

Message from the General Secretary of the WCC

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Bose, 5 - 8 September 2012

XX International Ecumenical Conference

Christian churches today understand that people and the earth are in peril due to the over-consumption of natural resources

XX International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox spirituality

MAN-CUSTODIAN OF CREATION

Bose, Wednesday 5 - Saturday 8 September 2012

in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches

Geneva, September 3, 2012

Dear Prior, Your Eminences, dear Fathers, dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I send cordial greetings to members of the Community of Bose and to all participants of the twentieth Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality. The theme this year—"Human Being – Custodian of Creation"—is well connected to Orthodox spirituality but also to the ecumenical movement. Undoubtedly, the conference will generate remarkable theological reflections and a profound spiritual experience, as it has in previous years.

Ecumenical theology has already learned from the Orthodox tradition and its reflection a great deal about the theological and spiritual dimensions of the human being's relation to the environment. We understand that that relation has been grounded in the liturgical life of the church. From Orthodox theologians the ecumenical family has also learned that the environmental crisis is a result of human sin, a distortion of the God given gift.

Credit must be given to ecumenical attempts to reach the churches regarding theological reflection on the environmental crisis. As a guardian of God's creation, human beings are, indeed, responsible for relations with the inhabited world. In ecumenical understanding, the environmental crisis is human-induced; and ecumenical activity in this field includes ethical and theological reflection, resource development and distribution, and advocacy at the international and national levels [1]. The strong conviction behind ecumenical action is that "we can prevent climate change – or at least, we know enough to reduce the degree of human-induced climate change" [2].

As early as in the 1970s, churches were advised to take a stand regarding environmental issues. At the initiative of the World Council of Churches, in 1974 scientists, theologians and economists articulated the concept of sustainability. In the following year, the fifth Assembly in Nairobi (1975) introduced the issue of a "sustainable society."

After the Inter-Orthodox conference on Environmental Protection in 1991 (Crete), the Orthodox churches themselves offered significant suggestions to churches, one of them to establish 1 September as a day of special prayers and supplications for all. Prior to this, in 1989, the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios issued an encyclical proclaiming 1 September, the first day of the calendar in the Orthodox Church, as a day to pray in all the churches of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the protection of the natural creation.

Christian churches today understand that people and the earth are in peril due to the over-consumption of natural resources by a small percentage of the world's population and that "the sins of egotism, callous disregard and greed lie at the root of the environmental crises.... The groaning of the Creation and the cries of people in poverty alert us to just how much our current social, political, economic and ecological state of emergency runs counter to God's vision for life in abundance" [3].

Christians must believe that if they understand the greatness of creation, in the words of Basil the Great, they will magnify the Lord. (*Homily 16,3*).

Christians worldwide repeat words from the Psalm (103): "Bless the Lord all his work," but what is a Christian response to the environmental crisis? Shall Christians share with all human beings the riches of their spirituality, which, among other demands, calls us to self-discipline? Indeed, asceticism must be taken very seriously by those who wish to restore the right relations with God's creation.

A number of profound theological themes and concepts from the Orthodox tradition can inform the ecumenical response to our environmental problems, vital to which is the call for *metanoia*/repentance: To quote from the Office of Vespers for the Preservation of Creation: "With humility of our souls we entreat you, Lord, and we fall down before you: at your command deliver the earth on which we dwell from every harm and from harsh ruin, and speedily avert from it and abolish by your will destructive emanations and pour out the fresh dew of life-sustaining air. Fence about the whole enclosure of the environment, Master and Saviour, with your mighty power, granting to all pardon and salvation and divine mercy."

Personally and ecclesially, God calls us to radical transformation, at the heart of which lies a common Christian call, free of any specific hermeneutics, formulated by F. Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamasov* as "Love all God's creation."

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[1] For more details see David Hallman, *The WCC Climate Change Programme, History, Lesson and Challenge*, at: http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p3/Climate_Change_Brochure_2005.pdf.

[2] *Ibid.*, 57.

[3] From the "AGAPE Call to Action, 2012": *Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call to Action*, at <http://oikoumene.org>.