The spiritual leader of the over 300 million Orthodox Christians world-wide, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew – who has widely become known as the “Green Patriarch” – has assumed unique and challenging initiatives among religious leaders in environmental concern and care, proclaiming that degrading or destroying the biological diversity of God’s creation is no less than sinful.

Bartholomew’s tenure has been characterized by international and inter-Orthodox outreach, as well as by ecumenical and environmental commitment. Born in 1940 on the island of Imvros, Bartholomew graduated from Halki Theological School near Constantinople, received a doctorate at the Pontifical Oriental Institute of Rome, and served as personal secretary to his predecessor Patriarch Dimitrios.

In 1989, Patriarch Dimitrios established September 1st as the annual day of prayer throughout the Orthodox world for the protection of the environment. Since his election in 1991, Patriarch Bartholomew has undertaken several innovative ecological projects, organizing an Inter-Orthodox Conference in Crete (1991) and five ecological seminars held at the Theological School of Halki (1994-1998) to raise awareness among Orthodox leaders and institutions.

In 1997, Patriarch Bartholomew became the first worldwide religious leader to denounce environmental abuse as a sin against God, humanity and nature. In 2002, he proclaimed the refusal to properly treat creation as a gift of communion with God and one another as humanity’s original sin [see excerpts].

In 1994, Patriarch Bartholomew also formed an international Religion, Science, and Environment Committee to raise public awareness and to promote dialogue on an inter-
disciplinary, an inter-confessional, and an inter-religious level. Together with the World Wildlife Fund for Nature and the European Commission, the Committee has to date organized four sea-borne symposia: in the Mediterranean Sea (1995), in the Black Sea (1997), along the Danube River (1999) and on the Adriatic Sea (2002) with the participation of scientists, theologians, journalists, and politicians. The Halki Ecological Institute was an educational workshop launched in 1999 and resulting from the second symposium. A future international and ecumenical symposium is scheduled for the Baltic Sea (2003).

In 2002, the Ecumenical Patriarch also co-signed the joint Venice Declaration of environmental ethics with Pope John Paul II. In the same year, Patriarch Bartholomew was awarded the prestigious Sophie Prize in Oslo, Norway, for his pioneering environmental vision and initiatives.

John Chryssavgis, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

Further Reading

