



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

A Daily Reading Program on the Christian Theology of Creation

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The Vision and Spiritual Direction of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the Orthodox Patriarchs

A Course of Daily Theological Reflections
on Christian Responsibility for
the Care and Keeping of God's Creation

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editors

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Introduction

The first day of September inaugurates the Church's liturgical calendar. Every year the ecclesial New Year opens with prayers for the creation. This is the same progression as Scripture as the Book of Genesis begins with the formation of God's creation and the foundational guidelines for right human behavior. Thus as a consequence of being created in the image of God and toward His likeness, humans have an innate and indwelling potential for *theosis* and the experience of God. The actual acquisition of this potential is determined by the degree to which each person actually embraces God's commands. This shapes the degree of transformation that a person may enjoy.

As a step toward realizing our potential in the likeness of God, these daily readings imbue us with the mind of the Church on how we are commanded to take proper care of God's creation as required by the divinely inspired teachings about creation found in the first chapters of Genesis and throughout Scripture.

As we allow these statements from His All-Holiness and other Orthodox Patriarchs and Hierarchs to become our teachers in Christian theology, we are absorbing, not only the Mind of the Church, but also the spiritual direction by which we can rightly engage the deep issues that plague modern society.

These readings expand the breadth and scope of parish and parishioner awareness on those ancient Christian teachings that are not always highlighted in parish education.

This focus allows the theological principles of ancient Christianity to become planted into our hearts and minds so that we can transform our daily lives as reflections of our theology about the implications of Jesus Christ. Through these daily readings, you will soon recognize that your actions will shift and gradually become more aligned with our theology. This will allow your behavior to become more respectful and caring for God and His good earth. Each day's reading captures one small dimension of the traditional Christian Orthodox teaching on creation care.

Begin your daily reading with a simple prayer for insight and inspiration. Then read the text for the day and respond to yourself on the questions that follow. You can summarize your response in the Refection section at the end of each day's reading.

Yours in service to God's good earth,

Fred Krueger

Prayers on the First Day of the Church Calendar

The abuse by contemporary man of his privileged position in creation and of the Creator's order to him "to have dominion over the earth" (Genesis 1.28) has already led the world to the edge of apocalyptic self-destruction, either in the form of natural pollution which is dangerous for all living beings, or in the form of the extinction of many species of the animal and plant world, or in other forms.

Scientists and other men of learning warn us of the danger, and speak of phenomena which are threatening the life of our planet, such as the "phenomena of the greenhouse" whose first indications have already been noted.

In view of this situation, the Church of Christ cannot remain unmoved. It constitutes a fundamental dogma of faith that the world was created by God the Father, who is confessed to be "Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible."

According to the great Fathers of the Church, Man is the prince of creation, endowed with the privilege of freedom. Being partaker simultaneously of the material and the spiritual world, he was created in order to refer back creation to the Creator, in order that the world may be saved from decay and death. ...

Ecumenical Patriarch +Dimitrios, Encyclical on Protection of the Environment, September 1, 1989

Q

Why should Christians pray for the health of the world?

What is the theology underlying this requirement?

What does it mean that humans have abused their privileged position on earth?

Reflection

A Lost Sense of the Sacred in Creation

Unfortunately, in our days under the influence of an extreme rationalism and self-centeredness, man has lost the sense of the sacredness of creation and acts as its arbitrary ruler and rude violator. Instead of the eucharistic and ascetic spirit with which the Orthodox Church brought up her children for centuries, we observe today a violation of nature for the satisfaction of basic human needs, but of man's endless and constantly increasing desires of lust, encouraged by the prevailing philosophy of the consumer society.

But creation "groans and travails in all its parts" (Romans 8.22), and is now beginning to protest at its treatment by human beings. Man cannot infinitely and at his pleasure exploit the natural sources of energy. The price of his arrogance will be his self-destruction, if the present situation continues.

In full consciousness of our duty and paternal spiritual responsibility, we, together with the Sacred and Holy Synod surrounding us, declare the first day of September a day on which, on the occasion of the Feast of Indiction, is the first day of the ecclesiastical year, prayers and supplications are offered... for all creation – to be the day of "the protection of the environment."

Therefore, we invite through this our Patriarchal Message the entire Christian world to offer together with the Mother Great Church of Christ [the Ecumenical Patriarchate] every year on this day prayers and supplications to the Maker of all, both as thanksgiving for the great gift of creation and as petitions for its protection and salvation. At the same time we paternally urge the faithful of the world to admonish themselves and their children to respect and protect the natural environment, and on the other hand all those who are entrusted with the responsibility of governing the nations to act without delay, taking all necessary measures for the protection and preservation of the natural creation.

Ecumenical Patriarch +Dimitrios, Encyclical on Protection of the Environment, September 1, 1989

Q

What causes the pollution of God's creation?

How can this violation of God's command be corrected?

What is our individual responsibility for the care and keeping of the earth?

Reflection

The Root Cause of Ecological Disasters

It is not God but man who causes contemporary plagues, which attack his well being, since “he is the most disastrous of the disasters” as an 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 harmony, especially of the ecological one, is audaciously overturned.

Nature was placed by God at the service of man, on the condition that man would respect the laws that pertain to it and work in it and protect it (cf. Gen. 2:15).

On this particular day, which has been 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 responsibility for such tragedies, since we tolerate those immediately responsible for them and accept a portion of the fruit that results such an abuse of nature. Consequently, we need to ask for God’s illumination so that we may come to understand the limit between the use and the abuse of nature and never trespass it.

We wholeheartedly wish that God reveals this to each one of us and gives us wisdom and strength not to trespass it.

HAH, Message for September the 1st, 2001

Q

How does pollution of the environment arise?

Why is the defilement of God’s creation a sin?

Can you trace the line between cause in humans and the impact on creation?

Reflection

Pray to Protect Nature from Calamities of Human Origin

On a number of occasions during the ecclesiastical year the Church prays that God will protect humanity from natural catastrophes: earthquakes, storms, famine and floods. But today we see the reverse. On September 1st, the day devoted to God's handiwork, the Church implores the Creator to protect nature from calamities of human origin, calamities such as pollution, war, exploitation, waste and secularism.

It may seem strangely paradoxical that the body of believers, acting vicariously for nature, beseeches God for protection against itself, its own actions. But from this perspective the Church, in its wisdom, brings before our eyes a message of deep significance, one which touches upon the central problems of fallen humanity and its restoration. This is the problem of the polarization of individual sin against collective responsibility.

Scripture tells us that if one member of the body is infirm, the entire body is also affected (1 Cor. 12:26). There is, after all, solidarity in the human race because, being made in the image of the Trinitarian God, human beings are interdependent and co-inherent. No man is an island. We are "members of each other" (Eph. 4:25) and so any action, performed by any member of the human race, inevitably affects all other members. Consequently, no one falls alone and no one is saved alone. According to Dostoevsky's Staretz Zosima in "The Brothers Karamazov," we are each of us responsible for everyone and everything.

HAH Ecum. Patr. Bartholomew, Day of Prayer for Environment, September 1, 1994

Q

How are we each responsible for the problems of the world?

Why does human sin infect nature? How does this take place?

What does HAH mean when he says that we are members of each other?

Reflection

Restoration of the Vision of God in All Things

It has become painfully apparent that humanity, both individually and collectively, no longer perceives the natural order as a sign and a sacrament of God, but rather as an object of exploitation. There is no one that is not guilty of disrespecting nature, for to respect nature is to recognize that all creatures and objects have a unique place in God's creation.

When we become sensitive to God's world around us, we grow more conscious also of God's world within us. Beginning to see nature as a work of God, we begin to see our own place as human beings within nature. The true appreciation of any object is to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Sin alone is mean and trivial, as are most of the products of a fallen and sinful technology. But it is sin that is at the root of the prevailing destruction of the environment. Humanity has failed in what was its noble vocation: to participate in God's creative action in the world. It has succumbed to a theory of development that values production over human dignity and wealth over human integrity. We see for example delicate ecological balances being upset by the uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant life or by a reckless exploitation of natural resources. It cannot be over-emphasized that all of this, even if carried out in the name of progress and well-being, is ultimately to mankind's disadvantage.

HAH, September 1, 1994

Q

Can you explain how sin is at the root of environmental destruction?

Why has modern society valued production over human dignity?

How does the Christian Church understand the concept of progress?

Reflection

Human Destiny is to Restore Right Relationships

It is not without good cause that nature “groans and travails in all its parts” (Romans 8:22). For was it not originally seen by God to be good? Created by God, the world reflects divine Wisdom, divine beauty, and divine truth. Everything is from God, everything is permeated with divine energy; in this is both the joy and tragedy of the world and of life within it.

The hymns and prayers in the Office of September 1st, composed by the gifted hymnographer of the Great Church, the late monk Gerasimos of the Holy Mountain, extol the beauty of creation, but they also remind us of our tragic abuse of it. They call us to repent for our actions against God's gift to us. We have made this world ever more opaque, ever more tortured. The consequences of nature's confrontation with humanity has indeed been an unnatural disaster of enormous proportions. Is it not, therefore, only right that we Christians act today as nature's voice in bringing its plea for salvation before the throne of God?

The Church teaches it is the destiny of mankind to restore the proper relationship between God and the world as it was in Eden. Through repentance, two landscapes, the one human, the other natural, can become the objects of a caring and creative effort. But repentance must be accompanied by soundly focused initiatives which manifest the ethos of the Orthodox Church....

The ethos of the Church in all its expressions denotes a reverence for matter; the world around us, other creatures, our own bodies. Hence, our Patriarchal message is simply that we maintain a consistent attitude of respect in all our dealings with the world. We cannot expect to leave no trace on the environment. However, we must choose either to make it reflect greed and ugliness or to use it in such a way that its beauty shows God's handiwork through ours.

HAH, September 1, 1994

Q

Why do Christians maintain a reverence for matter?

How do we maintain a relationship with creation as it was in Eden?

How may our efforts reflect God's handiwork?

Reflection

The Destiny of Humanity as the Restoration of Eden

The Church teaches it is the destiny of mankind to restore the proper relationship between God and the world as it was in Eden. Through repentance, two landscapes, the one human, the other natural, can become the objects of a caring and creative effort. But repentance must be accompanied by soundly focused initiatives which manifest the ethos of the Orthodox Church.

There is the eucharistic ethos, which, above all else, means using natural resources with thankfulness, offering them back to God; not only them, but also ourselves. In the Eucharist, we return to God what is His: the bread and the wine. Representing the fruits of creation, they are no longer prisoners of a fallen world, but are returned liberated, purified from their fallen state, and capable of receiving Divine Presence within themselves. At the same time, we pray for ourselves to be sanctified, because through sin we have fallen away and have betrayed our baptismal promise.

Secondly, we have the ascetic ethos of Orthodoxy which involves fasting and other spiritual works. These make us recognize that everything we take for granted are in fact God's gifts provided to satisfy our needs. They are not ours to abuse and waste simply because we have the ability to pay for them.

Thirdly, the liturgical ethos emphasizes community concern and sharing. We stand before God together and we hold in common the earthly blessings that He has given to all creatures. Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs, as a holy Father of the Church reminds us. We stand before the Creator as the Church of God which, according to Orthodox theology, is the continued incarnate presence of the Lord Jesus Christ on earth; His presence unto the salvation of the world, not just humanity but the entire creation.

The grace and infinite mercy of the Creator of all things and Provident God be with all of you, beloved children of the Church.

HAH, September 1, 1994

Q

What is necessary for humans to participate in the restoration of Eden?

How do the three forms of the Orthodox ethos apply to God's creation?

What is the role of repentance in the healing of the earth?

Reflection

Why the World's Natural Harmony was Disrupted

The natural environment was created by God to be friendly and of service to the needs of humankind. However, owing to Man's original disobedience, the natural harmony and balance of the environment was disrupted and due to persistent disobeying of God's commandments, it continues to disrupt, leading to total disarray and disharmony.

The prayer that we offer up to the Lord for the protection of the natural environment from 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.

HAH, September 1, 2003

Q

Why do we have a world that is now in disharmony and disarray?

Why should our prayer for creation be one that seeks repentance?

What does it mean to do God's will "on earth as it is in heaven"?

Reflection

Praise God for the Health of the Created Order

We are called to offer wholehearted praise to the Creator of everything visible and invisible for having placed us as the ones First-fashioned in luscious paradise among all His own creation....

Contemplating the creation of God within us and around us with this kind of God-given theological perspective, we are certainly justified at being overcome with total optimism even when the elements of nature are faced with the greatest dangers or when history is being distorted, because we recognize that "the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them" (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1).

Therefore, before any abnormalities in nature and history, the first requirement is not so much that we be wise and powerful so as to foresee in time and deal accordingly with earthquakes, founderingings and other usually unexpected calamities. Neither is it that we be armed with the provisions of worldly knowledge and science so as to drive back the powers marshalled against us by any enemy or invader. Rather, above all, we must be just, striving at every moment throughout our life to learn the precepts of God more perfectly and more profoundly.

This is why it is not incidental that among the first things we do in Orthodox worship is praise the Lord, invoking Him that we be taught His immovable precepts which are from Him only. Never are we so powerful and shielded from every unexpected force, as when we chant, as did the youths, the ode of the Beloved One: "Blessed are you, O Lord, teach me your precepts."

HAH, September 1, 1993

Q

Why should a Christian contemplate the creation?

What might one learn from this activity?

How might a person develop those qualities that honor God and creation?

Reflection

Guidance into Right Relationship to Creation

Panic never has allowed man to render judgments calmly and to balance justly his obligations towards himself, towards the world around him, and towards his ever-watchful God above him. However, it is precisely these obligations, as they have been coordinated from the very first moment of creation by the Just-Judging God, which constitute “His precepts” of which we have spoken above.

Usually, men speak out and go to great pain to mark and establish human rights, which, as a rule, are determined by self-interest and fear and always give rise to powers and demands, which separate persons from groups, from classes, from people.

The precepts of God, on the contrary, are by definition comprehensive, as much for the part as for the whole. This is why, by learning and recognizing them, they, through God's grace, render human beings brothers and partakers among themselves and, through eucharistic usage, partakers of the world and of the infinite love of God, and not consumers, which the atheistic polity or contemporary eudemonistic herd instinct through the hubristic progress of technology have taught.

Thus, the first responsibility of the faithful is, at least, to examine and study continuously in greater depth the law and precepts of God. Thus, by becoming cheerful givers and grateful receivers of His wondrous things in this world, we may come to respect the balances of nature set up by Him.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, September 1, 1993

Q

What are God’s precepts about creation?

Where are these found? What do they say?

Why should we study the law and precepts of God?

Reflection

Christians May Not Destroy Nature

In view of the problem of the poor management of the environment created by the numerous abuses of nature by humanity, by this significant decision reached under the spiritual guidance of our predecessor, Patriarch +Dimitrios of blessed memory, our Church must actively involve itself in this crucial issue. Humanity was created by God to have sovereignty over nature, not to be a tyrant over it. Many sectors of society have recognized that the ecological problem is associated with the moral crisis of the human person and that the use of nature depends on the perception, position, and training of human beings regarding the cosmos, for according to the ancient saying, “the measure of all things is mankind.”

Now that we have been awakened to the impending destruction of nature, how has society responded in recent years? We note here the so-called “plans for peaceful coexistence” [between mankind and nature] along with plans for the “development of the environment.” All these concerns are of course blessed and acceptable. As we know, however, they are limited in effectiveness. Who will find and apprehend those individuals responsible for forest fires? Who will restrain those who illegally cut down trees? Who and how will we control those unconscionable individuals who pollute our waters, rivers, and seas? Who will restrain the greedy?

We, the Church, must help firmly, extensively, and with relative ease with this pressing and necessary concern. We will help by enlightening the conscience of men and women and by cultivating respect for fellow persons and for all matter. Our goal is to give people feeling and instill in them the fear of God so that they may avoid doing wrong, vulgarity, impropriety, inhumanity, and especially egotism. Usually those who torch forests, those who illegally cut trees, those who pollute our shores, are egocentric individuals with hardened hearts, who do so out of greed and for purely utilitarian purposes. A good Christian cannot, rather, a good Christian is not, permitted by conscience to destroy nature and his environment. We cannot be a source of immoral or ugly acts.

HAH, “The Environment and Religious Education,” June 20, 1994

Q

Why must the Church involve itself in concerns about the environment?

What is the difference between sovereignty and tyranny over nature?

What does it mean in practice to have respect for all matter?

Reflection

Preserve and Do Not Destroy the Environment

This beauty of nature reflects the beauty and perfection of God. Thus we are obligated to preserve rather than destroy the environment. Hence, any destruction of nature clearly constitutes sin. As we read the agonizing warnings of the naturalists, the geologists and geographers and other specialists, who remind us of the great folly of the violation of nature with its foreseeable tragic consequences, you, contribute today to a momentous task of timely significance for our planet.

“For He [God] did not create it [the earth] a chaos, He formed it to be inhabited” (Isaiah 45:18). Humanity is obligated therefore not to destroy the earth, creating chaotic conditions with fires and a scarcity of water, but rather to develop and enhance it. “You who have nothing to do, plant a tree in the corner of your garden so that others may come and sit there to rest and recollect.” Such are the words of Adamo, in a timely song with beautiful orchestration and harmony. It would be worthwhile for our youthful listeners to find it. Inspired and enthused by it, sing it with your friends as an indication of your ecological concerns. In life, only those divinely inspired and with zeal, those who love their environment, create the things of God....

Permit us to confide in you our thoughts. We do not believe much in the strong and the mighty, or in people in authority. We believe rather in those willing and patient individuals who do not lose sight of their objective; the objective for good. Do not forget the acknowledgment of the ancient Greeks that “drops of water make rocks hollow.”

Many simple people in small corners of the world, with nominal but continuous daily concerns, can change the world, even slightly, for the better. You, our beloved conferees, contribute to the proper order and legitimate status of the cosmos. Cosmos is defined as meaning to decorate; it is defined as a love for beauty and decency. May you be blessed by God.

HAH, “The Environment and Religious Education,” June 20, 1994

Q

Why does destruction of the environment constitute sin?

What is the value of planting trees?

How may one individual make a difference in the state of the world?

Reflection

The Quest for Peace

The experience of the Ecumenical Patriarchate has been one of continuity and stability through centuries of global change. At one time, our Patriarchate was co-terminus with the boundaries of the Roman Empire. Today, as the 270th successor to the First-Called Disciple Saint Andrew, our domain is a ministry of spiritual leadership, but our Center is in the same topos we have known from the Apostolic Age....

For Orthodox Christians, peace is not merely the cessation of hostilities. There is an ontological basis for peace, and that is love. Love of God, love of neighbor, love of the stranger, indeed, love of one's enemy, has existential impact in the phenomenal world.

Anywhere and everywhere we are able, as a religious leader, to advance the fundamental principles of faith traditions which they hold in common, we increase the possibilities for love. These potentialities manifest themselves as tolerance, respect, and even admiration.

When we proclaim, as we did in the Bosphorus Declaration, that 'a crime in the name of religion is a crime against all religion,' we have begun to set in place, the girders of the bridges that build unity out of diversity. Religious faith must be seen by temporal powers, as an advocate of reconciliation, and an instrument for peace.

HAH, World Affairs Council, Los Angeles California, Nov 7, 1997

Q

What do you believe is the basis for peace among people and nations?

Can you define in positive terms what peace is?

How can Christians build bridges of cooperation with diverse peoples?

Reflection

No Time for Waiting or Delay

We are profoundly concerned about the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, but at the same time daily trampled and ignored. We are also concerned about the family and its indispensable significance. We are concerned about workers, who are used purely as a means toward consumption and production. We are concerned about God's creation, which is constantly and shamelessly rendered the object of abuse; for it is groaning, even though it is also threatening our planet, awaiting redemption and protection from us (Romans 8). We are concerned about the climate and other conditions – quite literally, about the air and the oxygen breathed by modern man and which future generations, as we fear, will seek in vain. We are, finally, concerned about humanity's mere survival on this continent and our planet.

What else must be done, beyond what has been achieved, in order for us to become aware? There is no time for waiting or delay. Otherwise, we are willingly and irresponsibly, even dangerously, shutting our eyes. As a result, our responsibility is ever increasing the consciousness of the dramatic condition of human survival on the planet...

What must take place immediately is repentance, together with the change of life that accompanies repentance. The guiding light of Christ always exists. Nevertheless, our eyes have been blinded and are unable to perceive and pursue that light. Without reconciliation, peace and justice, it is impossible to construct... any human society.

HAH Ecumenical Patr. Bartholomew, Sibiu, Romania, September 9, 2007

Q

What concerns should be at the forefront of our consciousness?

How can we become more aware of our personal responsibility for human survival?

Why is repentance critical to our future survival?

Reflection

The Earth is also Our Home

The way we respond to issues related to economy or ecology will inevitably determine our worldview and our policy for the future of our planet. In very simple terms, it means that the way we treat basic natural resources, such as air and water, is crucial for the lifestyle that we choose and the politics we choose to practice.

The kind of priorities and programs that we establish with regard to consumption and recycling, eradicating biological and chemical waste, addressing the problem of global warming, and preserving our oceans, rivers and lakes – all of these reflect the genuine interest that we have for the survival of the world, entrusted to us by our Creator.

Thus, it is not by chance that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has focused its attention and ministry on preserving the natural environment. It is unfortunate and selfish, however, that we have restricted the application of the words “ecology” and “economy” to ourselves, as if we are the only inhabitants and proprietors of this world. This planet is indeed our home; yet it is also the home of everyone, as it is the home of every animal creature as well as of every form of life created by God. It is a sign of arrogance to presume that we human beings alone inhabit this world. The truth is that no economic system – no matter how technologically or socially advanced – can survive the collapse of the environmental systems that support it.

HAH Ecum. Patr. Bartholomew, Eurasian Economic Summit, Istanbul, Turkey, May 7, 2009

Q

How do issues of economy or ecology relate to our personal worldview?

What happens when we limit ecology only to human concerns?

Why can't advanced technology save us?

Reflection

The Sins Associated with Economic Inequality

Today, we know all too well the sins associated with cheap labor and economic inequality. We are all able to perceive how assets or investments are transferred from one country to another in a way that leaves ordinary people feeling bewildered and disenfranchised, while at the same time making it impossible for anyone to hold investors accountable for their social and environmental behavior. We can see clearly that in global competition for economic gain there are losers as well as winners, victors as well as victims. And, through our own behavior or consumer choices, as well as our generally unquestioning acquisitiveness, we may also be encouraging bad behavior by the companies which dominate the global economy, instead of using whatever influence we may have in a positive way.

Our global economy is simply outgrowing the capacity of our planet to support it. At stake is not just our ability to live in a sustainable way, but our very survival. Scientists estimate that those most hurt by global warming in years to come will be those who can least afford it. Therefore, the ecological problem of pollution is invariably connected to the social problem of poverty; indeed, all ecological activity is ultimately measured and properly judged by its impact and effect upon the poor.

People in Western societies ought to assume greater personal responsibility. They should contribute to the solution of the environmental crisis not simply to assist the poor but to help wipe out poverty itself.

HAH Bartholomew, Eurasian Economic Summit, Istanbul, Turkey May, 2009

Q

How do our consumer choices influence economic inequality?

What are the specific sins that contribute to poverty and homelessness?

Why is all ecological activity judged by its impact on the poor?

Reflection

How we Treat the Earth Shapes How we Treat People

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has, among other initiatives, convened eight international symposia on the state of the earth and its waters. Dear friends, this issue is not about politics; it is about life. Indeed, for business leaders, it will become increasingly obvious that respect for the environment constitutes a moral duty for all, an expression of both common responsibility and simple common sense.

In recent years, we have learned some important lessons about caring for the natural environment. We have especially learned that environmental action cannot be separated from human relations. What we do for the earth is intimately related to what we do for people – whether in the context of human rights or international politics, whether with regard to poverty and social justice or world peace.

It has become clearer to us that the way we respond to the natural environment is intimately and deeply connected to the way we treat human beings. The way we relate to material things and the natural environment directly reflects the way we relate to other people.

HAH Ecum Patr. Bartholomew, Istanbul Turkey, May 6, 2011

Q

Why is environmental concern about the sacredness of life?

Why can't environmental issues be separated from human relations?

What principles shape a right relationship to the environment?

Reflections

How Strong is Your Commitment to Justice?

In our efforts for the preservation of the natural environment, we must ask ourselves some difficult questions about our concern for other human beings and about our way of life and daily habits.

How committed are we to working so that all people may have sufficient resources, so that no person suffers from poverty or hunger or unemployment? How can we direct our focus away from what we want to what the world and our neighbor need? Do we honestly do all that we can to leave as light a footprint as possible on this planet for the sake of those who share it with us and for the sake of future generations?

Caring about the world and about others is one of the fundamental choices we are free to make. Do we, therefore, choose to care? If not, then we are denying our very nature as human beings. If we do not choose to care, then we are not simply indifferent onlookers; we are in fact active aggressors. If we are not allaying the pain of others, and only see or care about our own interests, then we are directly contributing to the suffering and poverty of our world.

HAH Bartholomew, Istanbul, Turkey, May 6, 2011

Q

In what ways are environmental and human concerns a similar issue?

How may we direct our focus away from ourselves and to the needs of others?

Why does caring for the world related to our personal well-being?

Reflections

The Earth is Being Defiled

The Orthodox Church, aware of her responsibility for the fate of the world, is deeply concerned about the problems of contemporary civilization.

The face of the Earth has been distorted on a global scale. The soils, water, air and fauna and flora are damaged. Nature has been almost fully involved in the life support of man who is no longer satisfied with its diverse gifts, but exploits without restraint entire ecosystems. Human activity constantly expands due to the accelerated development of science and technology. The pollution of the environment by industrial wastes, bad agricultural technology, the destruction of forests and top-soil — all these result in the suppression of biological activity and the shrinking of the genetic diversity of life. Mineral resources are being exhausted; and drinking water supplies are being reduced. Many harmful substances have appeared, and entered into the biosphere where they accumulate. The ecological balance has been violated. Man now has to face the emergence of pernicious processes in nature, including the failure of its natural reproductive power.

All this happens against a background of an unprecedented and unjustified growth of public consumption, especially in the most developed countries, where the search for wealth and luxury has become accepted as normal. This situation obstructs the just distribution of natural resources, which are common human property. The ecological crisis is proving painful not only for nature, but also for man as organically integral to it. As a result, the Earth finds itself on the verge of a global ecological disaster.

HB Patriarch Kirill of Russia, “The Social Concept,” June 1, 2012

Q

Why is the Orthodox Church concerned about ecological problems?

Can you name some of the effects of environmental degradation in your area?

Why are natural resources the common property of all people?

Reflections

The Deteriorating Condition of the Oceans

Over the past two decades, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has highlighted the deteriorating condition of the world's oceans. Now, more than ever, it is crucial to respect and protect this invaluable and inalienable resource of our planet, which is a unique source of nurture and biodiversity.

As industrial development becomes the norm of global behavior, so too our dependency on fossil fuels drives society's indifference toward creation care. This fosters ever rising levels of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, which in turn irreversibly pollute the earth's atmosphere, creating the conditions that allow for climate change and disruption. Furthermore, about one-third of carbon emissions dissolve into the ocean causing rising levels of acidification. This acidification is killing coral reefs, dissolving the shells of clams, oysters and other shellfish, while also destroying the bottom of the ocean food chain.

Many of us unfortunately cannot comprehend these consequences of climate change due to our complacent and perhaps even complicit circumstances. However, the more vulnerable among us – who depend on the oceans for food and sustenance – understand this dire situation as they witness changing conditions in the ocean and rising sea levels from melting polar icefields.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, For World Oceans Day, June 8, 2016

Q

Why is it that many Christians still cannot grasp the threat of climate change?

What are the causes by humans of global climate change?

How does climate change cause harm to the poor?

Reflections

Pollution of the World's Oceans

We are all called to remember that what we put into our waters can be equally as harmful as what we take out of the oceans. The way that we pollute our oceans – whether intentionally through non-biodegradable waste or inadvertently through relentless use of fossil fuels – is as destructive as overfishing and harvesting.

In addition to this, basic human rights are at risk when we fail to protect the oceans. We have often tried to draw connections between our attitudes and our actions. The way we defile the oceans is reflected in the way we exploit its resources, which is directly related to the way we treat our fellow human beings, particularly the marginalized and less fortunate of our brothers and sisters.

Therefore, if we have created the dire conditions that we now face, we are equally accountable for and capable of remedying the health of our environment. Each of us must learn to appreciate the way in which our individual and collective lifestyles – our choices and priorities – impact the environment.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, For World Oceans Day, June 8, 2016

Q

How do our lifestyles impact the environment?

Does your lifestyle in some way have an effect on the oceans?

Why is there a correlation between our attitudes toward people and the land?

Reflection

Creation and Icons

We are called to rediscover the iconic dimension of creation. And it is this, which distinguishes us as Christians and our awesome responsibility for the survival of our environment. In the Church, then, “through heaven and earth and sea, through wood and stone, through relics and Church buildings and the Cross, through angels and people, through all of creation, both visible and invisible, we offer veneration and honor to the Creator and master and Maker of all things, and to Him alone.”

All things are sacramental when seen in the light of God. In the Great Doxology that we just chanted, we prayed that "in His light we may see light, for He is the one who has shown us the light." And this beautiful building, with its traditional Byzantine architecture, and refreshing Mediterranean setting, is a symbol of that original beauty which was restored to us in Christ.

Let us open our eyes to see the world that God has made for us. Let us walk gently on the ground that so patiently tolerates our behavior. Then, as children of God, we can liberate the whole creation. Nothing less is expected of us. Nothing less dignifies us or the world around us. And nothing less is worthy of our high calling in Christ Jesus, who is adored and glorified with His eternal Father, and the all-holy, good and life-creating Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

HAH, Beauty and Nature, Santa Barbara, California, November 8, 1997

Q

In what manner should alert Orthodox Christians view icons?

How can this be applied to the larger creation?

What does the term “the liberation of creation” mean to you?

Reflection

Promoting a Eucharistic Use of the World

Our world is in crisis. Yet never before in history have human beings had the opportunity to bring so many positive changes to so many people and to the global community simply through encounter and dialogue. While it may be true that this is a time of crisis, it must equally be underlined that there has also never been greater chances for communication, cooperation and dialogue.

One of our most passionate concerns during our ministry as Patriarch has been protecting the natural environment, raising ecological awareness across academic disciplines, ecological movements and political governments, as well as advocating for a change in established lifestyles in order that people might become more sensitive to the irreversible destruction that threatens the natural environment today.

Orthodoxy is committed to ecology. It is the “green” Church par excellence. Our faith and our worship strengthen our commitment for the protection of creation and promote the “eucharistic use” of the world, the solidarity with creation. The Orthodox Christian attitude is the opposite of the exploitation of the world.

HAH, Izmir University, Feb. 9, 2015

Q

Why does HAH call this period a “time of crisis”?

What does a eucharistic use of the world involves?

What is the opposite of an exploitation of the world?

Reflection

A Crisis Rooted in the Human Heart

We believe that the roots of the environmental crisis are not primarily economic or political, nor technological, but profoundly and essentially religious, spiritual and moral. This is because it is a crisis about and within the human heart. The ecological crisis reflects an anthropological impasse, the spiritual crisis of contemporary man and contradictions of his rationalism, the titanism of his self-deification, the arrogance of his science and technology, the greed of his possessiveness (“the priority of *having*”), his individual and social eudaemonism.¹

We are convinced that the theological perspective cannot only discover hidden dimensions of the ecological crisis, but can also reveal possibilities to face and overcome it. What is required of us, at the threshold of the third millennium, is that we overcome the ways in which we looked upon creation in the past, which implied an abusive, domineering attitude toward the natural world.

The solution of the ecological problem is not only a matter of science, technology and politics but also, and perhaps primarily, a matter of radical change of mind, of new values, of a new ethos.

HAH Bartholomew, Izmir Univ. Feb. 15, 2015

Q

Why is the environmental crisis a religious, moral, and spiritual crisis?

What is the role of a theological perspective in the environmental crisis?

How can we overcome our former ways of understanding the ecological crisis?

Reflections

1

A system of ethics and belief that evaluates actions in terms of their capacity to produce happiness; especially, happiness conceived of in terms of well-being based on virtuous and rational self-realization.

A Motivation to Live More Simply

We are convinced that any real hope of reversing climate change and addressing environmental pollution requires a radical transformation of the way we perceive and treat our planet.

Many of us have witnessed positive changes over the last decade. Nevertheless, all of us are deeply frustrated with the stubborn resistance and reluctant advancement of earth-friendly policies and practices.

Permit us to propose that perhaps the reason for this hesitation and hindrance may lie in the fact that we are unwilling to accept personal responsibility and demonstrate personal sacrifice. In the Orthodox Christian tradition, we refer to this “missing dimension” as *ascesis*, which could be translated as abstinence and moderation, or – better still – simplicity and frugality. The truth is that we resist any demand for self-restraint and self-control.

However, if we do not live more simply, we cannot learn to share. And if we do not learn to share, then how can we expect to survive? This may be a fundamental religious and spiritual value. Yet it is also a fundamental ethical and existential principle.

HAH, Halki Summit, Istanbul, June 18, 2011

Q

What will it take to reverse global climate change?

What is it that HAH calls the “missing dimension” in our Christian behavior?

Why is sharing a crucial quality? Without it, what does he say will happen?

Reflection

The Restoration of a Lost Identity

We as Christians, taught by Holy Tradition and by the experience of the Holy Church Fathers, link always the theme of man as custodian of creation with the need for repentance. When man fell, due to his sin, he lost his identity. Because of his tendency toward transgression, man became weak and cannot find in himself sufficient strength to return to his Creator. Man accepts God's love and becomes a being of communication, a being as communion, improving, with all the Saints, his God-likeness.

So man becomes the custodian of the creation which is created by the will of God for the single reason - to become one in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1, 22-23; 4,15). The human being is called to protect the work of God's hands because the deeds of God protect [nurture] him. The creation needs God for its existence as it cannot exist by itself. Man is searching for eternity and he is determined to care for the conjunction of unity and differences. Love disables divisions, while the Spirit assembles all.

We are profoundly hurt by the divisions in witnessing the Christian truth before the modern world which is yearning for spiritual direction and the meaning of the mystery of life.

His Holiness Patriarch Irinej, Metropolitan of Belgrade and Serbia, August 31, 2012

Q

How is the fall related to environmental destruction?

Why are human beings the custodian and protector of God's works?

How can man reclaim his lost identity?

Reflection

Notes

NOTICE TO READERS

The OFT is now able to offer you a DVD on HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's symposium on the Arctic in which he hears from scientists, religious leaders and Eskimo Natives plus many other experts on the plight of the Arctic as a result of global climate change. This comes with a study guide with reflection questions, which makes this an excellent tool for a parish study group.

If you would like a copy of this DVD with study guide, send our office a note and we can send it to you. It would be helpful if you can provide a donation to cover the costs of this packet, but this is not required.

Additionally, if you wish to receive this daily reading every month, please send a note to the OFT office at Fred@Ecostewards.org. The next month's set of readings will be sent promptly to you at the end of each month so that you can continue without interruption.

If you are able to send a contribution, please mail to:

The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration
P.O. Box 7348
Santa Rosa, CA 95407

Please share these daily readings with your family and friends, or others in your parish or neighborhood. One does not need to be an Orthodox Christian to benefit from these readings as they are helpful to all people.

Thank you!



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Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

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