Final press release

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XX International Ecumenical Conference

Bose, 11 September 2012

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XX International Ecumenical Conference
on Orthodox spirituality
MAN–CUSTODIAN OF CREATION

Bose, Wednesday, 5 September — Saturday, 8 September 2012

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In the Christian tradition, both of the East and of the West, to inhabit the earth is a task and a gift confided to human beings, custodians, but at the same time guests of creation. To *Man—Custodian of Creation* was dedicated the 20th International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality, organized in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches and held at the Bose Monastery on 5–8 September 2012.

The Orthodox Churches were the first to call the attention of Christians to the topic of ecology as a spiritual problem. In 1989 patriarch Demetrius of Constantinople proclaimed 1 September, the beginning of the Byzantine liturgical year, as a "day of creation", in which prayers and supplications are to be raised for the defense of the creation and invited "all men of good will" to abstain from damaging nature. His successor, the present ecumenical patriarch, Bartholomew I, followed him in this with great conviction and numerous initiatives, constantly recalling the spiritual and Christian foundations of the ecological commitment. In his message to the conference he exhorted the Churches to become aware of the gravity of the ecological crisis and to "discern the ties between spiritual commitment and ecological moral practice". The numerous messages of Church heads (pope Benedict XVI through his secretary of state, cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, cardinal Kurt Koch, the patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, Moscow, Serbia, Romania, the archbishop of Athens, the catholicos of all the Armenians Karekin II, the primate of the Anglican communion, Rowan Williams, the secretary of the World Council of Churches) gave a convinced reply to this urgency, aware that the destruction of the environment is a sin against God's commandment and that "a theological discussion of environmental problems with the Orthodox sister-Churches and an exchange of experiences within interconfessional and interreligious dialogue" is of great importance (patriarch Kirill of Moscow in his message).

The ecumenical importance of the ecological problem, which the Churches are rediscovering with ever greater conviction, was shown by the presence of official delegations of the Orthodox Churches and of the Catholic Church. In particular, present were cardinal **Roger Etchegaray**, vice-dean of the college of Cardinals, archbishop **Antonio Mennini**, apostolic nuncio in Great Britain, bishop **Mansueto Bianchi** of Pistoia, president of the commission for ecumenism and interreligious dialogue of the Italian bishops' Conference, bishop **Gabriele Mana** of Biella; metropolitans **German of Volgograd** (Moscow Patriarchate), **Georges of Mount Lebanon** (Patriarchate of Antioch), bishops **Stefan of Homel'** (Exarchate of Belarus of the Moscow Patriarchate), **Ioannis of Thermopylae** (Greek Orthodox Church), **Melchisedek of Pittsburgh** (Orthodox Church of America), father **Tavma Kachatryan** (Armenian Apostolic Church), archimandrite **Athenagoras** Fasiolo (Orthodox Archdiocese of Italy and Malta), canon **Hugh Wybrew** (Church of England), **Tamara Grdzelidze** (World Council of Churches), mons. **Andrea Palmieri**, under-secretary of the Pontifical Council for the promotion of Christian Unity.

Numerous monks and nuns were present at the conference; they came from Orthodox monasteries (Greece, Russia, Mount Sinai, Armenia, France, England, United States) and Catholic and Reformed monasteries (Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland, Hungary).

In four days of meetings and discussions open to the public theologians, patrologists, and scholars examined under various aspects the theological and spiritual dimensions of man's relationship with the environment that surrounds him, asking what values might inspire responsible choices in face of the ecological crisis provoked by man himself, which is causing irreversible wounds on life on our planet.

On opening day the talks by the prior of Bose, **Enzo Bianchi**, and by the metropolitan of Pergamum, **Ioannis Zizioulas**, delegate of patriarch Bartholomew to the conference, pointed out how in the Christian conception the creation is a work of the Trinity and how man is called upon not only to preserve the environment in which he lives, but also to be, in his condition of co-creature, "priest of creation", in order to offer it to God, awaiting the salvation of all creation, animate and inanimate. Because of this, at the heart of the ecological commitment we find a spiritual problem. "The earth is desolate when the quality of human life and of cosmic life declines," observed Enzo Bianchi. The teaching of the Orthodox Church on ecological problems was then illustrated by bishop Amvrosij of Gat?ina, rector of the St Petersburg Theological Academy and head of the official delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The goodness of creation according to the Biblical account (Gen 1,31), the relation between wounded and restored nature and the history of salvation (Rom 8,22), the church fathers' understanding of the relationship between man and creation, from Ireneus of Lyons to Maximus the Confessor to the Syriac fathers, were at the center of the reflections offered by **John Behr** (New York), **Nestor Kavvadas** (Tübingen), **Assaad Elias Kattan** (Münster).

Asceticism and poverty of the monastic tradition are an occasion for reflecting on respect for the earth and the sharing of its fruits in a consumer society. The round table presided by bishop **Andrej of Remesiana**, delegate of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, gathered the different perspectives given by the monastic tradition in its relations with the environment: from contemplation of nature in Byzantine literature and tradition (**Antonio Rigo**, member of the scientific committee, Venice; **Dimitrios Moschos**, Athens) to the transformations of the natural space in the monastic settlements of the Russian North (archimandrite **Porfirij Šutov** of Solovki, igumen **Mitrofan Badanin** of Varzuga) or in Cistercian abbeys in the West (**Esther De Waal**, Rowlestone, Herefordshire).

In the Eastern Christian tradition liturgical celebration intimately includes the cosmos in the Church's praise and adoration. Everything that lives and breathes, and trees, stones, the sun, the moon praise the Lord. The eucharistic celebration above all is a sacrifice of praise offered to the Father, in which the assembly of believers draws in all creation and all human history (**Job Getcha**, Paris). The cosmic dimension of the Christian liturgy finds expression in the iconography of creation; in the icon there occurs a "re-evaluation of the visible world" that regenerates the interior sight (**Anca Vasiliu**, Paris).

Scientists indicate the possibility of a collapse of the planet's ecosystem, and this requires a renewed assumption of shared responsibility. The discussion about man and creation ethics, coordinated by **Konstantin Sigov** (Kiev), saw an exchange between metropolitan **Serafim of Germany**, delegate of the Romanian patriarch. the Orthodox theologian **Elisabeth Theokritoff**, and the Lebanese epistemologist **Antoine Courban**.

The final day opened with a meditation in "Eucharist and creation" by archbishop **Antonij of Boryspil'**, vicar of the metropolitan of Kiev and rector of the Kiev Theological Academy, who stressed the cosmic dimension of the eucharistic sacrament, in which all creation, in the bread and the wine, becomes the body of Christ. The American Orthodox theologian **John Chryssavgis** explored the ways in which the richness of the Orthodox spiritual tradition, faced with the urgency of the ecological problem, translates into a new practice of relation with the natural world, capable of meeting the challenge of the complex problems raised by today's industrial and technological revolution.

The Benedictine **Michel van Parys**, member of the scientific committee, in the conclusion of the conference reminded all that the Holy Spirit is "at work to edify a new ark of the covenant and the temple that will be the body of the risen Messiah". In the dramatic decisions that await humanity with the worsening of the environmental crisis Christians may not forget that, as Ignatius of Antioch wrote, "the great marvels of our salvation are worked out in silence". This assurance is our hope: "To hope in God's salvation, to hope in man — is not this the testimony that Christians are called upon to give together to the world?

In his final words of thanks the prior of Bose, **Enzo Bianchi**, announced that the 21st International Ecumenical Conference will be held on 4–7 September 2013, the theme of which will be decided by the scientific committee in November.