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Archbishop Elpidophoros releases Encyclical for the Ecclesiastical New Year and the Day for the Protection of our Natural Environment

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To the Most Reverend Hierarchs, the Reverend Priests and Deacons, the Monks and Nuns, the Presidents and Members of the Parish Councils of the Greek Orthodox Communities, the Distinguished Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Day, Afternoon, and Church Schools, the Philoptochos Sisterhoods, the Youth, the Hellenic Organizations, and the entire Greek Orthodox Family in America

Beloved sisters and brothers,

My spiritual children in the Lord,

Thirty years ago, the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued an appeal to Orthodox Christians, urging prayer and care for God's creation. Since 1989, each year on September 1st, at the inspiration of His All-Holiness Demetrios, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has opened the liturgical year with prayers for all God's creation. Since 1992, at the exhortation of His All-Holiness Bartholomew, all Orthodox Churches have implemented the same tradition.

Over the years, the World Council of Churches has heeded this call, while more recently the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion have also embraced this tradition. Today, countless parishes and faithful adopt the same practice in their communities and lives. Therefore, in all corners of the planet, we have perceived glimpses of the polluted creation that we are called to redeem and the new creation that we are called to promote.

All of these initiatives are positive signs of awakening, but much more remains to be accomplished. Moreover, the Orthodox Church has drawn on its liturgical, patristic and spiritual treasures to develop a sensitive and profound theology of creation, emphasizing the Eucharistic and ascetic dimension of creation care, while highlighting the role of human beings as priests of creation.

In many ways, the encyclical of 1989 proved genuinely prophetic. What the world has witnessed in terms of climate change and global warming has only deteriorated and become exacerbated; the predictions of scientists were accurate, albeit restrained. At the same time, as Orthodox Christians, we must admit our failure to integrate our theology with our practice. Now those problems have intensified, while the challenge requires a more urgent response by the Church.

Our response, however, is fraught with difficulties and barriers because we are captive to a mentality of consumption and greed that is fundamentally foreign to Orthodox Christianity and contradictory to the spirit of communion and generosity. Instead, we are called to participate in the "cosmic liturgy" of creation (St. Maximus the Confessor), where "everything that breathes praises the Lord" (Psalm 150:1), where "the heavens and the hills, the trees and the animals exalt the name of God" (cf. Psalm 148:4–13), and where every drop of water and grain of sand offer glory and gratitude for the presence of the Creator.

Of course, we all recognize that we can no longer desecrate God's creation, whose origin and destiny are inseparably identified with ourselves. What we refuse to do is take the next step that is required of us as priests of creation, which entails consecrating creation to the Creator. Avoiding desecration is only a partial

response to the ecological crisis; accepting and advocating consecration is the fulfillment of our divine mandate to “serve and preserve the earth” (Gen. 1:15). Such a sanctification and offering to God of “His own of His own, on behalf of all and for the sake of all” (From the Divine Liturgy) also unleashes the transformative potential and restorative capacity of all creation for healing and wholeness. However, in order to heal the earth, we must purify our hearts and transform our habits. Every act of defilement on the body of creation is ultimately contempt for the Body of Christ. Whereas when we demonstrate respectful consideration for the earth’s natural resources, then we can also begin to discern the perspective of the kingdom “on earth as in heaven” (From the Lord’s Prayer).

As Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has written: “Climate change affects everyone. Unless we take radical and immediate measures to reduce emissions stemming from unsustainable excesses in the demands of our lifestyle, the impact will be both immediate and alarming.” Therefore, each parish and every individual should seek out ways of practicing prayer and care for God’s creation by applying the fundamental principles of scripture, theology and tradition with regard to our relationship with the natural environment by considering changes in our attitudes and habits with regard to food and travel, by reducing consumption of fossil fuels and choosing alternative sources of energy with regard to lighting and heating, as well as by raising and promoting awareness with regard to the divine gifts of water and air.

Every parish and community is invited and encouraged to open a fruitful dialogue on this challenge of our generation.

With paternal love in Christ,

† ELPIDOPHOROS
Archbishop of America

- Source: goarch.org