

Keynote Address by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Opening Session of Halki Summit III



Your Eminences,

Distinguished speakers and participants,

Esteemed guests,

Χριστός Ἀνέστη! Christ is Risen!

It is a special joy to welcome you to the Queen of Cities for the official opening of our Halki Summit, which will focus on the subject of “Theological Formation and Ecological Awareness.” This summit stands in a long tradition spanning over a quarter of a century, including five educational seminars at the Theological School of Halki, as well as nine international, interfaith and interdisciplinary symposia in the Mediterranean and Europe, but also in Greenland, Latin America and the United States. Last year, our symposium entitled “Toward a Greener Attica” was held in

Athens and the Saronic Islands of Greece.

Halki Summit III is graciously co-sponsored by the theological schools of St. Vladimir's in New York and Holy Cross in Boston, to whom we reached out precisely because this year we shall address the nature of ecological consciousness and environmental education in our theological schools and seminaries. This is a working meeting rather than a public seminar. So we are honored to host numerous institutions of religious instruction and spiritual formation from all over the world. In light of the ecological crisis, the Halki Summits provide a platform for conversation and promote an atmosphere of dialogue to discern and foster changes in attitudes and lifestyles. And we have invited eminent theologians and speakers from across the ecumenical spectrum – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran – in order to listen to one another and learn from one another.

Dear friends,

Our summit takes place during a very special anniversary year for the Orthodox Church. It has been thirty years since the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued its first environmental encyclical. September 1st marks the day on which we issue – annually since 1989 – a special letter to faithful across the world, cautioning how unrestrained “dominion” can lead to destruction, recommending communion as an antidote to unbridled consumption, and proposing asceticism as a solution to unlimited waste. Today, September 1st is commemorated by all autocephalous Orthodox Churches and all member denominations of the World Council of Churches. September 1st is also celebrated by the Roman Catholic community and the Anglican Communion.

In this respect, we have witnessed many positive changes over the years. Yet, at the same time, we confess that we are deeply dismayed at the stubborn and slow progress that has unfolded during this period. Even recently, United Nations scientists once again warned the world about the unparalleled deterioration of our ecosystems, the unprecedented degradation of our rainforests, and the unalterable destruction of our coral reefs. Moreover, all of these predicaments are unquestionably and irreversibly generated by human growth and greed.

In 1989, people were first becoming aware of the challenge of climate change and pollution. Yet today, three decades later, politicians and corporations are still reluctant or resistant to pursue policies and practices to stop or curb the problem. Why has there been so little progress, even – in fact, especially – in our own churches and communities throughout the world?

Permit us to propose that the reason for such hesitation and hindrance may lie in the fact that we are unwilling to accept personal responsibility and demonstrate personal sacrifice. We have failed to grasp how integrally we are interconnected with the rest of God's creation, how responsible we are for the protection of our planet, and how critical our choices and actions are for the sustainability of our children's future. We are convinced that any real hope of reversing climate change and addressing the environmental challenge requires a radical transformation of the way we perceive and treat our planet.

Having issued encyclicals and statements, both personally and with such leaders as Pope Francis, to our own faithful and to prestigious organizations, we recognize that the message should originate and resonate in much earlier stages of people's formation – long before their social, cultural, political, and even religious predispositions and priorities become defined and hardened. Of course, created nature and divine grace offer abundant occasion for such instruction and inspiration. Nevertheless, we cannot expect our church and parish leaders, or indeed our believers and parish faithful, to discern the truths and teachings that lie in the book of nature or the beauty of liturgy.

This is precisely why we believe that theological schools and religious seminaries are the appropriate setting and venue for sowing the necessary seeds to educate and motivate aspiring parish clergy and community leaders. Such education and motivation may assume the form of practical policies (such as recycling resources and reducing consumption) or collective programs (such as food choices and fasting customs). More fundamentally perhaps, such education and motivation may be embraced through prayer and worship (for example, by gaining a deeper understanding of the services and sacraments) or through academic curriculum (for example, with broader incorporation of environmental issues into courses and classes).

Nevertheless – most especially and essentially – the significance and sacredness of God's creation must be an integral element of every word that we proclaim regarding “the One who made the world and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth . . . in whom we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17.24-28). And this conviction and confession should be an inseparable aspect of “our defense before anyone who calls us to account for the hope that lies in us.” (1 Pet. 3.15)

This is the wider, cosmic lens through which we should perceive God and creation. This is the ethos that we should teach theology in seminaries. This is how we should preach sermons during liturgies. This is how we should instruct our children

in Sunday Schools and our adults in catechumen classes. This is what people should appreciate when they enter the church and venerate the icons. This is what people should proclaim when they leave the liturgy and encounter the world.

We may all agree that churches and religions have a fundamental responsibility and role to play in advancing ecological learning and advocating climate justice. Therefore, theological schools and seminaries should be at the forefront of this effort as well. Nevertheless, this cannot occur if seminarians and students are not exposed to an integrated environmental ministry throughout their education and formation.

Our aim as human beings fashioned in the image and likeness of God is to assume a eucharistic role within creation – a mandate entrusted to Adam and Eve in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. This means that we are called to receive the diversity of God's gifts in a spirit of thanksgiving and offer them back to God in an act of doxology. And if all believers are members of a chosen race and the royal priesthood in Christ, then all of us are called to serve as priests of God's creation. In this respect, we must acknowledge the importance of our schools and seminaries in the sacred process of molding ministers and producing pastors, who are sensitive and attuned to the presence of God in every detail of the universe.

So, dear friends, we have invited you here to explore how this worldview may be nurtured in the context of a theological seminary and any community that values ongoing religious literacy and formation. We sincerely hope that you will discover ways of informing and working with one another. We pray that you will inspire and initiate new and vital ways, in which our centers of education can plant the necessary seeds – not just for the cultivation of green pastors and leaders, but – above all for the conversion of hearts and minds. Finally, we wish you a pleasant stay in Istanbul. May God abundantly bless your ministries and guide your deliberations over the next days.

— Source: [Ecumenical Patriarchate / Facebook](#)