

## 2018 Greener Attica Symposium Report

This past June, I was privileged to be invited to a four-day symposium on the environment, hosted in Greece by His All-Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, on the environment. I received this invitation as a member of the Fellowship of the Transfiguration, a body of Orthodox clergy and laity concerned about environmental matters and endorsed by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA. At this event, called the *Green Attica Symposium*, I joined about 200 other international guests and world leaders to hear presentations outlining concerns about the environment. These guests were respected leaders in the fields of theology, science, philosophy and economics. All were present to grapple with the dimensions of what is happening to this planet's climatic behavior. A couple from Holy Trinity Church in Yonkers, and some youth from our diocese, who volunteered as helpers, were also present.

His All-Holiness was a most gracious host, sparing no expense to make the event comfortable and conducive for productive dialogue. Mingling with such people and catching up with old friends also made it a beautiful and enjoyable gathering! It started with a State Welcome and Banquet at the Acropolis in Athens; the next day, we were ferried to the island of Spetses. After a couple of days of intense presentations and discussions, we were taken to the island of Hydra, where more presentations were given. On the last day, as we returned to Athens, His All-Holiness, who had listened to all the discussions to that point, gave a final presentation. The accompanying photos give a glimpse of our activities and of the beauty of Greece in all its splendor.

A most memorable aspect of the Symposium was witnessing His All Holiness' pastoral encounter with the islands' inhabitants. I was told that he had never visited them before; and as he arrived, church bells rang out at full volume as the locals cheered with joy to welcome his presence! It was a privilege to share in this experience.

There was, however, a very serious side to the event. I have examined this issue from a theological point of view for close to 20 years, but even I was alarmed at the impending danger facing the peoples of this world because of pollution, fresh water calamities, and global warming. It is impossible in this short description to give a full outline of these dangers. Thus, I will give a summary in bullet format.

Here are some of the dangers of rising water and air temperatures that are caused by greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide and deforestation:

- Rising sea levels, endangering many low-lying areas such as Florida, the Mekong Delta, the Bay of Bengal, and the Nile Delta, as well as many small island nations;
- Decreasing rainfall in certain Mediterranean and many other arid areas, causing agricultural decline and increasing fires;
- More intense storms, occasioned by the conditions which arise when the ocean temperature goes above 84 degrees, allowing the types of super-storms that we have witnessed in recent years to develop;
- Rising humid temperature thresholds in tropical areas that will go well beyond the 95 degrees we associate with such areas, causing unbearable conditions in some parts of

the world (do you remember the effects of the heat wave in Chicago a few years ago for those who did not have air conditioning?); and

- Increasing scarcity of fresh water and the international conflicts that result, e.g., multi-national companies in Africa, Asia, South America and Australia are finding legal ways to monopolize the water rights of many countries for the production of Genetically Modified Objects (GMOs).

Pollution:

- Plastics in the ocean causing great stress on the sea and bird populations; and
- The prevalence of unbridled capitalism lacking checks and balances, causing many of the above issues.

### **Orthodoxy's Unique Approach**

Many Orthodox hierarchs have spoken extensively about the need to take care of God's creation in the context of the warnings we have heard from the global scientific community. The reason is that Orthodoxy's approach to the environment stands out in contrast to many other creeds. Indeed, many non-Orthodox Christians have looked to the Orthodox Church's lead, seeking to understand the theological basis for our care of creation. Here are some key points of a uniquely Orthodox reverence for the environment:

1. We regard God's creation as good. Many Protestants believe that the fall from grace by Adam and Eve caused creation to be intrinsically bad. We say it is corrupted by the fall, but still good – indeed, “very good”, as the Lord declared (Genesis 1:31).
2. In contrast to many Protestants, we believe that the Holy Spirit continues the act of creation to this day and will continue it. Note the prayer: “O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere and fillest all things ... “ .
3. We believe that the phrase in Genesis 1:28, “have dominion”, does not mean to dominate and pillage, as many have interpreted, but to care for the earth as God commanded Adam to do.
4. Because of Christ's resurrection, we are called through our baptism to offer the cosmos back to Him and intercede for all of creation. It is our priestly mission to do so.
5. Our liturgical seasons, with their prayers throughout the year, constantly refer to all of creation, not just ourselves, lest we fall into a pietistic inwardness that only focuses on our own soul's salvation with scant regard for anything else. The Gospels teach us to serve all mankind and to fulfill our uniquely human stewardship of all creation.
6. As most of you know, the Orthodox practice of *asceticism* is central to our way of life. The fasting seasons give us a way to restrain ourselves from becoming wasteful and excessive, by controlling our passions. The subsequent reduction in meat consumption is especially important to the environment. Did you know that it takes 11 times more energy to produce the same quantity of meat than it does grain?
7. The strong emphasis on the Communion of Saints in Orthodoxy is also connected to the cosmos. The icons in our churches show that we believe the Saints are not only present with us when we pray in a consecrated church, but that they and we are connected to the cosmos through Christ, the Creator of the universe. Further, many of the Saints were martyred. They spilled their blood into the earth to sanctify it and, thus, the whole of creation. While many non-Orthodox Christians rightly talk about

- good stewardship in the care of this planet, Orthodoxy also talks about the need for us to become icons of creation in the way that the martyrs have done.
8. There is a tendency among many non-Orthodox Christians to regard the Kingdom of God and the End Times as realities that will be made manifest only upon the Lord's Second Coming – not concerns with which to occupy ourselves here and now. In contrast, we proclaim the Lord's teaching that the Kingdom of God is within us, here and now. This is the basis of our goal of *theosis*. We experience a foretaste of the Kingdom during this life, particularly in the Divine Liturgy; so, we are called to embrace and grow into our role as stewards of creation and citizens of that Kingdom, in our present place and time and throughout our earthly lives.

### **Practical Solutions**

There are innumerable practical ways that we can fulfill our calling to care for God's creation; they are too many for this article. However, I will be leading a workshop on the environment at Day Two of our upcoming annual Diocesan Assembly on October 31<sup>st</sup>, in Brick, NJ. This forum will be a good opportunity to explore some practical ways in which our parishes can work to care for the environment.

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