

† 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, 1998²

CREATION AS IDOL

The Holy Orthodox Church, accepting that the entire creation is very good, finds itself in a harmonious relationship with the natural world, which surrounds the crown of creation, the human being. Even though the human being, either as an isolated individual or as collective humanity, is only a minuscule speck in the face of the immense universe, it is a fact that the entire universe is endowed with meaning by the very presence of humanity within it. Based on this assurance, even leading contemporary scientists accept that the universe is infused with the so-called “human principle,” meaning that it came about and exists for the sake of humanity.

Consequently, the stance of humanity before its Creator, the all-good God, should have been one of thanksgiving for the abundant wealth, which our Maker has placed at our disposal. However, humanity loved creation more than the Creator and did not return its debt to God. Rather, humanity made an idol of it and desired to be

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 This text also served as the basis for remarks of welcome by Patriarch Bartholomew during a colloquium entitled “Monotheism and Environment” organized by the Institute of Religious History and Law of Aix-Marseille University and hosted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul (September 5-8, 1998).

transformed into a wasteful ruler of creation, without any accountability before it, instead of being a rational and grateful consumer of creation. Moreover, humanity was often not even satisfied with wasteful manipulation but schemed to use the tremendous forces contained within nature for the destruction of its fellow human beings and the depletion even of nature itself. From the earliest of days, when Cain murdered Abel, at which point humanity altered the staff formerly used for support into a rod of assault, humanity now tries to use every element as a weapon. Thus, humanity was not satisfied with using elements which God granted in abundance – such as copper, bronze, and iron, and so on – in order to produce tools for a peaceful life. Rather, using all the latest scientific discoveries, humanity fashioned from these elements weapons of mass murder and a system of human annihilation. Unfortunately, humanity continues to make and use these weapons. We, therefore, see gunpowder, nitroglycerine, atomic and nuclear energy, chemical gases, bacterial and every kind of micro-organism and disease-causing factors, being mobilized and gathered into super-modern arsenals, for the purpose of being used as a threat to coerce others into submission but also as a means of active annihilation of those who do not submit.

Consequently, neither is the rebellion of nature against humanity a strange coincidence, nor is the continuous exhortation of the Orthodox Church that we should not love the world, which has been led astray from its divine purpose and those things in the world, but that we should love God instead (1 Jn 2.15). In this way, we are able to enjoy the things of the world with blessing and thanksgiving in Christ, through whom we have received reconciliation (Rom 5.11).

THE REBELLION OF NATURE

Nature rebelled against humanity, which abuses it. Therefore, it no longer finds itself in that perfect divine harmony, whose marvelous melody comes from the

rhythmic orbits of the heavenly bodies and the changing seasons of the year. Were it not for the good souls of the saints, who hold together the cohesion of the world, perhaps the revenge of nature for the inhumanities we force it to bear upon our fellow human beings, would be even more lamentable for those people who improperly use its powers against others.

In light of the above, on this first day of September in the year 1998 of our salvation, once again dedicated to the natural environment, we invite and urge everyone to convert the tremendous destructive forces, which we have accumulated on earth – a planet so small in size, yet so great in evil as well as in insurmountable virtue – into creative and peaceful forces.

Unfortunately, the coercion of nature to act destructively against itself and the human race does not come out of the will of certain evil leaders, as much as it is supported by those who wish to deny their own responsibility. It also comes from the consenting will of thousands of individuals, without whose psychological support these leaders would not be able to accomplish anything. Consequently, the responsibility of every living person on the face of the earth flows out of the conscious acceptance or rejection of what has been accomplished. It is through this acceptance or rejection that one participates in the formation of the predominant will. From this point of view, everyone, even the feeblest, can contribute to the restoration of the harmonious renewed operation of the world. We can do so by being in tune with the forces of the divine harmony and not with those which are badly dissonant and oppose the divine all-harmonious rhythm of the universal instrument, of which each one of us constitutes but one of its practically innumerable chords.

Our love for nature does not seek to idolize it; rather, our love for nature stems from our love for the Creator who grants it to us. This love is expressed through offering in thanksgiving all things to God, through whom we, having been reconciled through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5.19), enjoy also our reconciliation with nature. Without

our reconciliation with God, the forces of nature find themselves in opposition to us. We already experience consequences of this and are subjected to these consequences. Therefore, in order to avert the escalation of evil and to correct that which may already have taken place, and in order to suspend the penalty, we are obligated to accept the fact that we need to be responsible and accountable consumers of nature and not arbitrary rulers of it. We must also accept the fact that, in the final analysis, the demand placed on nature to use its powers in order to destroy our fellow human beings, whom we might consider useless, will result in our facing the same consequences.

Finally, for all these things, we fervently pray to the Lord God that He may show forbearance for our transgressions; that He may grant us time for repentance; and that He may shine in our hearts the light of His truth. This we ask in order that on the issue of the environment, and in each of the paths we encounter before us in life, we may advance in concord with His all-wise, all-harmonious order of the entire creation as it was decreed by Him. Otherwise, our discordant journey may lead to our demise.