

Statement on the Protection of the Baltic Sea

The Religion, Science and Environment Baltic Sea Symposium 'A Common Heritage, A Shared Responsibility' (1-7 June 2003)

At the beginning of the third millennium, during the International Year of Water and on the eve of International Oceans Day, we are concerned by the negative consequences, for humanity and creation, resulting from the degradation of the Baltic Sea. This degradation has been brought about by economic and technological development that recognizes neither its limits nor its potential for damage. We are equally disturbed by the daily world-wide suffering of vast numbers of people afflicted by violence, war, poverty and disease, and by ecological decline. The world that we see today around us is not the world of beauty and harmony that God envisioned as the expression of divine wisdom and love.

There has been visible progress in improving environmental management of the Baltic Sea and its drainage basin, through regional initiatives and cooperation. But this must not lead to complacency.

The maritime collision off Bornholm that occurred during the Symposium illustrated the acute dangers to the Baltic, as tens of thousands of tons of pollutants were dispersed in the sea.

The protection of the Baltic Sea requires further commitment and efforts to:

- Limit the discharges into the sea of excess nutrients that cause eutrophication and are harmful to the marine biosphere;
- Stop the discharge of toxic chemicals into the sea;
- Stop the careless introduction of non-native species of fish and other organisms that threaten marine ecosystems and existing species;
- Stop the over-fishing, habitat destruction and other factors that threaten fisheries, and establish a network of marine protected areas in the Baltic;
- Reduce the risks associated with the transportation of hazardous substances across the Baltic Sea; double-hull and clean-ship technologies are urgently needed to avoid oil-spill;
- Enhance the capacity of the Baltic Sea states in transition to monitor, assess and manage their marine ecosystems; and
- Increase awareness of the sea's problems and engage in education and actions to eliminate them.

We human persons, sharing many features with other living beings, have been endowed with God's image and likeness. This obliges us to co-operate with God in

realizing the divine purpose in creation. The human person is called to be and to act as a priest within creation, maintaining the sacredness of nature while freely and responsibly presenting the entire creation back to God as its source and salvation.

It is clear from this Symposium that there is an important opportunity to expand the involvement of church and other religious leaders and members in the long-term efforts to protect and conserve the Baltic Sea. The present social and environmental crisis shows that we are failing in this task. Among the states around the Baltic, there are sharp socio-economic contrasts and unjustifiable inequality. Yet the ecological problem is not simply economic and technological; it is spiritual and cultural. What is required of us is an act of repentance, a changed attitude with a new way of viewing ourselves, one another, and the world around us. We must allow the idea of human as priest of creation to inform our culture and to affect our ethos.

We must regain humility. That means acknowledging the limits of our powers, and most importantly, the limits of our knowledge and judgement. There is urgent need for a new environmental ethos, emphasizing our organic relationship with nature, our human interdependence, as well as the need for sacrifice and self-restraint. It is a high obligation to deliver to humankind, and its future generations, a world as good or better as the one received by us, a world free from ecological degradation, violence and bloodshed, a world of generosity and love.

Recalling the appeal made during our fourth Symposium by Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I at Rome and Venice on 10 June 2002, and drawing on our experience of the Baltic Sea today, we invite all men and women of good will to affirm the importance of the following ethical goals:

- To think of the world's children and future generations when we weigh our options for ecological action.
- To respect and promote the universal values sustaining every human society.
- To pursue a constructive use of science and technology, aware that the applications of some scientific ideas may be harmful.
- To be humble regarding the idea of exclusive ownership and to be open to demands of human solidarity and of the environment. We have not been entrusted with unlimited power over creation.
- To recognize, in our work for a better world environment, the diversity of conditions and responsibilities: not every individual, community, or government is able to assume the same burden, but all are called on to take some distinctive part in the shared effort.

These universal lessons guide us also in the search for useful steps toward the amelioration of global social distortions. We believe that food should be recognized as a

fundamental human right and attempts by major financial forces to affect its quality or modes of production should be submitted to democratic control; and that a system measuring environmental impact, generated by government and civil society, should be given a prominent role in evaluating social and economic disparities and identify responsibilities.

God has not abandoned the world. And God's image must not abandon it either. Human beings are an integral part of nature, the concern for which is vital for every survival of the human race. We are all called to play an active part in deepening and extending ecological awareness, so that it leads to practical programmes and specific changes in our way of life. Let us start now, with God's help and blessing. It is not too late. The world is endowed with incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward secure existence in future centuries.

*Religion Science and the Environment Committee
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