

† 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, 1997

CREATION AND FALL

The all-merciful and beneficent God, who created humanity from non-being into being, so desired that His beloved creature, the king of creation, namely humanity, may enjoy His “very good” creation. Thus God wanted humanity to enjoy creation from the majestic harmony of the heavenly firmament to the natural beauty of the earthly and marine animals as well as all vegetable life, with every harmonious and numerous variation revealed on the surface of the world. For, by contemplating the balance, harmony and beauty of creation, humanity is lifted to a sense of wonder at the supremely perfect perfection of the divine Creator and, consequently, to love and worship Him. In this way, humanity is sanctified and rendered a partaker of divine blessedness, for which it was destined.

However, the enjoyment of earthly and heavenly things was not granted to people without any presuppositions. Such enjoyment had to be the result also of their own voluntary and active will. In this respect, the first-created² were given the command to exercise ascetic abstinence in paradise; they were not to eat of a particular fruit. They were also given the command to labor; they were to work 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.

² “First-created” (or *protoplastoi*) is the conventional manner of referring to Adam and Eve.

keep the garden wherein they were placed. Moreover, they were given the command to increase and exercise dominion on the earth, in the same sense in which they were to work and keep the earth as an extended earthly paradise.

These commandments surely also apply to us as the successors of the first-created. They aim, neither solely nor predominantly, at protecting nature in itself, but in preserving the space within which humanity dwells; creation was made for humanity, and it was made beautiful and productive, serving and supporting every goal in accordance to our divine destiny.

Unfortunately, however, the fall of the first-created and the deviation from their goal also resulted in the transformation of their attitude toward nature and their fellow human beings. Thus, today, we are faced with an extremely self-sufficient and greedy behavior of people in relation to the natural environment. Such conduct betrays their indifference toward natural beauty and natural biotopes as well as toward conditions of survival for their fellow human beings.

In order, therefore, to sensitize people in regard to their obligation to contribute as much as they possibly can to the preservation of the natural environment, even if for their own sake, we dedicated September 1st as a day of prayer for the created order. Of course, the natural environment also has value in and of itself. Nevertheless, it acquires greater value when contemplated in connection with humanity that dwells within it. For, then, damage to the environment bears consequences not only for nature but also for humanity, rendering human life less tolerable and beautiful.

According to the Church Fathers, a merciful heart will not only seek the heavenly kingdom and sense that it has not abiding city here on earth, seeking instead the heavenly city; it also cannot tolerate any harm to animals and plants, indeed even to the inanimate elements of nature. Such a person recognizes in nature too a relative value, given by God Himself who created it. A similar spirit should also characterize

every Christian. We do not limit our expectations simply to this world; nor do we abandon our pursuit of the heavenly reality, namely the divine kingdom. Instead, we recognize that the way that leads to the heavenly Jerusalem goes through the keeping of the divine commandments during our temporary sojourn in this world. Therefore, we are careful to keep the original commandment to preserve creation from all harm, both for our sake and for the sake of our fellow human beings. In any case, respect for the material and natural creation of God, as well as indirectly for all people who are affected by the environment, reveals a profound sensitivity in human attitudes and conduct that should be characteristic of every Christian.

However, since we can discern that such a spirit does not inspire all people, we beseech the Lord on this day especially, that He might illumine them to avoid ecological turmoil and harm. May the Lord, in His long-suffering, protect us all as well as the environment that has, because of our sins, revolted. May He spare us from natural destructions that arise from forces beyond our control.

Let us pray, then, and ask the Lord for favorable and peaceful seasons, free from earthquakes, floods, fires, storms, as well as every raging wind and natural reaction. May He also spare us from every form of human destruction wrought upon our environment, so that we may live in peace and glorify in thanksgiving our Lord Jesus Christ, who bestows every good thing. May His grace be with you all.