

OPENING ADDRESS

By

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

At Halki Summit II

(June 8, 2015)

Most reverend hierarchs,
Eminent and erudite guests,
Dearest and distinguished participants,

The Letter to the Hebrews enjoins: “Let us consider how to inspire one another to love and good works.” (Heb. 10.24)

This is precisely how we welcome all of you to the second Halki Summit, organized under the auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in close association and cooperation with Southern New Hampshire University. We have assembled on an island of natural beauty, in a monastery with abundant history, to listen to speakers of acclaimed reputation, in a spirit of sincere partnership, among participants of profound commitment. Thank you for accepting our invitation to join us in this intimate conversation, where we believe that – in an open exchange of learning and sharing – we may truly “consider how to inspire one another to love and good works.”

Dear friends, today is World Oceans Day, when we remember to protect and preserve one of the most fundamental and precious gifts of our Creator. In our statement on this occasion, we noted that: “The way we defile the oceans is plainly reflected in the way we exploit their resources, which in turn is directly related to the way we treat our fellow human beings, particularly the more marginalized and less fortunate of our brothers and sisters.”

As you know, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has long assumed a daring and pioneering leadership in advocating the protection of the natural environment and the earth’s resources as God’s wonderful and diverse creation. We commenced our initiatives over three decades ago when climate change was neither a political challenge nor even an ideological convention. We were simply convinced of our moral responsibility and spiritual vocation to protect and preserve this unique and sacred gift of our planet and universe. Indeed, convinced that we could not do this alone, we have collaborated with political authorities and religious institutions, with scientific disciplines and journalistic circles, and such leaders as Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and now our brother Francis; as well as such groundbreakers as Jane Goodall, Al Gore, James Hansen and now President Hollande along the journey to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 21) scheduled to be held in Paris next December.

Through the years, we initiated a series of events and launched a sequence of statements – from occasional conferences to regular seminars, as well as from international, interfaith and inter-disciplinary symposia to annual, official appeals to all faithful believers and people of good will originally through the Orthodox world and subsequently across Christian denominations and religious communities throughout the world. Our efforts have now focused – beyond spreading the message of ecological awareness and cosmic compassion – on deepening our roots and casting our nets lower in order to penetrate more layers and levels of society. For, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that far too little has been achieved in terms of people reviewing and reforming their ways, repenting for their destructive impact on the planet and transforming their lifestyle to tread more lightly on God’s creation.

This is why we have invited you to this summit. As artists and intellectuals, you are the ones that can refashion and reshape the way that people think of and perceive our world. As thinkers and educators, you are the ones that can provide fundamental principles and

guidelines for an alternative worldview and a different culture. As authors and poets, you are the ones who can present a radical and even revolutionary, an uncommon and even unconventional way of living and behaving. For the truth is that we need to change the way we consider the world if we are ever to change the way we treat the world. And unfortunately, most of us have not yet accepted to live with less – both for others to have what is essential to survive as well as for our planet to be sustained.

To adopt and adapt some of the titles of our eminent speakers, we need what Professor Eagleton might call “the ideology of the aesthetic” in order to “discern the spirit,” as Professor Gorringer would say. We need to discover what Ms. Tempest Williams calls the “unspoken hunger” if we are ever to understand the connection between what Dr. Patel describes as the “stuffed” and the “starved.” Then we shall appreciate how “the vanishing glaciers” photographed by Mr. Balog can give rise to “a new vision” of the world.

In the late 3rd- early 4th century, St. Anthony of Egypt described nature as a book that teaches us about the beauty of God’s creation: “My book is the nature of creation; there, I read the works of God.” This is how Orthodox theology and spirituality perceive the natural environment. There is, as St. Maximus the Confessor would claim in the 7th century, a liturgical or sacramental dimension to creation. For St. Maximus: “Creation is a sacred book, whose letters and syllables are the universal aspects of creation.”

In order, however, to reach this point of maturity and dignity toward the creation, we must take the time to hear its voice. And in order to do this, we must first be silent. This is why we have chosen the island of Heybeliada (Halki) for our summit. Traffic is the most pronounced presence in Istanbul; it is the most conspicuous absence on this island.

So if we are silent, we will be receptive to learning to appreciate how “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the creation of His hands” (Psalm 19.1). In nature, every plant, every animal, and indeed every microorganism tells a unique story, unfolds a sacred mystery, and relates an exceptional harmony and balance. The same dialogue is also detected in the galaxies, where the countless stars reveal the same mystical beauty and mathematical inter-connectedness. We should clarify, however, that we do not need this perspective in order to believe in God or even to prove His existence. We need it quite simply to breathe; we need it for us merely to be. So when will we begin to learn and teach the alphabet of this divine language, which is mysteriously concealed in nature?

When people enter an Orthodox church, the first thing that they behold is a world of icons and images, a splendor of art and architecture. We feel quite comfortable with art; we are very much at home with color and music. Therefore, we believe that you, prominent speakers and precious participants, can assist the world to discern and relearn this vocabulary of art through poetry and literature, through film and sculpture, and through the culture and cuisine of food. We know this because we look to you as images of divine creativity and godly compassion, as reflections of divine imagination and holy innovation. How unfortunate that theology seldom includes poetry or that politics is often void of art. Our plea and prayer for the world is that people may learn to see with the eyes of the photographer, to hear with the ears of the composer, to touch with the hands of the sculptor, to taste with the palate of the hungry child, and to smell the way a bee is attracted to the flower.

We hope that you will all have the opportunity to see – and to teach us also to see – with new eyes during your stay here and your deliberations at the summit. Once again, we thank you for finding the time in your busy schedules to be here with us. May God bless you and enrich you in your work so that you may continue to inspire and inform, to educate and shape, to re-imagine and re-express “a new heaven and a new earth.”