

† 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, 2001

HARMONY BETWEEN MATTER AND SPIRIT

The designation of September 1st, which marks the beginning of the new ecclesiastical year and of a new period in the physical cycle of social activities, as a day of prayer for the environment, by the Great Church of Christ, the Mother Church of Constantinople, reveals the great significance for humanity of the physical world created by God.

The double nature of the existence of the human person, consisting of body and soul, or of matter and spirit, according to the “very good” and creative will of God, requires the cooperation of humankind and nature, of person and environment. Without this coordination, neither the environment is able to serve humanity according to its destiny nor is humanity able to avert the disturbance of natural balances and the obliteration of the natural harmony, which God created for us.

Unfortunately, due to human desire to gain power and wealth, humanity often trespasses the limits of the endurance of nature, subjecting it to maltreatment or abuse. On other occasions, humanity transgresses again the commandment of God

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.

to the first-created to labor and to keep the natural creation, becoming indifferent to the maintenance of its integrity and natural balance.

The result of this behavior is the disturbance of the natural harmony, and the rebellion, as it were, of the impersonal nature, which produces phenomena that are the exact opposite to those that serve humankind's normal life. The radiation of a power that is able to benefit humanity becomes an explosive potency of inconceivable destruction. The rivers that are meant to be bearers of life-giving water become carriers of destructive floods. The explosive potency of dynamite is transformed from a useful instrument to a power of homicide and total ruin. Rain is changed from a means of irrigation of plants and the watering of animals to a cause of drowning and uncontrollable currents. Combustion from energy sources and heat becomes a source of atmospheric pollution. In general, the totality of natural possibilities, designed to serve in regular operation humanity's natural survival are stretched by humankind beyond their regular limits and as a result awaken the avenging powers of abuse, which are released when the permissible use is transformed into a means of satisfaction of human audacity with a view to the limits of nature.

THE AUDACITY OF BABEL

The audacity of those who built the Tower of Babel produced a break in human understanding and communication.² Humanity's exclusive turning to the carnal aspect of being, to the exclusion of the spiritual aspect, brought about the purging cataclysm of Noah's times. Since then, God refrains from letting natural disaster bring humanity back to its senses, as the rainbow symbolizes. Nevertheless, humanity continues to pursue its greedy efforts towards forcing nature to mass

² See Genesis 11.

production and unnatural usage. As a result, humanity procures terrible environmental disasters that primarily damage itself. We may recall here such well-known cases as the environmental calamities incurred by nuclear explosions and radio energy waste, or by toxic rain and polluting spillages. We may also recall the consequences of the violent feeding of vegetarian animals that is enforced by human audacity in order to produce food from animals. All this constitutes an insolent overthrow of natural order. It is indeed becoming generally accepted that the overthrow of this natural order in the personal and social life of human beings produces ill reactions to the human organism, such as the contemporary plagues of humanity, cancer, the syndrome of post-virus fatigue, heart diseases, anxieties and a multitude of other diseases.

All these bear witness to the fact that it is not God but humanity that causes contemporary plagues, which attack our well being, since “man is the most disastrous of disasters,” as the ancient tragedy puts it. Thus, if we want to improve the conditions of the material and psychological life of humanity, we are obliged to recognize and to respect the natural order, harmony and balance, and to avoid causing disarray in the natural powers, which are released when the cohesive bond of the universal and particular harmony, especially of the ecological one, is audaciously overturned. Nature was placed by God to the service of humankind, on the condition, however, that humanity would respect the laws that pertain to it and would work in it and protect it (Gen. 2.15).

On this day, dedicated by the Mother Church to prayer for the natural environment, we supplicate the Lord to restore with His divine and almighty power the natural order, wherever human audacity has overturned it, so that humanity might not suffer the tragic consequences of unlawful violations of nature by human actions. We all share the responsibility for such tragedies, since we tolerate those immediately responsible for them and accept a portion of the fruit that results from

such an abuse of nature. Consequently, we all need to ask for God's forgiveness and illumination so that we may come to understand the limit that distinguishes the use from the abuse of nature and never trespass it.