

† 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 Christ<sup>1</sup>

*September 1, 2003*

#### EXTREME WEATHER AND EXTREMIST BEHAVIOR

This day of prayer for the environment finds us disturbed by information recently received about two distressing events. The first is the severe destruction of the natural environment owing to rising temperatures, which has caused extensive forest fires in some parts of the world. The second refers to the outbreak of collective killings of citizens that were innocent and unconnected with their killers, executed by extremist elements whose aim is to harm the society to which these randomly selected victims belong.

In both cases it is obvious that humankind is responsible, as is the perversity that causes it. Because, on one hand these climatic irregularities and their resultant natural catastrophes are mainly caused by human activities, which are performed without thinking about or making any prior assessment of the devastating effects they have on nature. On the other hand the collective execution of innocent and arbitrarily chosen people with the aim of spreading fear throughout society and forcing it to give in to the just or unjust demands of these executioners, implies an ignorance of the fact that this method has been used many times in the past but has never succeeded in its

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

purpose. Therefore, if a rational assessment of the results of these actions had prevailed amongst the perpetrators, then a lot of suffering would have been avoided. Many desperate actions against innocents could also have been avoided if the wrong doers recognised and respected the rights of the wronged.

The natural environment was created by God to be friendly and of service to the needs of humankind. However, owing to Adam's original disobedience, the natural harmony and balance of the environment was disrupted and due to his persistent disobeying of God's commandments, it continues to disrupt, leading to total disarray and disharmony. Therefore, the prayer that we offer up to the Lord today for the protection of the natural environment from all kinds of destruction and disruption, should first of all be a prayer for the repentance of man, who through misjudged, thoughtless, and sometimes arrogant actions directly or indirectly provokes most, not to say all, natural catastrophes.

Our Lord who taught us the Lord's Prayer includes in it a promise that accompanies a request "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". This has a broader meaning. Our prayer should be accompanied by a corresponding sacrifice, mainly a sacrifice of our selfishness and arrogant pursuits, which demonstrate our insolent attitude towards the Creator and His wisely stipulated natural and spiritual laws. This change of attitude and mentality is called repentance. Only if our prayer to God for the protection of the environment is accompanied by correspondent repentance, will it be effective and welcomed by God.

Therefore, beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord, let us reconsider our lives and let us repent for everything we do mistakenly and against the wise laws of God, in order to be heard by Him, begging His kindness to maintain the natural environment, friendly and undamaged for humankind. May the Lord God grant stability to preserve the natural world, which He created full of grace and harmony for the sake of humanity.

