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Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: “We must work together to break down barriers between faiths, cultures, and peoples”



On 15 May 2024, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew delivered the keynote address at the KAICIID Global Dialogue Forum in Lisbon, Portugal. In his speech, he emphasised the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s dedication to interfaith dialogue, particularly highlighting His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon’s significant role in KAICIID’s programs.

Patriarch Bartholomew stressed the importance of raising awareness about human rights, preserving human dignity, and fostering collaborative pathways for peacemaking and ecological sustainability. He stressed that the climate crisis is a profound spiritual issue, urging that care for creation be viewed as a sacred obligation.

He referenced the 2016 Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church's Encyclical, which identified the spiritual and ethical roots of the ecological crisis and called for a radical change in behaviour towards creation. He also mentioned a joint statement issued on September 1, 2021, with Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby, emphasizing the responsibility of religious leaders to hold nations and corporations accountable for environmental stewardship.

Finally, Patriarch Bartholomew reflected on the recent pandemic, highlighting the interconnectedness of global crises and the necessity of working together to address them. He urged a choice between shortsightedness and transformative action grounded in faith.

Read the full address below:
Distinguished religious leaders and organisational representatives,

Dear advocates, advisors, and allies in our collaborative vision,

Beloved friends, brothers and sisters,

It is a unique privilege and joy to join all of you at the generous invitation of the KAICIID Global Dialogue Forum. We are personally familiar with the special commitment and platform of KAICIID, particularly through the extended participation and intimate connection of our most senior Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon, whose prominent role in this interfaith program represents the dedication of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to bilateral dialogue and multilateral conversation on an international level and inter-religious context.

While this is hardly our first involvement in the invaluable and influential agenda of KAICIID, this specific event appealed personally and profoundly to our own concerns and ministry throughout our tenure. Over the last three decades and more, we have sought to raise awareness about human rights and preserve human dignity. We have, moreover, emphasized the need to establish collaborative pathways and underlined the need for peacemaking. And, perhaps above all, we have placed ecological sustainability and creation care at the very centre of our attention and protection. It is especially this last dimension to our ministry and commitment that we would like to focus on today. And we are highlighting the environment for three reasons:

First, we are concerned about the environment, because we are convinced that the climate crisis is not a marginal or peripheral challenge in our world. It has sincere and profound spiritual roots, stemming from the way we perceive the gift of

creation as a divine gift and a divine responsibility. For us, care for God's creation is not only a political or technological issue. It is primarily a sacred and spiritual vocation and obligation. Indeed, preserving the natural environment and our planet's resources is not a matter of public relations or fashionable statement. After all, our efforts to mobilize church congregations and faith communities about sustainability began long before ecology was considered popular or appealing. We were convinced from the outset—as early as the mid-1980s!—that sustainability constitutes part and parcel of our doctrinal belief and proper behaviour. Respecting material creation and learning to live with less, as well as offer glory and thanksgiving to the Creator God, are all central and vital to our belief system and moral code.

This is why the historic Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, which was held in Crete in June 2016 issued an Encyclical Letter to our faithful, underscoring (in paragraph 14) that "the roots of the ecological crisis are spiritual and ethical," while "the rupture in the relationship between man and creation is a perversion of the authentic use of God's creation." Moreover, the response to the ecological crisis, at least "on the basis of the principles of the Christian tradition," requires a radical change in behaviour against creation and "asceticism as an antidote to consumerism, the deification of needs and the acquisitive attitude," and presupposes "our greatest responsibility to hand down a viable natural environment to future generations." The same Encyclical concluded that the ecological problem "turns our attention to the social dimensions and the tragic consequences of the destruction of the natural environment."

This leads us to the second reason why we believe that the environment is a concern for all religious leaders. This is why, on September 1st, 2021, we issued and signed a joint statement with Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury, observing that all religious leaders have a duty to hold nations and corporations, but also communities and individuals accountable for the way we are treating our planet today. We are abusing and exploiting the earth and its resources, because we do not regard this planet as sacred. And so, instead, we unfortunately perceive and treat the earth as a desacralized object.

There can be no reason or excuse for our indifference or inaction. Today, all of us are well aware of the intimate and inseparable connections of the ecological crisis to the global problems of poverty, migration, and conflict. How can we, as religious leaders, not pursue the welfare of the world's inhabitants? How can we not bring to light the exploitation created by industries and corporations, often with the permission or tolerance of politicians and states? This is surely a fundamental and

critical part of our service as representatives of religion.

Thirdly, and finally, over the course of the recent pandemic, we learned how vulnerable we are as human beings and how fragile our environment is, if we do not work together. Our social systems frayed, and we found that we cannot control everything. We must acknowledge that the ways we use money and organize our societies have not benefited everyone. We find ourselves weak and anxious, submersed in a series of crises—for instance, in health, food, economy, and society—all of which are deeply and inseparably interconnected. These crises present us with a clear choice. We are in a unique position either to address them with shortsightedness and profiteering (which is the way of a world alienated from God) or seize this as an opportunity for conversion and transformation (which is the way of faith).

If only we could think of humanity as a family and work together towards a future based on the common good, we will find ourselves living in a very different world. Together—all of us in collaboration—we can share a vision for life where everyone flourishes and no person is ignored. Together, we can act with love, justice, and mercy in order to walk towards a fairer and more fulfilling society with those who are most vulnerable at the centre of our universe.

However, dear friends, this inevitably involves making changes—sometimes radical and even difficult changes. But that is the authentic way of transformation. That is the authentic way of transformative dialogue and peacebuilding. And that is the only way toward collaboration and inclusion. As ministers of religion, we must raise awareness about the ways we use our resources. As religious communities, we must discover new ways of working together in order to break down the barriers between faiths, cultures, and peoples. May God truly guide our steps in this direction.

May God bless you all! Thank you for your kind attention!