

THIRD EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL
ASSEMBLY
Sibiu, Romania
4 – 9 September 2007

Document/Dokument/Documento

129-07

Sibiu, Friday 7 September 2007
10:30 – 13:00, The Tent
Forum 7

Christian Theology and Practice in the Time of Environmental Crisis

Metropolitan Chrystopher,

Primate of the Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands and Slovakia

Dear participants of this Creation forum, I was asked to say a few words about the environmental problems as I see it as clergyman of the Orthodox Church and at the same time as the member of the Orthodox Academy Vilemov, which is for a decade quite dedicated to the theme of protection of the Environment. If you allow me I would first mention where and how our lifestyle cases to be a truly Christian regarding the creation. Then I would shortly speak about possibilities or ways forward in approaching of this theme from the theological perspective. Finally I would just mention some examples of practice on which I could participate in the Czech Republic.

The Church **–as the environment of salvation and hope** - without any doubt should be aware of her responsibility for the fate of the world and that is why it is **deeply concerned for the environmental problems generated by the contemporary civilisation**. Every day we learn that waters, air, and soils of the earth are more and more polluted. Every year we learn that many unique species – God’s creatures are extinct and do not exist any more. Nature all over the world is almost fully used for the support and use of man who is no longer satisfied with its gifts and exploits it without limits. Human activity, which has reached the level of biospheric processes, constantly grows. The pollution of the environment by green house gases emissions, industrial wastes, bad agricultural technology, the destruction of forests and soil — all this results in suffering of God’s creation and

the steady shrinking of diversity of life. The non-renewable resources are quickly diminishing; raw materials are used without considering of the needs of future generations. Resources of drinking water are more and more scarce. Many harmful substances and poisons have been produced, and they constantly stay in biosphere. The ecological balance is violated and natural reproductive processes are threatened.

We are clear today that this happens because of an unprecedented and unjustified growth of public consumption in developed countries, where the search for wealth and luxury is a norm of life. This situation obstructs the fair distribution of natural resources, which according to the teaching of the Church are common human property. At the end of this destruction and exploitation of our environment and of all creation is suffering not only of nature, but also suffering diseases and death of people. Realising that the Earth has found itself on the verge of a global environmental disaster is very important for adequacy and accuracy of our theological answer to contemporary environmental challenges.

So, which can be the theological origins of our work for protection of God's Creation? Why we Christians should accept this new environmental vocation?

First of all I think that if we have to approach this problem effectively from the theological perspective, our theology of creation must become much more based in the New Testament message about salvation of Man and it must become more Christological and Christocentric.

We hear from the mouth of contemporaries of our Lord Jesus Christ and from the Gospel a fundamental question: And who is my neighbour? This question and the answer of our Lord and Saviour we must hear very clearly if we want respond adequately and do environmental work in the Church.

The answer of our Saviour is surprising. Our Lord says (even we do not always like it) that our neighbour is every human being. It means not only a man of our belief and not only a man of our tribe and not only a man of our race or nation. Our Lord says that it is everybody, each human being who - as we believe - was created according to the God's image and likeness, is loved by God and is called to achieve complete dignity and perfection by Christ and through Christ.

Another important and real content, which is brought by the Gospel of Christ to us, is that our salvation is not possible without our care for our neighbour. Our interest in the life, which they live and will live. How one can love God which one doesn't see and to hate his neighbour whom he sees? More about it we can read e. g. in Matthew 24.

Surprisingly, science says very similar things today about the global ecosystem. Life of people on the other end of the world according to the contemporary knowledge depends on how we live, what we do, use and consume here.

It is today clear that from what and how much we consume (and of course with what and how we would share), depends not only the life of the people but also the life of all the other living creatures.

These creatures - as we can learn from the Bible are God's creation - are created from the endless God's goodness. They are for us also the partial revelation of his endless wisdom and love. If we as Christians take our honourable position in God's creation seriously, we must be able to help this God's creation in the time of its suffering and we must be able to protect it.

Inconvenient truth about Climate Change teaches us today that in the mystery of life we are not only mysteriously and mystically, but also really and "in fact" interconnected with all the other people and with all the other life on the planet Earth. This life - Creation - according to the words of the Scripture and according to the words of our elders looks on us as we look on God and expects from us love and mercy. (Rom. 8. 19- 22) It means that the creation expects from us exactly the same things, which we expect from God. Are we aware of that?

Just to conclude, in our era it is more and more clear that what the Lord says about our neighbours who are all the people, is true also in the light of today's science. His words are "modern" and in connection with the continuing destruction of the living environment very actual. Increase of the green house gases emissions with all their negative impacts on the global eco system makes these words very true not only in the spiritual but also in physical sense.

Our theological response on environmental crisis today must be certainly connected with the rising of the environmental awareness of Christians and awareness of their interconnectedness with the other people and created world.

In the time of environmental crisis we should be able to hear vocation of our Lord to be the peacemakers and to work constantly our more profound and deeper understanding of the issue of peace. The biblical concept of peace - Shalom should be perhaps extended also on our relation with the created world, which is subject of our merciless exploitation and violent war. If we like it or not, more that anything the peace in today's world is threatened by the unfeeling thirst of the industrial world for the non-renewable fossil energy resources. At the same time it is obvious that utilisation of these resources is continuously poisoning and destroying the global ecosystem and health and life of people and all the other creatures. Comparison of the today's world dependent on the non-renewable resources of energy to a drug addict is in our situation very appropriate.

I was asked to say here a few words also about the environmental practice within the Orthodox Academy Vilemov. I must say that this work originates first of all from our Christological and Christocentric understanding of the theme of Environment and of our neighbour and from our deep realizing of interconnectedness with all people and with all creation. Another origin of our work was and still is understanding that wars and many other conflicts can be avoided by our societies if we use everywhere available clean energy resources such as sun, water, wind and biomass. Last but not least our Academy wanted to bring a viable example of sustainable practice which can be followed by the others in our society and last but not least to reduce green house emissions and at the same time to build economic self-reliance. These reasons were the most important when our Orthodox Academy decided to establish our Centre for application of Renewable energy which now includes two middle size solar -

thermal installations, two photovoltaic systems and the wind-turbine of St Elias, heating system using biomass and the demonstration Holy Apostles water power plant. The Centre now provides education on sustainable energy issues and provides consultancy on especially for various Churches and NGO's. Into its framework belongs also the Ecumenical project Churches for the Future – 50 Solar roofs, which brings solar- thermal installations into various Church buildings and establishments.

Back to our theme of Christian lifestyle I am convinced that the conscious and deliberately Christian life style based on our experience of living God should be offered by us to society as a whole in this particular moment of history. This lifestyle based on respect for God, for God's creation and our neighbours must be offered as an alternative which would on one side sustain our spiritual and intellectual integrity and on the other side - help to save God's creation and God's gifts - clean air, water, soil and unchanged climate for our neighbours. For people of future generations and for all living species, animals and plants.

Part of our Christian lifestyle is and always was asceticism and we should not deny this. This asceticism now gets a new dimension since we should be able reduce our consumption and will for luxury and production of waste of all kinds not only because we want to save our souls, but also because if we want to help the others and threatened nature. Ascetic tradition on the top teaches us also that, answers to many questions raised by the environmental crisis are to be found in the human heart, not in the spheres of economy, biology, technology or politics. Nature is transformed or dies not by itself, but under the impact of man. Human spiritual condition plays the decisive role here.

Undoubtedly, part of our Christian lifestyle should be formed also by our ability to share – and this is especially truth for us in the north. If we like it or not we consume more natural resources - clean water, air, minerals and fossil fuels than our neighbours in the south. Are we ready to accept just sharing with everybody of these God's treasures as St. John Chrysostom speaks about it.?

Very important part of our Christian lifestyle then can defined as we know by ten commandments and by bringing them into practice also in environmental framework. We in the north should not ask what belongs to the others – today especially to nations of the south and east and to people of the future and we should be aware that gifts of nature Almighty gives them as he gives them to us.

Just to conclude, I think that the Fundamental question for all humankind now in general and for us Christians in particular is very simple: Do we really have the right to continue this way? Do we really want to continue in destruction of all life which at the end is not Our's but belongs to God? Are we going to continue to obey the king of this world who orders us one hundred times a day to buy, to use and to consume more until end? Or: **Are we today ready to hear the Words of our Saviour to Give our consumption up and share?**