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Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew received an honorary degree from the University of Notre

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew received an honorary degree from the University of Notre Dame Oct. 28. During an academic convocation in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart the Eastern Orthodox Church leader said climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are interrelated crises. Notre Dame's president, Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, is at left. (University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)



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Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are interrelated crises that challenge churches to respond with both faith and science, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said Oct. 28 at the University of Notre Dame, where he received an honorary doctorate.

"It is our obligation before God, neighbor and creation to assume responsibility for addressing climate change and suppressing the pandemic," the Eastern Orthodox Church leader told his audience.

Speaking directly to students in the basilica where the ceremony took place after vespers, Bartholomew said young people offer "the optimism that we so yearn for, the readiness to accept change and sacrifice, the capacity to overcome polarization and partisanship, the conviction to be catalysts of social and ecological justice as well as, quite frankly, the opportunity to save democracy and our planet."

He added, "May God grant your generation the necessary wisdom and courage to continue leading this charge and mandate."

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Bartholomew, who was an early leader in the Christian ecology movement and has bonded with Pope Francis over environmental issues, is on a weeklong visit to the United States that began Oct. 23.

In September, he joined Pope Francis and Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury in calling for strong measures on climate change so that future generations can live on a healthy planet. And on Oct. 4, he was among nearly 40 faith leaders who joined Francis at the Vatican to present an appeal for urgent action to world leaders who will meet in Glasgow, Scotland, Nov. 1-2 at the opening of the United Nations climate conference, COP26.

In his remarks at Notre Dame, Bartholomew stressed the importance of making political decisions based on scientific evidence and the need for people of faith to work together toward solutions.

"We faith leaders are called humbly and patiently to cooperate with leaders in the scientific and academic worlds, as well as the corporate and political domains," he said, adding that "creation care brings us divided, insulated believers before a common task that we must face together."

The patriarch also called for ecocide — the mass damage to or destruction of ecosystems — to be declared an international crime.

"As human beings, we surely understand that we cannot hurt our brothers and sisters, that there are moral, social and legal consequences" to actions, he said. "Why, then, do we not grasp the fact that there should be moral, social and legal repercussions when we harm God's creation?"

Both climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic raise "ultimate questions about life and death, sickness and suffering, as well as health care and justice," the patriarch said. In addressing the dual crises, he added, churches play a crucial role with their interrelated messages of faith in God and love of neighbor, symbolized by the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the cross.

During the pandemic, the church has learned the "important but a humbling lesson" that "religion must function and serve in connection with, and never in isolation from, science," he added. "Faith alone will not overcome the problems of our time, but the challenges of our time will certainly not be overcome without faith."

Protecting the environment, he said, "involves constant pain and forgiveness, unrelenting preference and priority for what we truly value, for what truly matters." It is through "a spiritual and moral response," he added, that people of faith "become a healing and transformative presence among our neighbors and on our planet."

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