

# ***Global Climate Change: A Moral and Spiritual Challenge***

[The following statement was adopted by the **Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas** (SCOBA) at their May 23, 2007 Session held at St. Vladimir's Seminary in Crestwood, NY.]

To all of the faithful clergy and laity of the Holy Orthodox Church throughout the Americas,

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

***For favorable weather, an abundance of the fruits of the earth, and temperate seasons,  
Let us pray to the Lord.***

At every Divine Liturgy the Orthodox Church repeats this petition. And the Book of Prayers (Euchologion) contains numerous prayers for gardens, animals, crops, water and weather conditions. In her wisdom, then, the Church has always known that human beings are dependent upon the grace of God through the world around us to nurture and sustain civilized society. Indeed, "God has worked our salvation through the material world" (St. John Damascene, On Divine Images 1,16). While God is the Source of all that we have, and His presence fills the entire world (see Acts 17.28), we humans share a God-given responsibility to care for His creation and offer it back to Him in thanksgiving for all that we have and are.

***Thine own of thine own, we offer unto thee, in behalf of all and for all.***

The action of returning creation back to God in gratitude and praise summarizes the commands that God gave humanity in the first chapters of Genesis. These commandments are intended to guide us into a fullness of the spiritual and material goods that we need. God tells us to "have dominion over the earth" (Genesis 1.28), which means that we are to care for the earth as the Lord would care for it. In the original Hebrew, the word for dominion (*radah*) means to rule in the place of the Lord. In the Greek Septuagint, the word for full dominion (*katakryieuo*) contains the root word *kyrios*, the same word that we use for Christ as Lord Ruler over all. From this, it follows that our responsibility as human beings is to enter into His will and to rule as the Lord would rule.

God also tells us that we are "to cultivate and keep the Garden of Eden" (Genesis 2.15, LXX). The literal meaning of this passage is that humans are required to serve the earth as well as to protect it from desecration or exploitation. We are responsible to God for how we use and care for the earth in order that all people may have a sufficiency of all that is needful. It is through our proper use of the material and natural world that God is worshipped: "Through heaven and earth and sea, through wood and stone ... through all of creation visible and invisible, we offer veneration and honor to the Creator." (Leontius of Cyprus, Sermon 3 on Icons)

What is further implied in the same commandment is thanksgiving to God for all that we have received through the physical world. Thus, each person has a "priestly" responsibility before God (1 Peter 2.5) to offer back to God that which belongs to Him. All this is implied in the Divine Liturgy, when the presbyter offers back to God what He has placed into human care. Indeed, the commandment "to cultivate and keep" the Garden also implies an expectation that we are to share the things of the world with those who are suffering, with those in need, and to have concern for the good of humanity and the entire creation. Even though our first parents fell away through disobedience, our Lord restored this priestly responsibility to humanity through His life-giving Death and Resurrection.

In our day, however, society has failed to remember these holy mandates about the right conduct of human beings. In our pride, gratitude has often been replaced with greed. As a people, we have forgotten God and foregone our mandated responsibilities. We no longer strive for sufficiency and moderation in all things. Too often, instead of receiving the gifts of God as He would bestow them, we heedlessly take from the earth and needlessly waste its resources, disregarding the impact that our greed exerts upon the life of our neighbors and the life of the world. There is no doubt that the pollution and degradation of the world is directly related to the pollution and the degradation of our hearts. "Look within yourself," writes St. Nilus of Ancyra, "and there you will see the entire world." (Epistles 2,119)

As Church leaders, our concern is service to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose Gospel of love teaches us that our response to the welfare of our neighbor and respect for the creation are expressions of our love for God. This means that we are all personally responsible to identify and adopt appropriate moral and ethical approaches to the changing conditions of the world.

Faithful to the responsibility that we have been given within God's good creation, it is prudent for us to listen to the world's scientific leaders as they describe changes occurring in the world's climate, changes that are already being experienced by many people throughout the world. Global climate change assumes many different shapes and appearances within our own country.

In Alaska, for instance, the average temperature has risen by 7°F, causing glaciers to retreat and the Arctic Ocean to lose its summer ice. In Florida, Hawaii and the islands of the Caribbean, coral reefs are dying. In ocean waters such as those off the coast of San Francisco, higher temperatures now result in lower concentrations of plankton, reducing a primary food source for fish and bird life, and ultimately, for humans. Across the western states, a modest increase in temperature has contributed to a six-fold increase in forest fires over the past two decades. In many parts of America, previously distant tropical diseases, such as West Nile virus and dengue fever, are appearing as a direct result of rising temperatures.

These are all clear signs of a rapidly changing climate. It cannot be predicted in precise detail how climate change is going to unfold, but the seriousness of this situation is widely accepted. And, while it is true that the world's climate has also undergone changes in past centuries, three crucial considerations make the current changes serious and unprecedented:

- The rapid extent of temperature increase is historically unparalleled. Past changes in climate occurred over extended periods of time and were considerably less severe.
- The human role in changing the climate is unique today. In earlier centuries, people did not have the technological capability to make such radical changes to the planet as are now taking place.
- The impact that climate change will exert upon society is great and diverse, inevitably including conditions which deeply disrupt the lives and livelihoods of people on an unprecedented scale.



Climatologists label these changes as the result of measurable increases of carbon dioxide and other so-called "greenhouse gases" in the atmosphere. These gases are produced primarily by the burning or combustion of gasoline, coal and other fossil fuels. Among the many consequences, the atmosphere and the oceans are warming; wind and rainfall patterns are changing; and sea levels are rising. Forces of climate change also increase the acidity of the oceans; they raise the ferocity of

storms, especially hurricanes; they cause droughts and heat waves to become more intense; and, in some areas, they disrupt normal agriculture. Furthermore, the changes are not occurring evenly: some parts of the world experience drought and others greater rainfall, even flooding. Importantly, the conditions that we observe now are only the early alterations to our climate. Much larger and far more disruptive changes will result unless we reduce the forces causing climate change.

It should be clear to all of us that immediate measures must be taken to reduce the impact of these changes to the world's climate. If we fail to act now, the changes that are already underway will intensify and create catastrophic conditions. A contributing root cause of these changes to our climate is a lifestyle that contains unintended, nevertheless destructive side effects. It may be that no person intends to harm the environment, but the excessive use of fossil fuels is degrading and destroying the life of creation. Moreover, the impact of our thoughtless actions is felt disproportionately by the poorest and most vulnerable, those most likely to live in marginal areas. By our lack of awareness, then, we risk incurring the condemnation of those who "grind the face of the poor" (Isaiah 3.15) As Church leaders, it is our responsibility to speak to this condition inasmuch as it represents a grave moral and spiritual problem.

Therefore, we wish to emphasize the seriousness and the urgency of the situation. To persist in a path of excess and waste, at the expense of our neighbors and beyond the capability of the planet to support the lifestyle directly responsible for these changes, is not only folly; it jeopardizes the survival of God's creation, the planet that we all share. In the end, not only is it sinful; it is no less than suicidal.

But there is hope. Society can alter its behavior and avoid the more serious consequences of climate change. To do this, however, we must work together to reduce the way that we have exploited the earth's resources, especially its fossil fuels. As Americans, we comprise barely 4% of the world's people; yet we consume over 25% of its resources and energy. Justice and charity for our neighbors demand a more frugal, simple way of living in order to conserve the fruits of creation.

In order to make the required changes, we are called to pray first and foremost for a change in our personal attitudes and habits, in spite of any accompanying inconvenience. Such is the depth of *metanoia* or repentance. The issue is not merely our response to climate change, but our failure to obey God. We must live in a manner that is consistent with what we believe and how we pray. Our heart must be "merciful, burning with love for the whole of creation." (Abba Isaac the Syrian, *Mystic Treatises*, Homily 48) At minimum, this means caring about the effect of our lives upon our neighbors, respecting the natural environment, and demonstrating a willingness to live within the means of our planet. Such a change will invariably require reduction in our consumption of fossil fuels as well as acceptance of alternative energy sources such as solar or wind power, and other such methods that minimize our impact upon the world. We can do these things, but it will require intentional effort from each of us.

Nevertheless, we cannot stop there. We must also learn all that we can about the emerging situation of climate change. We must set an example in the way that we choose to live, reaching out and informing others about this threat. We must discuss with fellow-parishioners and - since climate change is not only an issue for Orthodox Christians - we must raise the issue before public officials and elected representatives at the city, state and national levels. We are all responsible for this situation, and each one of us can do something to address the problem.

In each generation, God sends some great tests that challenge the life and future of society. One of the tests for our time is whether we will be obedient to the commands that God has given to us by exercising self-restraint in our use of energy, or whether we will ignore those commands and continue to seek the comforts and excesses that over-reliance on fossil fuels involves.

At every Divine Liturgy, we pray for seasonable weather. Let us enter into this prayer and amend our lives in whatever ways may be necessary to meet the divine command that we care for the earth as the Lord's. If we can do this, if we can render our lives as a blessing rather than a curse for our neighbors and for the whole creation, then, God willing, we may live and flourish. This is not an

optional matter. We will be judged by the choices we make. The Scriptures bluntly tell us that if we destroy the earth, then God will destroy us (see Revelation 11:18).

Let us all recall the commands of God regarding our use of the earth. Let us respond to the divine commandments so that the blessings of God may be abundantly upon us. And let us responsibly discern the right, holy and proper way to live in this time of change and challenge. Then we shall "perceive everything in the light of the Creator God." (St. John Climacus, Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 4,58)