

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by

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Comment on the Papal Encyclical: "Laudato Si"

There are many problems we are seeing in this world today. We have the ISIS situation in the Middle East. We have refugees traveling to various western countries. There is a financial crisis in Greece. And we have too many racial shootings in the U.S., particularly in some major cities. While these and many other problems are severe, they only affect a small number of people compared to the number of people on this earth. There is one problem, however, that affects or will affect every living creature on this earth – the deteriorating environment. We must do something about it very soon.

A major step forward was when on June 16, 2015, Pope Francis announced *Laudato Si*, his encyclical on protecting the environment. This follows other major Roman Catholic encyclicals such as when Pope John XXIII proposed peace over 50 years ago; Pope Paul VI in 1971 referred to some ecological concerns; Pope John Paul II called for ecological conversion; and Pope Benedict XVI, the predecessor to Francis, wrote about deterioration, in 2009, being related to culture. These were all excellent encyclicals but Pope Francis' is most impressive by the depth and thoroughness with which the ecological problem is described.

Laudato Si starts out with what is happening to our common home. It then covers the gospel of creation and is followed with what humans have been doing to affect this creation negatively. The remaining three chapters are devoted to what we must do to resolve this problem by implementing sustainability, more dialogue among the various religions, and instituting ecological education. This is truly an outstanding document that, hopefully, will make an impact on not only the 1.2 billion Roman Catholics in the world, but also on all the other religions.

The Greek Orthodox religion, however, has been very concerned with the state of the environment for many years and has been doing something about it for many years. In 1988, Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh and the international president of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature, proposed to then Patriarch Demetrios to establish a day of prayer for care of creation. This was established on September 1, 1989 and has been celebrated every year since on the 1st of September.

After Patriarch Bartholomew succeeded Demetrios, he has shown even more concern with protecting the environment right after he was enthroned in 1991. One of his biggest statements was at St. Barbara Greek Orthodox Church in Santa Barbara in 1997 when he said, "Anyone causing harm to the environment is committing a sin". But he has done much more

than that. From 1995 to 2009, Bartholomew has hosted eight major international symposia around the world with emphasis on protecting the global waters. Each of these symposia was on bodies of water with the first one on the Aegean and East Mediterranean Seas, attended by over 200 scientists, environmentalists, and government officials. This was followed with one on the Black Sea and included visits to the surrounding countries. Other symposia were on the Danube River, the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Amazon River, the Arctic Ocean, and even the Mississippi River. In each case, the topics were related to that body of water and the related land masses.

In 2012, Patriarch Bartholomew hosted his first Halki Summit at the currently shut-down Greek Orthodox seminary on Heybeliada (island), Turkey – also known as Halki. While the earlier symposia focused on the various countries and water, this summit was a conversation on environment, ethics, and innovation. This was followed earlier this year with Halki Summit II which placed emphasis on the environment, literature and the arts.

The papal encyclical and the patriarch's symposia are all related. In November 2014, Pope Francis visited Patriarch Bartholomew in Constantinople, and this is when Bartholomew related to Francis his concern with the deterioration of the environment and prompted Francis to prepare and announce his encyclical, *Laudato Si*. Both Metropolitan John of Pergamon and Archdeacon John Chryssavgis, who work closely with the patriarch on environmental matters, contributed to the preparation of the papal encyclical. In early August 2015, Pope Francis went a step further to bring communion of the two largest Christian religions when he established for the Roman Catholic parishes September 1st as the “World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation”. He made it clear that he selected this date to conform to the Eastern Orthodox Church, but the intent is to have many other religions follow suit.

As the Eastern Orthodox Church has been very active in protecting the environment for over a quarter of a century, it is truly great that the Roman Catholic Church has joined the Orthodox Church to promote this truly important agenda.