15/09/2021

Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the G20 Interfaith Forum “OPEN LETTER TO COP 26: ASCETICISM, JUSTICE AND ENERGY” (September 13th, 2021)



Your Eminences,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are honored to be with you and to participate in the G20 Interfaith Forum to urge G20 members to step up and respond effectively to the most pressing challenges of our time. We are grateful to the organizers for their kind invitation to address this Forum here today. It is the minute before midnight for humanity to go forward together towards a sustainable and resilient future that promises to heal

people and our planet. For that, we need to enhance the abundance of our best ideas and through faith to succeed in the decisive race to global net zero and to a culture of solidarity.

Do we all have the capacity to hold the global rise in temperature below 1.5 degrees Centigrade by the middle of this century? Will we all be able to mitigate the risks of climate change? Will we all be able to preserve the wealth of nature that nurtures current and future generations? Will we all be able to prevent the ongoing extinction of species and abate the loss of precious biodiversity? Will we all be able to stop violence amongst ourselves and against God's creation? Will we succeed in ending wars and in eliminating social injustice and the marginalization of our fellow human beings?

The answers to these questions are multifaceted.

We are gathered here today, in community, to stand firmly united in the faith that we are capable of succeeding in this essential global task. If we apply pious moderation and utilize respect and humility as spiritual guides to responsible and sustainable production and consumption, we will succeed. Only through such self-restrain, simplicity and μετάνοια, which in Greek literally means, a change of mind, not only internally, within ourselves, but also in praxis and concrete application, in a form of a modern asceticism, ἄσκησις, that is practice, the act of exercising, can we hope to heal ourselves and our world.

The climate emergency, with all its disruption of our lives and livelihoods on this beautiful but damaged planet, is caused by the conspicuous increase of consumption in various parts of the world. We must free our lifestyles from temptations and the deadening forgetfulness of the conditions for living together justly and well in God's given solidarity and harmony. Practicing selflessness toward others and caring for the well-being of the community restore peace of mind and soul.

This is the way to heal our societies. This is the way to heal this beautiful planet which is God's creation entrusted to us for faithful preservation. When God first created male and female, he honored them as prudent stewards of our natural environment. Such an important responsibility, to care for God's earthly creation, demands that every single and collective deed is deeply contemplated and considered.

An important part of this journey is already underway. It lies in the direction of commitment to green recovery and twin green and digital transformations. It

started at COP 21 in 2015, when prudence prevailed. There we assumed the obligation to work together on limiting global warming to 2 degrees and keeping it as close as possible to 1.5 degrees, as promised in the Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Hopefully, the upcoming COP 26 in Glasgow, led by the UK/Italy partnership-presidency and joined by all the participating states will result in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and climate and energy adaptation plans that can move the global environment to the level necessary for the world to reach net zero. In less than 30 years, it is possible to achieve the regeneration of our planet. Imagine living free from fossil fuels. Imagine a world in which we take care of one another. If realized, the attainment of intra- and inter-generational justice and the elimination of abhorrent poverty become possibilities.

We must realize this today because, paradoxically, the Covid-19 pandemic leaves us with a historic opportunity to “build back better.” As we stated just a few days ago in our Encyclical Message on the occasion of the beginning of the new ecclesiastical year for the Eastern Orthodox Church, on September 1st, day, which is also dedicated to prayers for the protection of the natural environment: “We pray for the swift overcoming of the consequences of the ongoing health crisis and for the illumination from above of governments throughout the world, so that they do not return to or persist upon economism, to those principles of organization of the economic life, of production and consumption, of exhaustive exploitation of natural resources, principles that prevailed prior to the pandemic. Further, it is our genuine desire that the dissemination of pseudoscientific opinions concerning the purported dangers of the Covid-19 vaccines, the slander aimed toward specialists of the medical field, and the unfounded degradation of the seriousness of the disease, be terminated. Unfortunately, similar opinions are propagated in regard to climate change as well, its cause and its disastrous effects. The reality is entirely different, and must be faced with responsibility, collaboration, joint actions, and common vision.”

To seize this momentum and take real action, we must realize the seriousness of the problem: unsustainable production and consumption damages the planet and all living species. Our generation has not, until today, sufficiently contemplated the consequences of its eudemonistic drives to experience the sensations of progress and the pleasures of life for some and not for all. As a consequence, the heaviest burden was placed on the lives and livelihoods of people on the frontlines of climate change, who not only are increasingly being forced to leave their homes, but also, especially women and children, become the main targets and victims of

human trafficking and exploitation.

The enormous sufferings of climate refugees to save themselves and their progeny from the perils of climate change must be immediately addressed. As our Lord Jesus Christ says in the Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40). Displaced victims of the climate emergency endure these tribulations alone and unjustly.

And yet in recent months, many nations have experienced, for the first time, the devastating effects of climate degradation. Floods in France, Belgium, Germany, and Luxembourg; burning forests in Greece, Turkey, Serbia, Australia and California; disastrous storms and prolonged droughts throughout Africa—each of these are undeniable results of harms we have inflicted upon our earth. These extreme weather events are our foreseeable destiny, if we insist upon our enmity toward the natural environment.

In this regard, it is crucial for COP 26, which is taking place from 31 October to 12 November in Glasgow, to unify and bind us together in our dedication to heal the climate and protect our planet. Success in this matter requires freeing the future from slavery to wastefulness and unfortunate habits that kill the very prerequisites for the good life for all on of us on earth.

In every Orthodox Liturgy, we ceaselessly pray: “For favorable weather, for an abundance of the fruits of the earth, and for peaceful times.” Every time we pray, we are reminding ourselves what needs to be done. We are longing for the moment in which governments globally will shape policies and create plans to safeguard the lives of people and communities threatened and affected by the consequences of the great ecological crisis. New policies must venture beyond the usual, by producing only what is needed in sustainable and non-wasteful ways. In the Orthodox Christian tradition, monastics have modeled sustainable living for generations. Now we are faced with the opportunity to follow their example to live in dignity and joy of a newly found common cause. It is not coincidental that a recently published book, entitled The Monk who became CEO – 1000 Years Athonian Management (Thessaloniki, 2017) became best-seller, by “revealing” the secret of success of the ascetic management implemented by the monastic community of Mount Athos and how it can present a prototype for new strategy and different value orientation in the philosophy of a modern company.

New technologies

In this spirit of modern asceticism, we call the major economies of the world to provide leadership in all these transitions to a green economy. Green economy refers to the well-being resulting from non-wasteful production and from responsible consumption. Green is the color symbolizing the life that God has given to all. Thus, innovative technologies for green transformations can, should, and must be technologies for life.

These technologies must drive the healing of our planet. By enhancing waste elimination, the depollution of water, air and soil, and nurturing our forests and oceans, we are making the major turn towards an ecological economy for the well contemplated communal and global thriving prosperity of all.

Through our contemplations, we can see a world in which coal, oil and gas are left in the bosom of our planet, while we are powering our mobility, production of electricity, heating, cooling, construction, and all our activities on green and clean energy. Such contemplations are not mere day dreamings. There are already well-devised technology solutions for the pressing energy problem. These need to be supported not only by pioneering governments, business enterprises and investments, but they should also be empowered by everyone engaged in the movement for de-investing from fossil fuels and the modes of production/consumption that waste our future. We must now share these new technologies justly and equally throughout the world and invest in them from the South to the North in order to be responsible, accountable global citizens.

Education and Youth

To foster human talents, cultivate the faith of inventiveness, and encourage spirited engagement, it is vital to promote quality education for all, male and female, without discrimination.

Throughout the whole of our lifetimes, we must learn anew and acquire the skills needed to achieve all transformational agendas, from the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development to the UN Agenda for Humanity. Education for such new realities is essential to the dream and the reality of transforming our world to the one world of well-being, sustainability, resilience, responsibility, and justice for all.

We need to assure that intergenerational gaps do not widen and that the green and digital transformations leave no one behind. Our youth took to the streets, the public squares, and every corner of the earth to ignite collective action aiming for the highest of climate-neutral targets. Bonded and networked by inspiration passed to us from our engaged youth, we are obliged to raise this demand of young men

and women to reach global net zero. Our faith and ingenuity, our common devotion and inventiveness, must be brought forth for us all to achieve in community these tall objectives. We need to join in the efforts of young people to accelerate our progress along transformational paths with full involvement of all those left furthest behind. We urge G20 nations to first recognize and then pursue the demands of our young men and women for a sustainable and resilient future.

Thus we must open our hearts and minds to the ambitions voiced by young generations. They are driving present efforts from the expedited achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to reversing harmful climate changes and enhancing general conditions of life. Our younger generation, the largest ever in the history of humankind, will certainly make valuable recommendations at the Youth for Climate Summit to be held from 28 to 30 September in Milan. With truthfulness and sincerity, we plead that the ministers in Milan at the preparatory meeting for COP 26 embrace the visions and proposals of the youth as envoys of the future.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unprecedented determination and human energy are required to free us all from enslavement to wasteful living. By devoting the power of our faith and the ingenuity of our minds to the contemplation of solutions, we can escape this bondage. As we are able to heal in community, so we are able as well to mend in community the wrong ways by accepting the goal of the protection of dignity and human rights of all people.

Therefore, we urge the leaders of the world’s largest economies to be the first to work together and coordinate their actions in support of a sustainable environment and of the common effort for global healing of the climate and for founding a just global society.

Here and now, individual and communal actions, brave and wise steps taken by women and men, by young and old, will empower us to make significant common decisions. We are inspired by a vision of a world united in well-being, sustainability, resilience, responsibility, justice and peace for all. Truly, our shared commitments can heal humanity and its home, its οἶκος, our planet Planet.
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