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'Green patriarch' leads symposium on river

by Michelle Minkoff



Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople speaks on the New Orleans riverfront at the opening address of a weeklong symposium on "The Great Mississippi River: Restoring Balance." (CNS/Frank J. Methe/Clarion Herald)

Religion News Service

NEW ORLEANS -- It is the religious duty of Orthodox Christians to protect an environment harmed by natural disasters and society's modern way of life, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I said here Oct. 21.

"We are living in a moment in history when we must work for solutions in faith, in love, in hope, and in responsibility," said Bartholomew, who is spiritual leader of nearly 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide.

Speaking from a balcony overlooking the Mississippi River, the subject of a weeklong conference of religious, political and academic leaders convened by the patriarch, Bartholomew kicked off the event by saying that the river is in need of repair -- just as the city is.

"The river is a microcosm of our planet," he said. "In the water we observe many of the world's ecological issues."

It is the eighth time Bartholomew -- known as the "green patriarch" because of his interest in the intersection of faith and the environment -- has convened a conference on the problems facing major bodies of water. Previous gatherings have centered on issues facing the Aegean Sea, the Danube River and the Arctic Ocean.

Bartholomew's stop here is part of an apostolic visit to the United States that lasts until Nov. 6. He has already visited Memphis, Tenn., and heads to Atlanta, New York and Washington, after New Orleans.

The religious leader, based out of Istanbul, Turkey, has brought worldwide attention to metro New Orleans' post-Hurricane Katrina recovery. He visited the city in January 2006, just four months after the catastrophic flood, and told residents rebuilding and gutting their homes, "Your pain was and is our pain. It was felt by all humanity."

After arriving Oct. 20, Bartholomew issued a statement saying, "We return so that we might bear witness to the hope that is in you, the hope you have manifested through the rebuilding [of] your lives and your community."

The environmental symposium was to focus particularly on Louisiana's coastal erosion. The Rev. Canon Sally Bingham, who helped organize the meeting, has said the patriarch recognizes that "while climate change didn't cause the levees to break," it is causing storms and droughts that are more severe.

In his speech introducing the symposium, Bartholomew said that the natural resource of water has been damaged by the demands of modern culture, citing depletion by irrigation systems and the loss of half of the world's rain forests.

"Without thinking, we have lost so much of the sponges responsible for the delivery of our fresh water," he said.

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Bartholomew's call for solutions prompted Archbishop Demetrios, the head of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, to call Bartholomew the "healing patriarch."

"He tends to the wounds inflicted on the world by human causes and natural catastrophes," the archbishop said.

Pope Benedict XVI sent a message to be delivered to symposium attendees expressing his support for environmental work.

Former Vice President Al Gore, who has championed environmental causes since leaving office and was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, also sent a message congratulating Christians for focusing attention on an issue he believes is in dire need of action.

Author John Barry, who wrote the acclaimed *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, also addressed the symposium.

He said the flooding in New Orleans was a foretaste of what could happen to other coastal communities given rising sea levels around the globe.

“New Orleans is the point of the spear,” Barry said, “and what happened in New Orleans will -- with increased sea-level rise and increased storm intensity -- threaten every coastal city in the world. More than half of the world’s population lives in coastal zones.”

Barry said how south Louisiana handles its problem of disappearing coastal wetlands will be either a positive or negative model.

“It will give us something to emulate or avoid,” he said. “So far, the United States has failed the test. This is a statement of what society values and what type of investment [the country] is willing to put into infrastructure.”

Contributing to this piece were staff of The Times-Picayune for Religion News Service and Peter Finney Jr. for Catholic News Service.

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