

† 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, 2004

WHAT HAVE WE ACHIEVED?

Fifteen years ago, our venerable predecessor, the late Patriarch Dimitrios issued the first official decree for the preservation of the natural environment, an encyclical letter to the *pleroma* of the Church, formally establishing September 1st as a day of prayer for the protection of the environment. That historical proclamation emphasized the significance of the eucharistic and the ascetic ethos of our tradition, which provide a corrective for a consumer lifestyle and an alternative to the prevailing philosophy of our age.

The Church Fathers have always insisted on the critical importance of self-examination as a pre-condition for spiritual growth. Echoing the classical oracle of Delphi, Clement of Alexandria² exhorts: “Know yourself! If you know yourself, you will know all things.” Evagrius of Pontus³ states: “He who knows himself knows God.” And Isaac the Syrian⁴ claims: “To know oneself is to know one’s failures, which leads to the resurrection of the dead.” Therefore, let us consider what we have

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 Clement (150-215) was head of the famous School of Alexandria.

³ Evagrius (345-399) was an ascetic and monastic author.

⁴ Isaac of Nineveh was a seventh-century mystic and author.

learned as a Church over the last fifteen years. What knowledge have we gained? What failures have we experienced? And what direction should we now assume?

In the five summer seminars that were held annually from 1994-1998 at the Theological School on the Island of Halki, we learned about the close connections between environmental issues and education, ethics, communication, justice, and poverty. And in the five international symposia held biannually from 1995 to date, we have explored the impact of our wasteful lifestyle on the waters of the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, the Danube River, the Adriatic Sea, and the Baltic Sea. Together with theologians, scientists, politicians and journalists, we recognized in a tangible manner the responsibility that we all bear - before one another, before our world, and before our God - for the destruction of our world's natural beauty, for the depletion of the earth's resources, and for the devastation of our planet's diversity.

More especially, we have appreciated how the preservation of the natural environment is intimately related to the cessation of warfare, to the restoration of social justice and to the management of world poverty. We have learned how the way that we treat human beings is directly reflected in the way that we relate to the natural environment, as well as to the worship that we exclusively reserve for God. It should come as no surprise to us that we are able to misuse the natural and material creation when we are able to abuse our fellow-human beings. The Mother Church has been at the forefront of significant gatherings and agreements of world peace and welfare, of economic and social reform, of human rights and religious tolerance.

STRENGTH IN THEORY, WEAKNESS IN APPLICATION

When it comes to the appropriate response and the proper theological reflection, there is no doubt that our Orthodox Church has a great deal to contribute to the contemporary debate concerning ecology. We are able to draw upon the depth and wealth of our Scriptural and Patristic heritage in order to contribute positively

and constructively to the critical issues of our time. Where, however, as Orthodox Christians we reveal the greatest vulnerability is in the practice of our theory.

It is always the easier approach to lay blame on Western development and technological progress for the ills that we confront in our world. And it is always a temptation to believe that we hold the solution to problems that we all face today or else to ignore the imminent danger that we face globally. What is more difficult – and yet at the same time more noble – is to discern the degree to which we constitute part of the problem itself. Just how many of us examine the foods that we consume, the goods that we purchase, the energy that we waste, or the consequences of our privileged living? How often do we take the time to scrutinize the choices that we make on a daily basis, whether as individuals, as institutions, as parishes, as communities, as societies, and even as nations?

More importantly, just how many of our Orthodox clergy are prepared to assume leadership on issues concerning the environment? How many of our Orthodox parishes and communities are prepared to materialize the knowledge that we have accumulated in recent years by practicing ecologically-sensitive principles in their own communities? How do the decisions of any local community and parish reflect on a practical and tangible level the experience that we have gained on a theoretical level?

In an age when the information is readily available to us, there is surely no excuse for ignorance or indifference. To overlook is to shut our eyes to a reality that is ever-present and ever-increasing. Former generations and cultures may have been unaware of the implications of their actions. Nevertheless, today, more perhaps than any other time or age, we are in a unique position. Today, we stand at a crossroads, namely at a point of choosing the cross that we have to bear. For, today, we know fully well the ecological and global impact of our decisions and actions, irrespective of how minimal or insignificant these may be.

It is our sincere hope and fervent prayer that in the years ahead, more and more of our Orthodox faithful will recognize the importance of a crusade for our environment, which we have so selfishly ignored. This vision, we are convinced, will only benefit future generation by leaving behind a cleaner, better world. We owe it to our Creator. And we owe it to our children.