

MESSAGE

By

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

To the Istanbul Conference “Creation: Our Shared Inheritance” of the Issachar Fund
(May 27, 2015)

Dear organizers and distinguished participants,

It is with great joy that we welcome you to the extraordinary city of Istanbul, which spans continents and cultures, as well as civilizations and narratives over millennia and centuries.

Furthermore, it is with great pleasure that we welcome you as religious leaders, representing a wide range of faith communities, responding to the challenge of climate change and the ecological crisis from the perspective of religion and spirituality.

Dear friends, the spiritual life demands a respectful approach to God’s creation. The way we relate to material things reflects the way we relate to God. The sensitivity with which we handle worldly things mirrors the sacredness that we attribute to heavenly things. And this is not simply a matter that concerns us as individuals; it concerns us as religious communities and devoted believers. We need to treat nature with the same awe and wonder that we show when we treasure a classical work of beauty and art.

In order, however, to reach this point of maturity and dignity toward the natural environment, we must first be silent. Silence is a fundamental element of an ecological ethos. We must be silent to hear one another; and we must be silent to hear the voice of the Creator in the sound of nature. For, “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the

firmament proclaims the creation of His hands” (Psalm 19.1). The ancient Liturgy of St. James is celebrated only twice a year in Orthodox Churches. However, in that service, there is a prayer that affirms the same conviction:

The heavens declare the glory of the heaven; the earth proclaims the sovereignty of God; the sea heralds the authority of the Lord; and every material and spiritual creature preaches the magnificence of God at all times.

Indeed, when God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, communication occurred through a silent voice, as St. Gregory of Nyssa informs us in his fourth-century mystical classic, *The Life of Moses*. Nature is a book, opened wide for all to read and to learn. Each plant, each animal, and each micro-organism tells its own story, unfolds its own mystery, relates its own extraordinary harmony and balance, which are interdependent and complementary.

The same dialogue of communication and mystery of communion is detected in the galaxies, where the countless stars betray the same mystical beauty and mathematical inter-connectedness. We do not need this perspective in order to believe in God or to prove His existence. We need it to breathe; we need it for us simply to be. The coexistence and correlation between the boundlessly infinite and the most insignificantly finite things articulate a con-celebration of joy and love. This is precisely what, in the seventh century, St. Maximus the Confessor called a “cosmic liturgy.” There are “words” (or *logoi*) in creation, which can be discerned with proper attentiveness.

It is unfortunate, then, that we lead our life without even noticing the environmental concert that plays out before our very eyes and ears. No single member – human or otherwise – can be removed without the entire symphony being deeply affected. No single tree or animal can be removed without the entire picture being profoundly distorted, if not destroyed. When will we stop to hear the music of this harmony? It is an ongoing rhythm, even if we are not aware of it. When will we learn to embrace the awesome beauty of the divine presence on the body of the world? Its contours are so markedly visible.

We are convinced that this is precisely the role of religion and the responsibility of religious leaders. We are called to awaken people's conscience in order for them to become sensitive and receptive to God's presence in the world. In this respect, your convocation is vital inasmuch as it provides a precious occasion to listen to one another and establish a common vision and vocabulary, with which we can respond to the environmental problems of our time and to do so with a sense of urgency.

This is the source of our optimism. Some years ago, in Venice (June 10, 2002), we declared with Pope John Paul II:

It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now, with God's help and blessing.

Dear organizers and participants, the natural environment – the forest, the water, the land – belongs not only to the present generation

but also to future generations. We must frankly admit that humankind is entitled to something better than what we see around us. Our children and the future generations are entitled to a better and brighter world, a world free from degradation, violence and bloodshed, a world of generosity and love. Let us begin to work for this future from today.

May God bless your deliberations and decisions.