of humankind with our surrounding physical world.

This failure is due, mainly, to the insistence of the greater part of humankind on the false understanding that the ecological problem is foremost a matter of logical connections, expressed and materialized through the means and methods of politics, economy, technology, and all other human activities.

For all these reasons, it is necessary that the Church steadily call to mind the evangelical truth on this matter, namely that all of the above deviations represent a violation of the divine disposition of the physical world, which cannot remain unpunished given the deviations of such an anti-life stance. It is, indeed, necessary for the Church to remind us that, on the contrary, the aforementioned and therefore imperatively necessary reconciliation, whenever and wherever it is accomplished, represents *par excellence* a spiritual event. More precisely, the Church reminds us that it is the blessed fruit of the Holy Spirit, granted to all who freely and consciously partake in the great mystery of divine love, which has followed the creation, and which constitutes the reconciliation of God, through Christ, with humankind and the entirety of creation.

This reconciliation is understood and experienced within the Church as a settlement: “God in Christ reconciles the world with Himself,” not considering their trespasses, as proclaimed by Saint Paul, the Apostle to the Nations (2 Cor 5.19). This is because all things are derived from God, and, in this case, the renewal of all things, “the new creation,” in which we become participants through Holy Baptism, as well as other sanctifying gifts in the life of the Church. They are derived from God, who “reconciled us with Himself through Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 5.18). Moreover, we are all dutifully reminded by the Church that God Himself placed “in us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5.19), that He entrusted to us Christians the proclamation of the evangelization Gospel of this joyful message of reconciliation, of the new, loving communion of God with humankind and the natural world.

Clearly, this is what is most necessary today. This is what is most urgent for the relationship of humankind with the material world: namely, reconciliation in the aforementioned sense. This reconciliation is not merely to take place in a rational manner, for our benefit and material gain, or, again, for material prosperity and materialistic welfare. It is to be understood theologically, that is with humility and

repentance, which lead to true participation in the beauty of creation, restored through Christ, with which the goodness of life is connected harmoniously. And this is so because both goodness and beauty share the same source and cause, which is God Himself, who constitutes the brilliant beauty of the most extreme divine goodness and comeliness.

Indeed, beloved brethren and cherished children in the Lord, this is what is truly good: to participate in that divine goodness and beauty so that we, too, may say, according to Dionysius the Areopagite:

We say it is good to participate in beauty; indeed, beauty is participation in that cause which beautifies all good things. This supersubstantial good is called beauty due to the loveliness which it transmits to all beings, to each one appropriately.²

It is from this divine beauty that the commandment derives that we preserve both the goodness and beauty within us and around us, as the most exalted gifts of God.

For all these reasons, from this sacred center of Orthodoxy, we salute as a significant fact the subject chosen for the second Pan-European Ecumenical Assembly, to be held, God willing, in Austria in June of the coming year of our Savior, 1997: “Reconciliation – gift of God and source of new life.” The well-grounded expectation that Christians of Europe will dedicate their efforts to the examination of this issue, both separately and in common, forebodes many blessings. Among these, we expect a clearer sight of divine beauty in nature and a more decisive involvement of all in its protection and further promotion, through the divine gifts and through the multiple creative forces of humankind.

² *On Divine Names*, PG 3.701. Dionysius was a fifth-century Syriac theologian.