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Photos of Bartholomew are available via www.religionnews.com

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Published: November 2, 2009

(RNS) With his flowing white beard and long black raiment fluttering in the wind while blessing the waters of the Mississippi through an ancient rite, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the world's 250 million Orthodox Christians, looks like a throwback from the past.

Yet this throwback has very salient and progressive concerns. As head of the world's Eastern branch of Christianity, his presence invites many Western Christians to look at a part of their heritage they might never have known about, and reminds them that their Eastern brethren share a common humanity.

Based in Istanbul, the primary seat of Orthodox Christianity worldwide, the Patriarch was in New Orleans at the end of last month (Oct.) to preside over "The Great Mississippi River: Restoring Balance," the eighth international gathering of the Religion, Science The Environment Symposia, which the Patriarch has been spearheading since 1995.

Bartholomew first went to New Orleans in January of 2006, four months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city and displaced hundreds of thousands.

"We return after nearly four years to share in the loss and pain of the courageous citizens of New Orleans. We return to the place where the waves of the sea and the banks of the river overflowed. We return in order to pray with you, and to intercede with the Lord of Creation that the 'flood of many waters shall not come nigh unto you again' and so that we might pose questions and find solutions for the ecological perils of our time," he said.

Also known as the "Green Patriarch," Bartholomew asserts that God, as Lord of Creation, intended for humans to be good stewards. Humankind, therefore has a moral obligation to protect and preserve the environment.

From the destruction of rainforests to agricultural irrigation that daily depletes the world's fresh water supplies, the patriarch argues (echoing the views of many scientists

today) that environmental dilemmas are the result of human activity.

"We have lost half of the world's great forests due to the demand for timber and for conversion to agriculture, without thinking that these giant wet sponges are responsible for the delivery of much of our fresh water. Some of the world's greatest rivers are so depleted by human influence that they no longer flow to the sea," he lamented.

"Even the smallest human intervention can have — and does have — devastating long-term effects on the planet," he added.

Poignant statements like those resonate with people because they help the public become more environmentally conscious, and Bartholomew's return to the Big Easy was consistent with his overarching message:

To confront the ecological crises threatening the planet, human beings must alter their behavior, and religion has an important role to play in environmental justice and sensitivity. As a moral force, religion can help change people's hearts and minds.

Bartholomew's most recent stateside tour does not end with the symposium. For the Obama administration, the patriarch's visit to Washington this week is particularly significant from a geopolitical standpoint. It means an opportunity to connect with Russia, the Balkans and the Middle East through Orthodox Christians, the predominant Christian denomination in those regions.

Bartholomew's visit also comes at a time when the U.S. government is trying to fortify relations with Turkey. Though ethnically Greek, Bartholomew is a Turkish citizen, and the Turks were very sore about the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq.

Meanwhile, the Turkish Government refuses to recognize Bartholomew as the "ecumenical" patriarch, and continues to oppress the cultural and religious freedom of its non-Turkish minorities. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, in particular, has suffered. Turkey has confiscated hundreds of Church properties over the decades, and forcibly shut down the theological school on the island of Halki, the patriarchate's centuries-old training ground for priests, 38 years ago.

In a historic move, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan met with Bartholomew and other religious leaders in Turkey this past August, and Turkish Ambassador Nabi Sensoy hosted a luncheon in the Patriarch's honor. But according to Ted Galen Carpenter, a foreign policy expert at the Cato Institute, a public policy think tank, Turkey has a long way to go, and needs to ease up on its minorities in order to demonstrate its reliability as a U.S. and NATO ally.

Members of Congress agree. The House of Representatives adopted a resolution unanimously last week welcoming the patriarch to the United States, recognizing his

leadership "on matters of environment, peace and religion," and urging Turkey to grant religious freedom and property rights to the Patriarchate, and to reopen the Halki seminary.

Allowing the Patriarch freedom of movement is certainly welcome, but among other things, Turkey's admission to the European Union depends on its willingness to show greater tolerance toward its traditionally vulnerable citizens. Such an expression of democratic values would indicate a genuine Western orientation on Turkey's part, and would help the U.S. and its European partners feel a little more confident about Turkey as an ally and partner.

(Evan C. Lambrou, an award-winning journalist, was managing editor of the National Herald, the country's oldest and largest Greek American newspaper. He is a graduate of Washington University and the Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Boston.)

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Fire kills 3 in Oklahoma City

A fast-moving fire swept through an apartment building early Tuesday, killing three people and injuring at least two others, fire officials said.



camporee09

Photos of the Last Frontier Council's Centennial Camporee Saturday, Oct. 24, 2009, in Oklahoma City.



H1N1 vaccines: Saturday, Oct. 24, 2009

Photos of people lining up for H1N1 vaccines on Saturday, Oct. 24, 2009



Family search: Friday, Oct. 23, 2009

Photos from the search of the missing Red Oak family on Friday, Oct. 23, 2009