

To Commit a Crime Against the Natural World Is a Sin

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

The Ecumenical Throne of Orthodoxy, as a preserver and herald of the ancient Patristic tradition and of the rich liturgical experience of the Orthodox Church, today renews its long-standing commitment to healing the environment. We have followed with great interest and sincere concern the efforts to curb the destructive effects that human beings have wrought upon the natural world. We view with alarm the dangerous consequences of humanity's disregard for the survival of God's creation.

We believe that Orthodox liturgy and life hold tangible answers to the ultimate questions concerning salvation from corruptibility and death. The Eucharist is at the very center of our worship. And our sin toward the world, or the spiritual root of all our pollution, lies in our refusal to view life and the world as a sacrament of thanksgiving, and as a gift of constant communion with God on a global scale.

We envision a new awareness that is not mere philosophical posturing, but a tangible experience of a mystical nature. We believe that our first task is to raise the consciousness of adults who most use the resources and gifts of the planet. Ultimately, it is for our children that we must perceive our every action in the world as having a direct effect upon the future of the environment. At the heart of

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the relationship between man and environment is the relationship between human beings. As individuals, we live not only in vertical relationships to God and horizontal relationships to one another, but also in a complex web of relationships that extend throughout our lives, our cultures, and the material world. Human beings and the environment form a seamless garment of existence, a complex fabric that we believe is fashioned by God.

People of all faith traditions praise the Divine, for they seek to understand their relationship to the cosmos. The entire universe participates in a celebration of life, which St. Maximos the Confessor described as a “cosmic liturgy.” We see this cosmic liturgy in the symbiosis of life’s rich biological complexities. These complex relationships draw attention to themselves in humanity’s self-conscious awareness of the cosmos. As human beings, created “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26), we are called to recognize this interdependence between our environment and ourselves. In the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, as priests standing before the altar of the world, we offer the Creation back to the Creator in relationship to Him and to each other.

Indeed, in our liturgical life, we realize by anticipation the final state of the cosmos in the Kingdom of Heaven. We celebrate the beauty of creation and consecrate the life of the world, returning it to God with thanks. We share the world in joy as a living mystical communion with the Divine. Thus it is that we celebrate the beauty of creation, and consecrate the life of the world, returning it to God with thanks. We share the world in joy as a living mystical communion with the Divine. Thus it is that we offer the fullness of creation at the Eucharist, and receive it back as a blessing, as the living presence of God.

Moreover, there is also an ascetic element in our responsibility toward God’s creation. This asceticism requires from us a voluntary restraint in order for us to live in harmony with our environment. Asceticism offers practical examples of conservation.

By reducing our consumption—in Orthodox theology, *encratia*, or self-control—we come to ensure that resources are also left for others in the world. As we shift our will, we demonstrate a concern for the Third World and developing nations. Our abundance of resources will be extended to include an abundance of equitable concern for others.

We must challenge ourselves to see our personal, spiritual attitudes in continuity with public policy. Encratia frees us of our self-centered neediness, that we may do good works for others. We do this out of a personal love for the natural world around us. We are called to work in humble harmony with creation and not in arrogant supremacy against it. Asceticism provides an example whereby we may live simply.

Asceticism is not a flight from society and the world, but a communal attitude of mind and way of life that leads to the respectful use, and not the abuse, of material goods. Excessive consumption may be understood to issue from a worldview of estrangement from self, from land, from life, and from God. Consuming the fruits of the Earth unrestrained, we become consumed ourselves, by avarice and greed. Excessive consumption leaves us emptied, out of touch with our deepest self. Asceticism is a corrective practice, a vision of repentance. Such a vision will lead us from repentance to return, the return to a world in which we give to as well as take from creation.

We are called to be stewards, and reflections of God's love by example. Therefore, we proclaim the sanctity of all life, the entire creation being God's and reflecting His continuing will that life abound. We must love life so that others may see and know that it belongs to God. We must leave the judgment of our success to our Creator.

We lovingly suggest, to all the people of the Earth, that they seek to help one another to understand the myriad ways in which we are related to the Earth and to one another. In this way, we may begin to repair the dislocation many people experience in relation to creation.

If human beings treated one another's personal property the way they treat their environment, we would view that behavior as anti-social. We would impose the judicial measures necessary to restore wrongly appropriated personal possessions. It is therefore appropriate for us to seek ethical, legal recourse where possible, in matters of ecological crimes.

It follows that to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation, for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands, for humans to injure

other humans with disease, for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances—these are sins.

In prayer, we ask for the forgiveness of sins committed both willingly and unwillingly. And it is certainly God's forgiveness which we must ask, for causing harm to His own creation.

Thus we begin the process of healing our worldly environment, which was blessed with beauty and created by God. Then we may also begin to participate responsibly, as persons making informed choices, both in the integrated whole of creation and within our own souls.

We are urging a different and, we believe, a more satisfactory ecological ethic. This ethic is shared with many of the religious traditions. All of us hold the Earth to be God's creation, where He placed the newly created human "in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to guard it" (Genesis 2:15). He imposed on humanity a stewardship role in relationship to the Earth. How we treat the Earth and all of creation defines the relationship that each of us has with God. It is also a barometer of how we view one another. For if we truly value a person, we are careful as to our behavior toward that person. The dominion that God has given humankind over the Earth does not extend to human relationships.

We must be spokespeople for an ecological ethic that reminds the world that it is not ours to use for our own convenience. It is God's gift of love to us, and we must return His love by protecting it and all that is in it.

The Lord suffuses all of creation with His divine presence in one continuous legato from the substance of atoms to the Mind of God. Let us renew the harmony between heaven and Earth and transfigure every detail, every particle of life. Let us love one another, and lovingly learn from one another, for the edification of God's people, for the sanctification of God's creation, and for the glorification of God's most holy Name.

Amen.¹

1. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "To Commit a Crime Against the Natural World Is a Sin," Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, 8 November 1997.