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ECOLOGY – MAIN CONCERN FOR THE CHRISTIAN SPACE OF THE 21ST CENTURY? CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: Although ecology is an important contemporary topic, influencing the economic, ethical, philosophical and religious area, among others, there are still aspects which are not highlighted enough by contemporary researchers as far as its role and the potential consequences of its misunderstanding are concerned. Knowing this, we will try to emphasise why ecology should be considered an important issue of the 21st century and which are the perspectives of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches regarding this topic. Both Churches share a common vision and their leaders are deeply committed to the vision of a future society where the environment is protected and respected. Therefore, we will try to emphasise the visions of several charismatic leaders such as the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople or Pope Francis regarding this aspect and to show which are the main points of their conception. We will also try to present them in the context of their times and of their confession and to analyse the way in which they continue the directions assumed by their confessional area, being part of the current Christian message. At the same time, we will try to underline the common points of their perception and to see the pragmatic grounds on which they base it and the practical proposals they put forward. Topics such as integral ecology and aspects such as the anthropological basis of ecological crises will be analysed on the basis of documents, including the pastoral letters of Patriarch Bartholomew and the Encyclical letters of the current Pontiff, among which *Laudato Si*.

Key words: Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I of Constantinople, Pope Francis, *Octogesima adveniens*, *Laudato si*, environment, *Redemptor hominis*.

1. Introduction

In the past decades, the ecological crisis has become a recurrent topic in the economic, philosophical and religious areas (Frunză, Sandu 2016, 43), while the civil is also seriously concerned about it. It is no surprise that the Christian area is also interested in ways to overcome it. In this context, there are many religious personalities who, in their speeches, underline the fact that the Earth's resources are not infinite and their misuse could also become a problem for the survival of the human race. Moreover, official documents dedicated to the environment, resources and energy are released by official bodies of the Church or by their leaders (see, for example: Conseil Pontifical "Justice et Paix" 2014).

Clearly, it must also to be mentioned that the concerns related to this topic are not new in the religious area. The fact that it has biblical roots (Chirilă 2014, 75) determined different theologians to present the care for creation as a commandment and to suggest possible ways of accomplishing this task. Aware of the relevance of ecology for the theological area and for the 21st century, we will try to emphasise the most important contemporary opinions on it, from the Orthodox and Catholic areas. The opinion of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (Morariu 2019, 19-25) and that of Pope Francis (Francis 2015) will be presented, together with other important documents or works and, whenever necessary, they will be compared with writings from other Christian backgrounds, such as the Anglican one (Mondin 2000, 310), in an attempt to see how the two traditions perceive the ecological problem, which are their common points, but also the differences in perception or the solutions suggested.

2. The Ecology of the 21th Century in the Orthodox Perspective

When one thinks about the contemporary Orthodox perspective on ecology, the first name that comes to mind is clearly that of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Called "the Green Patriarch" by the Vice President of the United States Al Gore (Chryssavgis 2012, 4) and later by almost everyone who presents his activity, he is not only a man who warns society about the danger of the misuse of resources, through the conferences held in places such as Yale University (Bartholomée 2015) or those organized recurrently (Morariu 2019, 21). He is a man who contributed to the development of public awareness of this problem and who determined important personalities of recent times to take the initiative (Edinburgh 2012: VII).

He was clearly inspired by his predecessor, Patriarch Dimitrios (Maros 2017, 146), who also tried to draw attention to the future problems generated by the destruction of the environment. Thanks to him, the 1st of September is considered by both the religious and lay spaces the Global Day of Creation and many actions have been accomplished in order to determine people to think in a responsible way about the idea of ecology.

Among his first actions regarding this topic, we must also consider his pastoral letter from 1st of September 1st 1992. There, in an attempt to present the patristic conception regarding the relationship between the human being and the rest of the creation, he emphasised the fact that man is at the border between the spiritual and material creation: "In the language of the Church Fathers, the human person "stands at the border" between material and spiritual creation. Humanity is a "borderer" with regard to space and time as well; thus, in "an hour of temptation," one is courageous to foretaste the "day of salvation." (Chryssavgis 2012, 27).

In his conception, being placed at the border also means being the connection between two realities. Therefore, it is man's mission to "spiritualise" the creation through his actions. This was the first of a long series of pastoral letters in which he spoke about this topic.

However, the beginning of his actions in the field of environment must be searched earlier in time, in the 80s. It was then that, in a meeting dedicated to the preparation of the Pan-Orthodox Council which took place later in Crete, in 2016, he brought into debate the abuse of the environment. As the editor of his works underlines: "The environmental vision and initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate date to the mid-1980s, when it organized and chaired the third session of the Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambesy (October 28 November 6, 1986). Although the decisions of this meeting were not binding, serving only as recommendation, nevertheless the representatives attending the meeting expressed and stressed their concern for the abuse of the natural environment by human beings, especially in affluent societies of the Western world. The meeting also underlined the importance of respecting the sacredness and freedom of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, the missionary imperative and witness of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world, as well as the harm wrought by war, racism, and inequality on human societies and the environment. The emphasis was on leaving a better world for future generations." (Chryssavgis 2012, 4).

Thanks to him and to his sustained work, along bioethical (Morariu 2016, 247-254) and other relevant (Morariu 2018, 1-5) topics, the ecological problems were also discussed by the council and the Orthodox Church took an important step forward towards the definition of its social doctrine (Morariu 2019, 2).

Giving an anthropological value to his ideas, the Greek Patriarch has not only contributed to the valorisation of a relational subject that can

create bridges between religion and politics (Frunză 2015, 19), but has also offered a deep foundation, which is important for both the religious and the philosophical areas. His discourse, often rushed, was no longer old-fashioned, but became a call, an exhortation or, in some situations, an attempt to prevent an imminent danger. This explains the tone of his 1994 pastoral letter, when he criticised individualism, seen as a threat to the common good and to the social ontological characteristic of the human being, and spoke about a reversed paradigm. In that letter, he said the following: "On a number of occasions in the ecclesiastical year, the Church prays that God may protect humanity from natural catastrophes: from earthquakes, storms, famine and floods. Yet, today, we observe the reverse. On September 1st, the day devoted to God's handiwork, the Church implores the Creator to protect nature from calamities of human origin, calamities such as pollution, war, exploitation, waste and secularism... from this perspective, the Church, in its wisdom, brings before our eyes a message of deep significance, one that touches upon the central problems of fallen humanity and its restoration. This is the problem of the polarization of individual sin against collective responsibility" (Chryssavgis 2012a, 32).

Therefore, a valid solution for the 21st century is collective responsibility. The motivation resides in the fact that nature constitutes the basis of human life and provides the necessary resources for its accomplishment (Rhabbi 1995, 12). Although it may look a little idealistic, his vision "on earth as in heaven" (Chryssavgis 2012a) is based on practical facts. "Integral ecology" (Sereti 2018, 617), a topic which he suggested and was later developed by Pope Francis, means for him not only a series of legal measures meant to protect nature and important elements such as forests, seas, oceans and s. o. from pollution or destruction, but also a deep understanding of the relevance of nature for the human being. This definitely means more than the "ecological reconstruction" (Gould 2018, 287) mentioned by sociologists. It means a deep motivation and an inter-generational interest and justice, as Pope Francis mentioned in his letters (Francis 2019). In order to encourage this attitude in humans, the Patriarch of Constantinople underlines the fact that "Natural environment – the air, water, the land – is not only a good of the present generation, but equally one of future generations. We must sincerely admit that humanity deserves more than the show that takes place under our eyes. We and the ones that come after us, our children, our disciples, have the right to a better world, a calmer one and with a clearer vision. A world free of corruption, violence and blood, a generous and kind one." (Bartholomée 2015, 60-61).

Besides intergenerational interests, Bartholomew also brings into discussion the economic aspects, which proves his pragmatic vision. 2002 was one of the years which gave him this opportunity and created the context to prove the practical use of his ideas. In the context of global

warming, caused by human actions, this year was marked by important floods. Leaving aside the theological arguments that he had used in different situations before, he attacked the problem from an economic point of view, showing that "Recent floods in Europe, India and Russia, as well as those occurring during this year or previously in other parts of the earth, all bear witness to the disturbance of the climatic conditions caused by global warming. Such disasters have persuaded even the most incredulous persons that the problem is real, that the cost of repairing damages is comparable to the cost of preventing them, and that there is simply no margin left for remaining silent." (Chryssavgis 2012a, 50).

The adoption of certain practical attitudes meant to keep the planet far from the ecological disaster may look expensive at first glance. But considering the long-term advantages which they will bring and the fact that the future of humanity as a whole depends on that, it seems a good and tempting idea. For this reason, important people such as the President and the Vice President of the United States of America, the Duke of Edinburgh and many other important personalities trusted him, while important international bodies such as the European Union (Chryssavgis 2012, 7) and universities from all around the world asked for his advice.

The fact that he started using a language common with the economic area did not make him forget the theological roots or to stop using theological arguments in future documents. Likewise, the highlights of all his speeches were Christians and his arguments were based on the Bible and its interpretation by the Church Fathers (Bartholomew 2018, 12). Therefore, when, a few years later, he held a conference on the Christian understanding of ecology, his ideas were clear, well-articulated and sent a message according to the doctrine of the Church that he represents. In his speech, he emphasised the fact that "Two fundamental consequences follow from this understanding (the religious one, our note). First, *the use of the world is not an end in itself for humanity, but a way of relating to God*. If humanity distorts the use of this world into an egocentric abuse of greed, by dominating and destroying nature, then humanity is denying and destroying its own life-giving relationship with God, a relationship destined to continue into eternity. Second, *the world as God's creation, ceases to be a neutral object for human use*. It incarnates the word of the Creator like every other creation embodies the word of its artist. The objectives of natural reality bear the seal of their divine Creator's wisdom and love, they are words (*logoi*, which also implies meaning) of God inviting humanity to dialogue (*dialogos*) with God" (Chryssavgis 2012a, 68).

The fact that he is the leader of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and has an honorary primate among the other heads of national Orthodox Churches makes Patriarch Bartholomew a representative voice in this space. His ideas are therefore welcomed by the secular society and its representatives and also by the religious area to which he belongs and by the leaders of other Churches (such as Pope Francis). As it can be seen, his

attitude in the ecumenical area is based on practical actions such as the organisation of conferences, the establishment of September 1st as the global day of the environment and so on, proves the concerns of the Orthodox Church with a topic which is definitely important and which will also generate many future debates.

3. Catholic Perspective of the 21st-Century Ecology of the 21st century

Compared with the Orthodox situation, the Catholic area has a homogenous tradition in terms of social doctrine (the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005:3). A list of pontifical documents clarify many of the problems regarding the relationships of the Church with different social categories. Among them, ecology was also tackled, which explains why, compared with the Orthodox area where, after brief mentions by the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, Bartholomew was the most relevant voice that assumed the ecological issue as a personal task, here, the current Pontiff, Pope Francis, although developing a complex and current vision on ecology and its present challenges, is only a continuator of a direction opened more than half a century ago.

Among the oldest documents that refer to the issue of ecology, theologians mention (Mondini 2000, 312), Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter *Octogesima adveniens*. Published in 1971, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's letter *Rerum novarum*, which is considered to be the basis of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, it is focused on issues such as the situation of workers, the international political situation or global peace rather than on *Rerum novarum*. Nonetheless, in the 21st paragraph, the head of the Catholic Church expresses his concern regarding the fact that pollution and the other forms of human destruction are real menaces for the environment. Therefore, he draws attention to this potential problem, underlining the fact that "While the horizon of man is thus being modified according to the images that are chosen for him, another transformation is making itself felt, one which is the dramatic and unexpected consequence of human activity. Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace – pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity – but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family." (Giovanni XXIII, Paolo VI, 2004, 1015).

A few years later, in 1979, Pope John Paul II brought this topic again into discussion (Mondini 2000, 312), but on a different note. This time, the

Pontiff presented it in an exhortative, not in a critical the topic (Ihm 1981, 251). He spoke about the fact that man is called to save the natural environment, to be its "patron" and "saviour" and not its destructor. In the context of the increase of problems related to ecology and the environment, he later declared the 23rd International Day of Peace of January 1st 1990 to be a day of salvation of the environment (Mondini 2000, 312).

The idea of ecological crisis was also brought into attention a few years later by Pope Benedict XV, in his encyclical letter entitled: *Caritas in veritate* (2009). Here, in the 33rd paragraph, he mentioned the problems caused to nature and to the environment by the human being (*Caritas in veritate* 2009) but in a phrasing that gives to the text an anthropological basis, making it look similar to those of Patriarch Bartholomew, he also placed in in relation to the moral crisis of humanity. Later on, in the 48th paragraph of the same encyclical letter, he also spoke about intergenerational justice as a potential solution for overcoming the future challenges that this might bring (*Caritas in veritate* 2009; the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, 451-487). Moreover, reducing energy consumption and the discovering alternative forms of energy would be, according to his thinking, an important step in the development of a more eco-friendly way of life: "The technologically advanced societies can and must lower their domestic energy consumption, either through an evolution in manufacturing methods or through greater ecological sensitivity among their citizens. It should be added that at present it is possible to achieve improved energy efficiency while at the same time encouraging research into alternative forms of energy (*Caritas in veritate* 2009).

Therefore, when Pope Francis brought this topic again into debate, he will do it based on what his predecessors affirmed and he will keep as keynote elements the solutions they suggested. This happened, for example, in the encyclical letter *Laudato Si* (2015), where he suggested that the "authentic human ecology" should be taken into account in the future debates regarding the topic: "Saint John Paul II became increasingly concerned about this issue. In his first Encyclical he warned that human beings frequently seem "to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption". Subsequently, he would call for a global ecological conversion. At the same time, he noted that little effort had been made to "safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology" (Francis 2015, 5).

Taking into account the new acquisitions of society and the actions that the Catholic Church has taken in this area (for more information about these actions, see also: Campanini 2007, 113-117), he started his letter speaking about the environment and the need to protect it from the biblical perspective, which shows that humans are the rulers of creation. Like Saint Francis of Assisi, he offered an interpretation on the note for

this issue, claiming that: "our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us" (Francis 2015: Assisi 1991, 113-114). Therefore, the fact that man was asked to be the leader of the earth and the "patron" of creation does not mean to use it to his discretion, destroying its goods, but to take care of it and to act as a bigger protective brother. Thus, he must be responsible in relation to creation and take care of it, this being not only part of the tasks regarding his salvation, but also connected with the welfare of earthly life.

The current Pontiff also insists on the complexity of the problem and its consequences, starting from a present aspect of the environmental crisis, which has global relevance. He underlines the fact that "Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our days. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in the coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and services of the ecosystem such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters and their access to social services and protection is very limited" (Francis 2015, 21).

Due to the different branches where the ecological problem has echoes, he suggests an "integral ecology", developing an idea previously released and debated by his Greek Orthodox homologue from Constantinople (Sereti 2018, 617; Bartholomée 2015, 17). He sees this as having subsequent components like: the ecology of daily life, the ambient ecology, economical, social and cultural ecology. His opinion on the problem and its accomplishment make him one of the authors who understand the ecological system (Gould 2018, 19) in a holistic way. Moreover, by showing that the ecological attitude reflects the spiritual and cultural life of a person, he moves the action from the understanding of ecology as something secondary towards the fact that it must be at the centre of all human concerns. By using terms such as "the throwaway culture" that can look tough to people who are familiarised with a different tone of the pontifical letters, he shows the urgency of understanding the problem and emphasises the necessity to act quickly, motivating that human happiness depends on the health of the environment: "Human beings too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness and endowed with unique dignity. So we cannot fail to consider the effects on people's lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture" (Francis 2015, 31).

From general aspects, used to offer a landscape of the situation and an objective evaluation of the dangers that can come from the misuse of

nature, Pope Francis, like some of his predecessors or the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, moves on to refer to practical elements of the environmental problems and offers examples from the contemporary world. One of them was and still is water. His perspective, painted in dark colours, is meant to awaken human conscience and to determine both enterprises and humans to stop the great pollution of waters and therefore to contribute to the decrease of the rate of human mortality and illness. In the first part of his letter, he shows that: "One particularly serious problem is the quality of water available to the poor. Every day, unsafe water results in many deaths and the spread of water-related diseases, including those caused by microorganisms and chemical substances. Dysentery and cholera, linked to inadequate hygiene and water supplies, are a significant cause of suffering and of infant mortality. Underground water sources in many places are threatened by the pollution produced in certain mining, farming and industrial activities, especially in countries lacking adequate regulation or controls. It is not only a question of industrial waste. Detergents and chemical products, commonly used in many places of the world, continue to pour into our rivers, lakes and seas" (Francis 2015, 23).

Solving the problem of water, both from the point of view of pollution and by providing water access to populations from areas like Africa, which do not have access to it, will clearly be a worthy contribution of humanity to the overcoming of the ecological difficulty. At the same time, it will represent a proof that human beings have understood the relevance of nature and have invested in their future as a species. However, until that moment, there are many steps to take. And the human being must start to think about their poor neighbours in a sensitive and active way, just like important religious people such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta did (Slavicek 2007, 6; Scott 2005; Feldman 1998). Pope Francis knows this and he therefore emphasises with sadness the fact that: "Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded" (Francis 2015, 22).

Complex and well-structured, the Catholic vision of the environment and of ecological problems is, as we have tried to show in this paper, based on sources such as the Bible and the Church Fathers and it has many points which are common with the Orthodox Church. The difference consists in the fact that, although he starts from a term previously used by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, which he confessed (Francis 2015, 5), Pope Francis develops his vision and incorporates elements from his predecessors, also offering solutions in a holistic way.

4. Conclusion

As we have tried to demonstrate in the present paper, both the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches understand the relevance of ecology for human life and for its future and are concerned with the way in which the contemporary society uses resources. Therefore, in the Orthodox area, voices such as that of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew try to raise awareness in the public space by holding lectures, by organizing conferences and by topic-related practical actions, the Catholic area doing the same thing. The difference is that, in the case of the latter, the concern for ecology is older, beginning in the 70's with Pope Paul VI's letter *Octogesima adveniens*. It was later continued and developed by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI and re-shifted by Pope Francis, thanks to his initiatives from the encyclical letter *Laudato Si*. There's a common vision and many common points between the two contemporary leaders of the Christian Church, a fact accepted by both of them. Sharing a common vision in issues related to the future of humanity is important. Moreover, the fact that, in the past years, they also had meetings is again a promising aspect.

Therefore, as we have tried to demonstrate, ecology clearly represents an important concern of the Orthodox and Catholic area. The solution suggested by the two contemporary leaders of these Churches may help the world invest in its future and become more aware of the relevance of a healthy planet, for practical and theological reasons. Both Bartholomew and Pope Francis try to explain that and to contribute through their speeches, letters and works, but also through their meetings and other practical actions, to awareness raising in the world by promoting a new lifestyle, which is not only in accordance with the principles of the Bible, but which also brings harmony and the perpetuation of life in a happy and healthy way.

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