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Papal Letter to Mississippi River Symposium

"The Great Fluvial Systems of Every Continent Are Exposed to Serious Threats"

VATICAN CITY, OCT. 22, 2009 (Zenit.org).- Here is the letter, dated Oct. 12, that Benedict XVI sent to Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, on the occasion of the Eighth International Symposium on Religion, Science and the Environment titled "Restoring Balance: The Great Mississippi River."

The symposium, organized under the patronage of Bartholomew I, is under way through Sunday in Memphis, Tennessee.

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To His Holiness Bartholomew I
Archbishop of Constantinople
Ecumenical Patriarch

On the occasion of the Eight International Symposium on the theme Religion, Science and the Environment, devoted this year to the Mississippi River, I have asked the Most Reverend Gregory M. Aymond, Archbishop of New Orleans, to offer Your Holiness my cordial greetings and my prayerful good wishes for the occasion. I likewise renew my appreciation for your continued efforts to promote respect for God's gift of creation and a sense of global solidarity for its wise and responsible stewardship.

From earliest times, water has always been acknowledged as a primary human good and an indispensable natural resource. Around the great rivers of the world, like the Mississippi, great cultures have developed, while over the course of the centuries the prosperity of countless societies has been linked to these waterways. Today, however, the great fluvial systems of every continent are exposed to serious threats, often as a result of man's activity and decisions.

Concern for the fate of the great rivers of the earth must lead us to reflect soberly on the model of development which our society is pursuing. A purely economic and technological understanding of progress, to the extent that it fails to acknowledge its intrinsic limitations and to take into consideration the integral good of humanity, will inevitably provoke negative consequences for individuals, peoples and creation itself (cf. Common Declaration, 30 November, 2006). Authentic human development likewise calls for intergenerational justice and practical solidarity with the men and women of the future, who are also entitled to enjoy the goods which creation, as willed by God, is meant to bestow in abundance upon all.

I fully agree with Your Holiness that the urgent issues surrounding the care and protection of the environment, while touching important political, economic, technical and scientific questions, nonetheless are essentially of an ethical nature, and the solution to the ecological crisis of our time necessarily calls for a change of heart on the part of our contemporaries.

Nature, in fact, is prior to us, and, as the setting of our life, it must be used responsibly, with respect for its inbuilt equilibrium. As the expression of the Creator's plan of love and truth, nature must be acknowledged as

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containing “a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation” (Caritas in Veritate, 48).

Precisely for this reason, by virtue of their faith, Christians are called to join in offering the world a credible witness of responsibility for the safeguarding of creation, and to cooperate in every way possible to ensure that our earth can preserve intact its God-given grandeur, beauty and bounty.

The present Symposium, which calls attention to the majestic Mississippi River, also reminds us of the tragic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the flooding which caused such great devastation to New Orleans and surrounding areas on 29 August 2005. My thoughts and prayers are with all those, especially the poor, who experienced suffering, loss and displacement, and all those engaged in the patient work of rebuilding and renewal.

With these sentiments, Your Holiness, I embrace you with fraternal affection in the Lord. At the same time I ask you kindly to convey my greetings and heartfelt good wishes to all those taking part in the Symposium, together with the assurance of my prayers that this important gathering will lead to the renewed awareness of our responsibility for the gift of creation, which God has entrusted to us “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15) as common inheritance and home.

From the Vatican, 12 October 2009

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