

Patriarchal Encyclical for the Ecclesiastical New Year

Prot. No. 735

† BARTHOLOMEW

By God's Mercy Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome

And Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Plenitude of the Church

Grace and Peace from the Creator and Conservator of All Creation

Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ

Beloved brothers and children in the Lord,

We have come to September 1st, the beginning of the ecclesiastical year, which the Ecumenical Patriarchate and subsequently the entire Orthodox Church designated as a day of prayer for the natural environment. Since then, as a result of this initiative, the interest in protecting the natural environment has expanded more broadly and numerous measures are now taken for the sustainability and balance of the earth's ecosystems as well as for all related problems.

Inasmuch as it is well known and proven, that "the laws of nature are neither dissolved nor disturbed, but always remain constant" (St. John Chrysostom, *On Lazarus* VI PG 48. 1042), we are today obliged to focus our attention on the unseen human interventions impacting the ecological balance, which is disturbed not only by visible destructive actions – such as deforestation, depletion of water resources, the overall exploitation of natural and energy resources, together with the pollution of immense land or marine regions by means of spilling or depositing toxic and chemical materials – but also by activities invisible to the naked eye. We are speaking of interventions into the genes of living creatures and the creation of mutations with unforeseen developments, such as the discovery of ways for releasing vast powers, atomic and nuclear, whose misuse could obliterate all traces of life and civilization on our planet. In such cases, greed and love of power are not the sole criteria on the part of those seeking to intervene and mutate these living creatures, which God created as "very good," but the arrogance on the part of some that look to oppose God's Wisdom and consider themselves capable of improving His work. The ancient Greeks called this spiritual condition "hubris," and it signifies arrogant insolence of someone with limited mind before the all-knowing and almighty Creator.

Naturally, we are not opposed to scientific research, so long as it provides beneficial services to humanity and the environment. Thus, the use of scientific determinations, for instance, for the healing of illness is surely acceptable; but the forceful commercial exploitation of resources from contemporary chemical and biological technology in the light of some predetermined conclusion that these are not harmful to humanity, is certainly denounced because it has repeatedly led to tragic consequences for humanity and the environment.

Science is quite right to research constantly and endeavour to explain the natural laws and order. God's commandment to the first-created, namely that they "subdue the earth" (Gen. 9.1), grants the license for research into and knowledge of the natural and biological mechanisms active in nature so that the natural environment may be a heavenly entity. The only condition is that the pursuit and utilization of knowledge should not aim solely at profit or become an arrogant effort toward the construction of a new tower of Babel, whereby God's creatures seek to reach and perhaps, through some people's conceit, even surpass the Creator Himself. Unfortunately, sometimes human beings forget the fact that "the source of beauty created all things" (Wisdom 13.3) and "the Lord's hand established the earth, while His right hand founded the heavens." (Is. 48.13)

Consequently, it is our obligation, as shepherds of the Church and every person of the spirit and the sciences but also of all devout Christians, to do good and especially to pray that the divine Creator of all may enlighten the scientists, who are particularly involved with these issues, that they may enter the mysteries of nature with humility before God and respect toward the natural laws so as to avoid the unnatural use of their research for commercial or other reasons. A long experience is necessary in order to determine that the ascertained beneficial repercussions of the application of new knowledge do not have parallel side effects that are destructive to the environment as well as to humanity.

At the creation of the world, the Lord's voice and original command that "nature may have its own laws remain in our world so that it is able to generate and bear fruit for all time" (Basil the Great, *On the Hexaemeron* IX PG 29.96) also guarantee the earth's sustainability. So the earth will continue to generate and bear fruit if it is permitted to adhere to its own natural order and if we as its inhabitants live according to the commandments and laws of God, abiding by and practicing them. Then He alone "will rain in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit . . . And we shall eat our bread to the full and live securely in our land. And He will grant peace in the land." (Lev. 26.4-5)

On the occasion, then, of this important day and the commencement of the year, we pray with Joshua, the angelic Symeon, the seven children in Ephesus, and the sacred Psalmist David that the Lord will send forth His spirit and renew the face of the earth (cf. Ps. 103.20) to bless the works of His hands and deem us worthy of peacefully completing the time that lies before us. And we invoke upon those undertaking scientific research into the power of nature the illumination, grace and blessing of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

September 1, 2013