

June 2, 2003

Introductory Remarks

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

Your Eminences, distinguished and beloved participants,

We address to you heartfelt and warm greetings at this inaugural meeting of the 5th Symposium on Religion, Science & the Environment, devoted to the theme “The Baltic Sea: A Common Heritage, A Shared Responsibility”. It gives us great satisfaction and joy that the initiative begun in the year 1995 to explore the problems of the pollution of the environment has become established as a regular institution; and we are now meeting for the fifth time to continue our research.

We leave the scientific part of our programme to those who are specialists.

This morning let us reflect together upon the way in which three of the great religious civilizations—the Jewish, the Christian and the Muslim—understand the relation of humankind towards the Creation. This is expressed in the opening chapters of the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Here we read, “God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by the Orthodox Church, the Septuagint, the words “very good” are expressed in a stronger way: the Greek says “kala lian”, which might legitimately be translated “altogether good and beautiful”.

Even though we live in a world that has been corrupted by human selfishness and sin, let us never forget that it is God’s world, created by Him as a cosmos of goodness and beauty. If we lose our sense of wonder before that cosmic beauty and essential goodness, we shall fail in our ecological responsibility, and we shall no longer be able to bring to our contemporaries a message of healing and hope.

What, then, is the relation of the human race towards the world that God has made? In Genesis we read that God set the first-created man and woman in the Garden of Eden “To till and keep it”; an alternative translation might be “to cultivate and watch over it” (Gen. 2:15). From this it is clear that the relation of humankind to the created order is active and dynamic: we human beings do not simply enjoy the world, but we are called to guard it, to keep it safe, and to develop its potentialities.

The dynamic character of this relationship is made still clearer when it is said that God, after blessing the first human couple, gave them the commandment: “Increase and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). What does it mean, that we are not only to “cultivate” and “keep” the earth, but are commanded to have “dominion” and “rule”?

We cannot understand this commandment unless we place it in its proper context. Immediately before the words that have just been quoted, it is stated that God created humankind “in His image and likeness” (Gen. 1:26). The “dominion” and “rule”, then, with which we humans are entrusted, is specifically an expression of the divine image within us. In our relationship to creation we are to reflect God’s wisdom and His loving compassion.

“Dominion”, therefore, does not mean domination, and “rule” does not signify an arbitrary tyranny. Our “dominion” is not something irresponsible, purposeless and egocentric, but it is always *liturgical*. In other words, it is given in order to promote a particular purpose. It is never conferred simply for the sake of the particular person who exercises it; the person is always the minister of a mission.

God has imparted to the creation an inherent structure, and it is the responsibility of humankind to respect that structure and to guard it. It is significant that in the account of creation in Genesis, God gives to us human beings for our nourishment “plants yielding seed” and “fruit trees of every kind with the seed in it” (Gen. 1:12). Let us reflect on the meaning of these phrases. Each year the farmer needs to keep back some of the seed, so that he may have a harvest in the following year. Nature will only supply his needs if he shows self-restraint in using its resources, and if he respects the patterns of its productive potentiality.

In this way “dominion” and “rule” denote responsible stewardship. Our perspective needs to be diachronic and inter-generational. We are to think not only of our immediate requirements but of the demands of the future as well. We are to guard and keep the earth not for ourselves alone but for our children; and we are not to imagine that nature is inexhaustible.

To ask the question, “Should the natural environment be preserved for the sake of the Creator or for the sake of humankind?” is to pose a false alternative. Since the “dominion” entrusted to human beings by God is to be exercised according to the “divine image and likeness”, in showing reverence for the ecological balance within nature we are at one and the same time obeying God’s plan and safeguarding our own best interests.

If we ask, “For the sake of which human beings should the environment be cultivated and guarded?” the answer is surely obvious. It can only be for the sake of humankind in its totality, not of any particular nation, group or race.

According to the first settlers in Australia, the indigenous peoples were astonished when they saw how these settlers regarded themselves as the owners of particular tracts of land. According to the understanding of the indigenous peoples, the earth was a possession common to all, just like the air, the sun, the sea.

Unfortunately Western society has not so far achieved the level of understanding displayed by the Australian aborigines. We have not yet learned to share the resources of the earth with one another on a fair and equal basis. This is painfully evident in the

Baltic, where there is a sharp contrast between the nations in the western and in the eastern parts of the sea. Assessed according to the national income per person, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Germany are among the twenty richest countries in the world. In the other states bordering on the Baltic—Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and the Russian Federation—the national income per person is no more than a small fraction of what the four western peoples of the Baltic region enjoy. How can this glaring discrepancy possibly be justified in the light of Genesis?

This is only one of the issues that we shall have to confront during the present Symposium. Let us be guided in all our discussions by the vision set before us in the opening of Genesis: that the world is a place of beauty and wonder, and that our task as stewards is to act with reverence and compassion, mindful of our responsibility to future generations and of the need to share justly with others that which belongs to all alike.

In full confidence that the present Symposium will lead to many positive developments, we wish to all the participants a successful and enjoyable week in each other's company.

May the grace of God and His rich mercy be with you all. Amen.