

(#8)

OUR DAILY BREAD

Sustaining Life and Human Dignity through Food and Agriculture

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

(Eemlandhoeve, Netherlands, April 26, 2014)

Your Eminence Archbishop Joris Vercammen,
Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Esteemed symposium moderator, organizers,
and distinguished participants,

It gives us great pleasure to address you today. We are honored by the invitation to participate in this “Food and Sustainability Symposium” as well as by the warm hospitality afforded us. We greet you all with great joy. For whatever reason you may have come to this presentation, you share a love and respect toward God’s creation. Let us assure you that our Church loves you and respects your work for food sustainability, human dignity and a healthy environment.

We congratulate those who have put together this important conversation on food and agriculture. It is most gratifying that during our visit to this beloved and forward thinking country, we have the opportunity to share the historical Christian vision of God’s earth.

Firstly, as Christians, we are obliged to declare that our personal interest and that of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the environment does not emanate from an idolization of the earth but from the conviction that the entire physical world is God’s work, which He deemed “very good.” And humankind, which receives the command to protect this divine gift, is obligated to cultivate the natural world for all future generations, preserving the earth healthy, productive, fruitful, and beautiful.

We are not influenced by passing attitudes or fashions. Our vision in principle is the same now as two thousand years ago. This timeless view of God’s earth contains several key themes, which shape our approach to food cultivation, agriculture, the sustenance of life and human dignity.

In the Book of Genesis we are told to “serve and preserve” the earth. (Gen. 2.15) The original Hebrew terms imply “planting” and “bringing to completion,” as in the way seeds are brought from planting through nurturing and cultivation to harvest. Some linguists add that the words also convey a sense of service. The second commandment to “preserve” or “keep” the earth involves spiritual renewal, vigilance, and especially protection from desecration, pollution or any form of evil. Thus great wisdom and balance exists in the complimentary character of these twin commands of “serving” and “preserving.”

Another crucial concept brings further definition to our vision of the earth and sustainable agriculture. This is the notion of “covenant.” After the great flood, Noah was given a promise from God, that “no further catastrophe would come upon humanity” if Noah and his descendants obeyed God’s commandments. (Gen. 9.1-15) This covenant includes careful tending of the earth because it applies as much to human affairs as it does to the land. Human respect for God and the earth includes constructing a sustainable and respectful attitude that will continue for many generations. (1 Chron. 16.14-17)

This causes us to ask a series of questions: How do we develop a timeless stability in society? What are the principles? What sort of energy is implied? What attitudes and values are required to maintain this sustainability? This command also requires examination of what to avoid: What principles inform what we should not do? The tradition and experience of farmers with the land over many seasons leads to a wisdom that can answer these questions.

You may recall that the peasant agriculture of the Netherlands achieved a stability that endured for centuries before the arrival of industrialized agriculture. This experience should give rise to further questions about modern agriculture: For instance, are carcinogenic pesticides and chemicals sustainable? What effect do these have on future generations? Should toxic chemicals that cause birth defects or mutate genetic structure be allowed? Are there forms of energy that we may not use?

A wonderful example of the required attitude comes from the early Benedictine monasteries in this region. When Saint Benedict first compiled his rule in the 6th century, he sought a means by which the monks’ daily chores would complement their spiritual striving. Thus, he included a rule that declared that the monks should bring the same love and respect, which they offered to God during the sacred services to the

tools and the labor in the garden. (St. Benedict, *Monastic Rule* 10) This would allow the same worship and thanksgiving that they enjoyed in prayer to extend to the duties in the fields and orchards. This striving certainly shaped the attitudes and tradition of early Dutch monasteries, such as Saint Adalbert's Abbey and Abbey van Susteren.

Ultimately, this rule reflects the teaching that Jesus Christ gave in the Sermon on the Mount. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, He offered them "The Lord's Prayer" that all Christians share, namely the "Our Father." This prayer includes the words "give us this day our daily bread" but also contains the phrase that tells us to do God's will "on earth as it is in heaven." This is precisely the vision that defines our way of living in the world. And as we extend this vision to the requirements of food, we can identify the principles that determine the Christian understanding of sustainable agriculture.

In the second century AD, Clement of Alexandria served as bishop for a community of Christians near the delta of the Nile River. Alexandria was not only a great philosophical center, but also a great trade center. Camel caravans and sailing ships brought products and ideas to this ancient metropolis on the Mediterranean Sea. Clement gradually articulated a theology of lifestyle, beginning with food and eating. (See his *Christ the Educator*, Book II, chapters 1-5) He asked believers to eat locally grown foods, as well as to eat simply and in moderation. Thus, he formulated a Christian lifestyle that honored God, respected earth, nurtured believers, and distinguished the Christian community from others in Egypt.

A contemporary American farmer and poet, Wendell Berry, similarly writes: "We cannot live harmlessly or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, even reverently, eating becomes a sacramental act; when we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration . . . Indeed, how we eat determines how the world is used."

Dear friends, our food choices influence not only our own health, but also the health of the land and our communities. When we realize that our food choices have consequences for the larger world, it helps us to assume responsibility for our participation in the sustainability of God's creation. There is an unbroken thread that connects the heart of God to the seed of the ground. It is the prayer and exhortation of our Lord to act

“on earth as it is in heaven.” If we can fulfill this challenge, through self-reflection and prayer, then we can also meet the challenge of food sustainability and human dignity while providing an agricultural model for the modern world.