

# **A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift**

by  
George P. Nassos

## **The Environmental Contributions of Patriarch Bartholomew**

I just completed reading an outstanding book, “Bartholomew: Apostle and Visionary” by John Chryssavgis. This book covers three major topics, the biography of Patriarch Bartholomew who is the spiritual leader of about 300 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, some of the history of that church, and his dedication and influence on protecting the environment.

Bartholomew was elected patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church just over 25 years ago, and right from the start in his position he was committed to protecting God's creation. In 1997 while giving a talk in Santa Barbara, CA, he said that anyone causing harm to the environment is committing a sin. This was the first time that a religious leader had ever identified harming the environment with committing sin.

His first environmental initiative was just one month after becoming the patriarch in 1991 when he convened an ecological conference on the island of Crete. But his real effort was a movement known as “Religion, Science and the Environment”, a movement that led to a series of eight international conferences – all on water. The first such symposium in 1995 took place on the Aegean Sea entitled “Revelation and the Environment”. Symposium II in 1997 was entitled “The Black Sea in Crisis” and dealt with issues related to countries around the Black Sea such as Turkey, Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria.

In 1999, the third symposium took place with the title “River of Life – Down the Danube to the Black Sea”. The participants traveled the length of the Danube River from Passau, Germany through Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania and ending at the delta of the Danube in Ukraine. Again the content of this symposium related to all environmental issues along the Danube. Three years later in 2002, the fourth symposium dealt with environmental issues around the Adriatic Sea with the theme “The Adriatic Sea – A Sea at Risk, a Unity of Purpose” with a focus on the ethical aspects of the environmental crisis.

The patriarch organized his fifth symposium the following year in 2003 on the Baltic Sea with the title “The Baltic Sea – A Common Heritage, a Shared Responsibility”. The Baltic borders on nine countries and receives pollution from each of them. The 250 participants dealt with the many environmental issues. Taking place in 2006, the sixth symposium was quite different with a convoy of boats traveling down the Amazon River. Titled “The Amazon – Source of Life”, this symposium concentrated on the many global problems stemming directly from the Amazon.

Symposium VII: “The Arctic – Mirror of Life” took place in 2007 and focused on the melting ice caps of Greenland. It also considered the plight of indigenous populations as well as the concern for unwarranted oil exploration. The last of the symposia on water took place in

2009 on the Mississippi River titled: “Restoring Balance – The Great Mississippi River” and dealt with the many cities along the river that discharge waste into this body of water. Basically, it is the third largest drainage basin in the world.

Three years later in 2012, Patriarch Bartholomew organized the first of smaller conferences, with about 50 participants, held on the island of Heybeliada, Turkey, also known as Halki. This was the inaugural Halki Summit and dealt with “global responsibility and environmental sustainability”. I was fortunate to have attended this conference and had a chance to meet James Hansen, Bill McKibben, Jane Goodall, Amory Lovins, Gary Hirshberg and other environmentalists. The second in a series of Halki Summits took place in 2015 and focused on literature and the arts. Bartholomew is planning more of these summits to continue his dedication on protecting the environment.

The patriarch is so committed to the environment that he is converting a former orphanage to an interfaith environmental center on the island of Buyukada, also known as Prinkipos. This wooden structure is the largest wooden building in Europe and the second largest in the world. Here he plans to highlight the relationships of religion and the environment, religion and science, and society and policy.

One of the patriarch’s greatest contributions to preserving the environment, however, started in late 2014 when Pope Francis met with Patriarch Bartholomew in Constantinople, Turkey. With that opportunity, the patriarch seemed to have convinced the pope of the importance in preserving the environment. Six months later the pope issued his encyclical, “Laudato Si”, on protecting our common home. Not only did Patriarch Bartholomew give Pope Francis some inspiration to write the encyclical, but two of the patriarch’s people contributed to the encyclical. Now the patriarch’s environmental agenda can be passed on to the 1.2 billion Roman Catholics.

After reading all about Patriarch Bartholomew’s efforts in protecting the environment, it is no wonder that former Vice-President Al Gore gave him the name “The Green Patriarch”.