

† 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, 2002

UNPAID DEBT TO NATURE

When the Mother Church declared September 1st each year as a day of prayer for the environment, no one could imagine at the time (as early as 1990) just how rapidly the natural conditions of the world would deteriorate as a result of harmful human interference or how horrific the consequent losses and damages on human lives would be. Recent floods in Europe, India and Russia, as well as those occurring during this year or previously in other parts of the earth, all bear witness to the disturbance of the climactic conditions caused by global warming. Such disasters have persuaded even the most incredulous persons that the problem is real, that the cost of repairing damages is comparable to the cost of preventing them, and that there is simply no margin left for remaining silent.

The Orthodox Church is a pioneer in her love and interest for humanity and its living conditions. Therefore, on the one hand, it recommends that we lead virtuous lives, looking to eternal life in the heavenly world beyond. On the other hand, however, it also recognizes that – according to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ – our virtue will not be assessed on the basis of individualistic criteria, but on

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.

the basis of applied solidarity. This is so characteristically described in the parable of the Last Judgment (see Matthew 25). In this parable, the criterion for being saved and inheriting the eternal Kingdom is supplying food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, aid to the sick, compassion to prisoners. Generally, the criterion is offering our fellow human beings the possibility of living on our planet under normal conditions and of coming to know God in order to enter His Kingdom.

This means that the protection of our fellow human beings from destructive floods, fires, storms, tempests and other such disasters is our binding duty. Consequently, our failure to assume appropriate measures for avoiding such phenomena is reckoned as an unpaid debt and constitutes a crime of negligence, incurring a plethora of other crimes, such as the death of innocent people, the destruction of cultural monuments and property as well as overall regressive progress. We pray, therefore, that God will remove natural destruction, which we cannot avert by our own care and foresight. Yet, at the same time, it is our obligation to engage in the labor of study and the expense of securing necessary measures in order to avoid such disasters as are derived from wrongful human action.

It is true that the great part of such measures and expenditures cannot be taken from isolated individuals because they transcend their capabilities. Sometimes, they even transcend the capabilities of individual states, requiring the cooperation of several states and even of humanity in its entirety. Thus, we heartily salute the international consultations on this matter, which are taking place throughout the world or will take place in the future, and pray that they may conclude their deliberations with unanimous decisions on the measures that should be taken as well as on their implementation.

Nevertheless, what contributes most of all to the creation of this ecological crisis is the excessive waste of energy by isolated individuals. The restriction of wasteful consumption will blunt the acuteness of the problem, while the constant

increase in the use of renewable sources of energy will intermittently contribute to its alleviation. However insignificant the contribution of any individual in averting further catastrophe to the natural phenomena, we are all called and obliged as individuals to do whatever we can. Only then can we confidently pray to God that He may supply what is lacking in our effort and efficacy.

We paternally urge everyone to come to the realization of their personal responsibility and to do all that is possible in order to avert global warming and environmental aggravation. We fervently entreat God to look favorably on the common effort of all and to prevent further imminent disasters on our natural environment, within which He ordered us to live and to fight the good fight so that we may inherit the heavenly Kingdom.