



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

Proclaiming the Ecological Mission of the Orthodox Church as the Reconciliation of all Things in Christ

Saint Apolinaris
6th century

The Vision and Spiritual Direction of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and All Orthodox Patriarchs

A Course of Daily Theological Reflection
on Christian Responsibility for the
Care and Keeping of God's Creation

Month Three
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Introduction

The March edition of our Reading-a-Day program seeks to expand and embrace many more of our Orthodox Patriarchs and Hierarchs as they address concern for God's creation. The statements we select are usually simple and are presented to extend the breadth and depth of these Orthodox teachings that are not always highlighted in parish instruction.

Our office has been asked, "Why don't we present even more statements from smaller Orthodox jurisdictions?" The short answer is "we try." The larger answer is complex. Their statements are not easy to find. Many jurisdictions do not write in English. Some don't issue statements for public consumption. We use what is available in English and on the internet. Besides tracking down foreign language statements is not easy. But with this issue we will increase our listing of statements from smaller jurisdictions.

The benefit of this process is that our patriarchs and bishops become our teachers in presenting the Orthodox Church's theology of creation. The values are several:

- The centralizing of Orthodox commentary from around the world declares that we are one Church with one theology despite a variety of social, political, cultural, ethnic, and language differences.
- The focus on the environment helps to articulate a Christian way of life. The environment serves as a doorway. Through it we not only strive to live "on earth as it is in heaven," but we begin to develop a genuine Orthodox Christian way of life, and therefore a distinctly Orthodox culture. This provides young people with direction on how to live in society which in turn aids their stability in their life in the Church.
- The vision in these statements captures the practical meaning of discerning Christ and the Holy Spirit as "filling all things." Thus the Orthodox vision of our Heavenly King as "everywhere present and filling all things" is put into daily life.

A further consideration is that unless parishioners live out the principles of Christian faith, we can't offer either the world or our own youth, an example of how to remain steadfast in the life of the Church. An old principle says that we communicate more by our actions than by our words. Thus each day's reading and reflection questions capture some small but distinct dimension of Orthodox Christian teaching on creation care as adapted to fit our modern context.

Yours in service to God's good earth,

The Reading-a-Day editorial team

EM-MR-EC-FK

Sacrificing Selfishness

The natural environment was created by God to be friendly and of service to the needs of humankind. However, owing to Man's original disobedience, the natural harmony and balance of the environment was disrupted and due to persistent disobeying of God's commandments, it continues to disrupt, leading to total disarray and disharmony.

Therefore, the prayer that we offer up to the Lord for the protection of the natural environment should first of all be a prayer for the repentance of humans, who through misjudged, thoughtless, and sometimes arrogant actions directly or indirectly provokes most, not to say all, natural catastrophes.

Our Lord who taught us the Lord's Prayer, includes in it a promise that accompanies a request "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." This has a broader meaning. Our prayer should be accompanied by a corresponding sacrifice, mainly a sacrifice of selfish and arrogant pursuits, which demonstrate our insolent attitude towards the Creator and His wisely stipulated natural and spiritual laws. This attitude change is called repentance. Only if our prayer for the protection of the environment is accompanied by a corresponding repentance, will it be effective and welcomed by God.

Therefore, beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord, let us reconsider our lives and let us repent for everything we do mistakenly and against the wise laws of God, in order to be heard by Him, begging His kindness to maintain the natural environment, friendly and undamaged for humankind.

HAH, The Phanar, September 1, 2003

Q

What is repentance?

How does it address our habitual behavior that involves earth and society?

What happens to our behavior after we repent? Where does repentance lead?

Reflection

Reuniting the Universe Under Jesus Christ

Cosmology is a form of knowledge which is given to us in Christ by the Holy Spirit. “The mystery of the Incarnation of the Word,” wrote St. Maximus the Confessor, “contains within itself the whole meaning of the created world. He who understands the mystery of the Cross and the Tomb knows the meaning of all things, and he who is initiated into the hidden meaning of the Resurrection understands the purpose for which God created everything from the very beginning.”

If this is so, it means that everything has been created by and for the Word, as the Apostle says (Colossians 1:16-17), and that the meaning of this creation is revealed to us in the re-creation effected by the same Word taking flesh, by the Son of God becoming the son of the earth...

In this perspective the Fathers maintain that the historical Bible gives us the key to the cosmic Bible. In this they are faithful to the Hebrew notion of the Word, which not only speaks, but creates: God is “true” in the sense that his word is the source of all reality, not only historical, but also cosmic reality... That is why, as St. Maximos says, we discover, or rather the Gospel discovers for us, that on the one hand, the Word “hides himself mysteriously in created things like so many letters,” and on the other hand, “he... expresses himself in the letters, symbols and sounds of Scripture.”

HB Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch, Zurich, Switzerland, March 10, 1989

Q

What is Christian cosmology?

What is the ‘Logos,’ referring to what HB calls the Incarnation of the Word?

How does this relate to the created world?

Reflection

For the Sanctification of the World

The Church of Christ has had to cope with many problems which are prominent in our contemporary world. The crisis facing ecology is one such problem that has grave moral implications for all humankind.

Orthodoxy watches with great anxiety the merciless trampling down and destruction of the natural environment caused by human beings with extremely dangerous consequences for the very survival of the natural world created by God.

In view of the present situation the Church of Christ cannot remain unmoved.... The role of humanity as the priest of creation is clearly shown in liturgical theology. We are able to reshape and alter the world.

The vocation of humanity, as shown in liturgical theology, is not to dominate and exploit nature, but to transfigure and hallow it. In a variety of ways - through the cultivation of the earth, through craftsmanship, through the writing of books and the painting of icons - humanity gives material things a voice and renders the creation articulate in praise of God.

We must attempt to return to the proper relationship with the Creator and creation in order to ensure the survival of the natural world. We are called to bear some of the pain of creation as well as to enjoy and celebrate it. That means to perform Liturgia *extra muros*, the Liturgy beyond, or outside, the walls of the church, for the sanctification of the world.

HG Bishop Irineu [Pop], Romanian Orthodox Church, Iraklion, Crete, 1991

Q

Why is the Orthodox Church concerned about ecological problems?

How is the world sanctified?

What is the role of priests and parishioners in this task?

Reflection

A Spirituality of Thanksgiving

In order to achieve a sacramental vision of creation, human beings are called to practice a spirituality of thanksgiving and self-discipline. In theological terms, we are called to be “eucharistic” and “ascetic” beings.

In this way, the Orthodox Church reminds us that creation is not simply our possession or property, but rather a gift from God, the Creator, a gift of wonder and beauty. From the moment of creation, this world was offered by God as a gift to be returned in gratitude and love.

This is precisely how the Orthodox spiritual way avoids the problem of the world’s domination by humanity. For if this world is a sacred mystery, then this in itself precludes any attempt at mastery by human beings. Indeed, the mastery or exploitative control of the world’s resources is identified more with Adam’s “original sin” than with God’s wonderful gift. It is the result of selfishness and greed, which arise from alienation from God and an abandonment of the sacramental worldview. Sin separated the sacred from the secular, dismissing the latter to the domain of evil and surrendering it as prey to exploitation.

HAH, Moscow, May 26, 2010

Q

What is the purpose of being thankful?

Why is it that the earth is never entirely one’s own private property?

How do Orthodox reconcile secular laws about private property with our theology?

Reflection

Responsibility for Future Generations

We should hand [the material world] ... on to the generations that come after us... enhanced and with greater capacity for supporting life.

- His Beatitude Patriarch +Maxim, Bulgarian Orth. Church, 1997

In the years ahead, more and more of our Orthodox faithful will recognize the importance of a crusade for our environment, which we have so selfishly ignored.

This vision... will benefit future generation by leaving behind a cleaner, better world. We owe it to our Creator. And we owe it to our children.

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Day of Prayers for Creation, 2004

Q

Why should we today assume responsibility for future generations?

What is different in the world today from the world of the past?

What does this responsibility mean in practical terms?

Reflection

The Whole World is a Living Sacrament

Everything that lives and breathes is sacred and beautiful in the eyes of God. The whole world is a sacrament. The entire created cosmos is a burning bush of God's uncreated energies. And humankind stands as a priest before the altar of creation, as microcosm and mediator. Such is the true nature of things, or, as an Orthodox hymn describes it, "the truth of things," if only we have the eyes of faith to see it.

We know that this vision has been blurred; the image has been marred by our sin. For we have presumed to control the order of things, and have therefore destroyed the hierarchy of creation. We have lost the dimension of beauty and have come to a spiritual impasse where everything that we touch is invariably distorted or even destroyed.

Nevertheless, through the divine Incarnation our sight is once again restored and we are once more enabled to discern the beauty of Christ's countenance "in all places of His dominion," and "in the least of our brothers and sisters" (Gen. 25:40).

HAH, Santa Barbara, California, November 8, 1997

Q

What is beauty?

Why does HAH call the world "a living sacrament"?

If the divine vision of creation is blurred, what is human responsibility for this?

Reflection

An Ecological Ethic is Necessary for Christians

There certainly is an Orthodox Christian ecological ethic. It is an ethic that is not an option for Orthodox faithful. It is not a mere theological “specialty” for those who have academic and professional reasons to be interested. The Orthodox ecological ethic proceeds directly from our doctrine.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem said, “the method of godliness consists of two things – pious doctrines and virtuous practice.” Without any doubt, virtuous practice demands right attitude and action toward the environment, for our Holy Tradition demands nothing else.

As such, the Orthodox Christian ecological ethic is ecclesial: it proceeds from our life in the Church, the Body of Christ ... and it is ultimately comprehensible only within the context of the Church. Here is where the main distinctions exist between our *ecclesial* ethic and the ecological ethics we find in secular society.

HE Metropolitan Nicholas of Amisso, Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Church,
Antiochian Village, June 15, 2002

Q

What is our Orthodox ecological ethic? How would you summarize it?

What is the Orthodox doctrine of creation?

What sort of lifestyle should emerge from our Orthodox theology?

Reflection

An Ethic of the Environment

We have reached a point in technological development where we must learn to say “No!” to technologies with destructive side effects. We are in dire need of an ethic of technology.

In the Orthodox Church, we profess and confess that God’s spirit is “everywhere present and fills all things” (From a Prayer to the Holy Spirit). However, we must also begin to embrace a worldview that declares and demonstrates the biblical conviction that “the earth is God’s and everything in it” (Psalm 23.1), so that we may refrain from harming the earth or destroying the life on it. We have been gifted with unique resources of a beautiful planet. However, these resources of underground carbon are not unlimited—whether they are the oil of the Arctic or the tar sands of Canada, whether they are the coal of Australia or the gas in Eastern Europe.

Moreover, with regard to nuclear energy specifically, we cannot assess success or sustainability purely in terms of financial profit—the disasters at Three Mile Island (1979), Chernobyl (1986), and Fukushima (2011) have amply demonstrated the human, financial, and ecological cost. Nor, indeed, can we ignore the other problems of nuclear power, such as waste disposal and vulnerability to terrorist attacks.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, April 26, 2016

Q

What is an ethic of the environment?

What is the ethic and message in this passage?

How might this ethic be applied?

Reflection

Our First Task

We paternally urge all the faithful of the world to admonish themselves and their children to respect and protect the natural environment.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch +Dimitrios, September 1, 1989

Our first task is to raise the consciousness of adults who most use the resources of the planet. Ultimately, it is for our children that we must perceive our every action... as having a direct effect on the future of the environment....

As individuals, we live not only in vertical relationships to God, and horizontal relationships to one another, but also in a complex web of relationships that extend throughout our lives, our cultures and the material world. Human beings and the environment form a seamless garment of existence; a complex fabric that we believe is fashioned by God....

In the bread and wine of the Eucharist, as priests standing before the altar of the world, we offer the creation back to the Creator in relationship to Him and to each other. Indeed, in our liturgical life..., we celebrate the beauty of creation, and consecrate the life of the world, returning it to God with thanks. We share the world in joy as a living mystical communion with the Divine. Thus it is that we offer the fullness of creation at the Eucharist, and receive it back as a blessing, as the living presence of God. ...

We are called to work in humble harmony with creation and not in arrogant supremacy against it.... We lovingly suggest to all the people... that they help one another understand the myriad ways in which we are related to the earth and to one another. In this way, we may begin to repair the dislocation many people experience in relation to creation.

HAH, Santa Barbara, California, Nov 8, 1997

Q

How do we work in humble harmony with creation?

In what ways can you help others understand how we are to relate to the earth?

Why do you think our first task is to raise the awareness of adults?

Reflection

Man: A Curse or a Blessing on God's Creation?

How should Orthodox view the environment? Is it a great reservoir of untapped riches, waiting to be exploited for profit? Or is it an untouchable sanctuary, where nothing should be used? Should we view the environment as a living, almost divine being? Or is the environment God's Creation, where man is set with a profound, symbiotic relationship, and a definite, holy purpose?

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of creation as a foundational concept. It means that we must accept the reality of every creature as *meaningful*.

Nothing exists as a chance encounter. Each creature is created by God to exist, conceptualized from eternity and realized in time. God alone gives meaning to His Creation. In our Orthodox ecological ethic, we insist that man adopt a humbler, more honest and scientific outlook, in which he seeks to discern meaning in Creation.

HE Metropolitan Nicholas of Amisso, Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Church,
Antiochian Village, June 15, 2002

Q

What is the Orthodox vision of creation?

How important is our understanding of creation in Orthodox theology?

What is the role of humility in our Orthodox worldview?

Reflection

Every Person a Priest of God's Creation

In the Orthodox Church, behind whose tradition lie long battles against ancient Greco-Roman paganism, a spirituality involving a deep respect for nature is strongly conditioned by the view that nature acquires sacredness only in and through the human person.

This gives humanity decisive importance and responsibility. A human is the Priest of creation as he or she freely turns it into a vehicle of communion with God and fellow human beings. This means that material creation is not treated as a means of obtaining pleasure and happiness for the individual, but as a sacred gift from God which is meant to foster and promote communion with God and with others.

Such a 'liturgical' use of nature by human beings leads to forms of culture which are deeply respectful of the material world while keeping the human person at the center.

HE Metropolitan John of Pergamon, "Production and Consumption," April, 1996

Q

Why do Orthodox Christians respect nature?

How is the human person a Priest of Creation? In practice what does this mean?

How may creation serve as a means of communion with God?

Reflection

The Care of Creation is Our Spiritual Task

The human is on Earth, not as a stranger who came to receive a monetary profit, but as a careful owner who cultivates the earth for future generations and takes care not only of his own profit, but also of the good of his neighbors and those far off.

Moreover, the care and protection of the Creation of God in all its beauty and harmony is not only our practical task, but also a spiritual and religious duty, a fulfillment of the commandment of God and a trail of moral feeling.

The Black Sea region has suffered from many sad consequences through an unreasonable selfish use of nature and this has been especially dramatic in our century.

Today we must understand the need to work together for the transfiguration of this wonderful piece of land, for the improvement of the condition of the Black Sea, the pearl of our planet....

HB Patriarch + Alexiy of Moscow and All Russia,
Yalta, Crimea, September 24, 1997

Q

How is the care for creation our spiritual task on earth?

What is necessary for a right caring of the earth?

How do we correct wrong habits from the past?

Reflection

Programs of Practical Action are Needed

Our attention must be given to developing programs of practical application.

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 1994

Tree-planting initiatives must be undertaken.... Groups of students can cultivate gardens, while others can care and tend to forest regions. Along with lectures, seminars should be organized intended on enlightening students concerning planting procedures, gardening and similar activities. Groups of children in secular, parochial and catechetical schools may adopt vegetable or flower gardens, forested regions, church compounds, abandoned properties, farm regions cultivated for the common good, or areas with natural beauty which they will care for on a voluntary basis. Their example can sensitize their parents and elders who can then be motivated to do likewise.

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 1994

Let us begin here and now to plant trees, both material and noetic, which will perhaps require many decades before they grow to full maturity – trees beneath whose shelter in the future, not only we, but also our children, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, will be able to sit with security and eucharistic joy.

- HE Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, 2002

Q

Why should the faithful plant trees?

What are some practical activities that you might recommend for action?

How is care of creation best taught through practical programs?

Reflection

Sin Against the Environment

The ecological crisis is a spiritual problem. The proper relationship between humanity and the earth or its natural environment has been broken with the Fall both outwardly and within us, and this rupture is sin. The Church must now introduce in its teaching about sin the sin against the environment, the ecological sin. Repentance must be extended to cover also the damage we do to nature both as individuals and as societies. This must be brought to the conscience of every Christian who cares for his or her salvation.

The rupture of the proper relationship between humanity and nature is due to the rise of individualism in our culture. The pursuit of individual happiness has been made into an ideal in our time. Ecological sin is due to human greed which blinds men and women to the point of ignoring and disregarding the basic truth that the happiness of the individual depends on its relationship with the rest of human beings. There is a social dimension in ecology which the Encyclical [Laudato Si!] brings out with clarity. The ecological crisis goes hand in hand with the spread of social injustice. We cannot face successfully the one without dealing with the other.

Ecological sin is a sin not only against God, but also against our neighbor. And it is a sin not only against the other of our own time but also – and this is serious – against future generations. By destroying our planet in order to satisfy our greed for happiness, we bequeath to future generations a world damaged beyond repair with all the negative consequences that this will have for their lives. We must act, therefore, responsibly towards our children and those who will succeed us in this life.

HE Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, June 18, 2015

Q

What is individualism?

What is environmental sin? Can you name some examples?

Why should Christians care about the future?

Reflections

Love God's Creation

Regard yourselves as being responsible before God for every creature and treat every thing with love and care.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch +Dimitrios, 1990

The Orthodox Church proposes two central concepts, namely compassion and community. An essential element of caretaking is compassion, which is the very experience and expression of caretaking. To be cared for by God and to care for God's creation entail showing compassion for every living being and for every living thing. "A compassionate heart," writes a seventh-century mystic, St. Isaac the Syrian, "Burns with love for the whole of creation – for human beings, for birds and beasts, for all of God's creatures."

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, June 30, 2004

Let us proceed with much love toward the natural world that surrounds us...
In the end, people protect only that which they truly love.

HB Archbishop Anastasios, Albanian Orthodox Church, 2002

Q

Why should we treat everything with 'love and care'?

How does one acquire a compassionate heart? What inhibits the heart?

What benefits derive from a loving heart?

Reflection

Our Spiritual and Religious Duty

The human being is on earth, not as a stranger who came to receive a monetary profit, but as a careful owner who cultivates the earth for future generations and takes care not only of his own profit, but also of the good of his neighbors and those far off.

Moreover, the care of protecting the Creation of God in all its beauty and harmony is not only our practical task but also a spiritual and religious duty, a fulfillment of the commandment of God and a trail of moral feeling.

The Black Sea region has suffered from many sad consequences of an unreasonable selfish use of nature and this has been especially dramatic in our century.

Today we must understand the need to work together for the transfiguration of this wonderful piece of land, for the improvement of the condition of the Black Sea, the pearl of our planet....

HB Patriarch +Alexey II, Russian Orthodox Church, Yalta, Russia, September 24, 1997

Q

What is our human purpose on earth?

How do we achieve success in our sojourn on earth?

What does the Orthodox Church say is our spiritual and religious duty?

Reflection

Proceed into Stronger and More Effective Actions

We wish to add one simple observation which is already known to everyone, namely that the destructive deterioration of the environment is taking on multiple and threatening dimensions. Therefore, we must not be content with verbal protests, but instead we proceed to continuously stronger and more effective actions, each from their own part and position. For, pollution is dangerously spreading and rapidly increasing.

Indeed, quite possibly, and God forbid, according to the calculations of the experts, quite probably, pollution will become impossible to control. We cannot remain idle.

May the enlightenment of the Paraclete always shine in your steps and in your actions within the course of your research and study, for your own benefit and for that of all your fellow human beings and the whole natural world.

HAH, The First International Symposium,
Island of Patmos, September 22, 1995

Q

Why does pollution of God's creation continue to spread?

What is our responsibility to address this social form of sin?

Why are we spiritually and morally responsible for this development?

Reflection

A Moral and Spiritual Perspective

Environmental protection is a profoundly moral and spiritual problem that concerns us all. The initial and crucial response to the environmental crisis is for each of us to bear personal responsibility for the way we live and for the values that we treasure and the priorities that we pursue. To persist in the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly. It is a sin against God and creation.

HAH, Ecum Patriarch Bartholomew, Manaus, Brazil, July 16, 2006

The care of protecting the Creation of God in all its beauty and harmony is not only our practical task but also a spiritual and religious duty, a fulfillment of the commandment of God and a trail of moral feeling.

Today we must understand the need to work together for the transfiguration of this wonderful piece of land, for the improvement of the condition of the Black Sea, the pearl of our planet....

HB Patriarch +ALEXEY II, Russian Orth. Church
Yalta, Crimea, September 24, 1997

Theological reflection on anthropology and cosmology is even more important now because the problems of man and the environment with which we are confronted, are increasingly taking on a global dimension.

In the Church of Antioch, we currently experience these particular problems in a very urgent manner... Following the example of St. Maximos the Confessor, the prophet of the relationship between man and the cosmos, and the defender of the full humanity of the Word, we persist in proclaiming and living the love of Christ, which is capable of transforming every human endeavor. We do so within the effervescence of the Arabic and Islamic world, in spite of many wounds which have not yet healed.

HB Patriarch +Ignatius IV of Antioch, September 8, 2012

Q

Why should Christians care for the earth and its future?

How do we accomplish this?

What is our goal in this activity?

Reflections

Excess Consumption as a Cause of Climate Change

Global Climate Change has been on the Eastern Orthodox Christian agenda for over twenty five years. In 1989 Ecumenical Patriarch +Dimitrios began to raise the alarm when he observed “scientists... warn us of the danger of the phenomena of the greenhouse whose first indications have already been noted....”

In a letter to the 2013 Warsaw Climate Summit, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew brought a further cause of climate change into focus: “Excess consumption.” Humanity’s reckless consumption of earth’s resources threatens us with irreversible climate change. Burning more fuel than we need, we contribute to droughts or floods thousands of miles away.

To restore the planet we need a spiritual worldview which cultivates frugality and simplicity, humility and respect. We must constantly be aware of the impact of our actions on creation. We must direct our focus away from what we want to what the planet needs. We must care for creation. Otherwise, we do not really care about anything at all.

In our efforts to contain global warming, we are demonstrating how prepared we are to sacrifice our selfish and greedy lifestyles. When will we learn to say: “Enough!”? When will we understand how important it is to leave as light a footprint as possible for the sake of future generations?

HE Archbishop Seraphim of Zimbabwe, Patriarchate
of Alexandria and All Africa, June 18, 2014

Q

Why is excess consumption harmful to the world?

What is required to restrain consumption?

What is our individual responsibility in restraining consumption?

Reflection

A Good God Gives Us a Good World

The world was created “very good” in order to serve the mind of God and the life of humanity. However, it does not replace God; it cannot be worshiped in the place of God; it cannot offer more than God appointed it to offer. The Orthodox Church prays that God may bless this creation in order to offer seasonable weather and an abundance of fruits from the earth. It prays that God may free the earth from earthquakes, floods, fires, and every other harm.

In recent times, it has also offered supplications to God for the protection of the world from destruction caused by humanity itself, such as pollution, war, over exploitation, exhaustion of waters, changes in environmental conditions, devastation, and stagnation.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate does not however rely only on supplication to God to improve the situation. Starting from God, as it is always proper to do, the Ecumenical Patriarchate works intensely in every possible way to alert everyone to the fact that the greed of our generation constitutes a sin. This greed leads to the deprivation of our children’s generation, in spite of our desire to bequeath to them a better future.

HAH, Kathmandu, Nepal, November 15, 2000

Q

In what ways can we see and know that the world is good?

Why do people corrupt and pollute the world?

What is the solution to our human tendency to corrupt and pollute the world?

Reflection

The Earth Is the Lord's and the Fullness Thereof (Part One)

During the Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, there developed a notion and then a theology of man's dominance over and ownership of the earth. Even the creation narrative was re-interpreted as giving man a purely utilitarian ownership of the earth.

While this desire to dominate the earth predates these two extraordinary developments in human society, it had previously been necessary only to accommodate oneself to a certain amount of self-control, such as irrigation. It was these two events, one on the level of the mind and the other on the level of our action, that made it possible for us to carry out such domination.

Nevertheless, in the [Mosaic] Law we are taught that all the land belonged to God and that portions were divided among the tribes to be held in trust and used for their needs. And as the embodiment of their responsibility to cultivate an ability to respond, like the Lord, with care, God even went so far as to give a sabbath to the land, so that it might be rested and resuscitated. From this it is clear that God cares for the earth and desires that it be sustained. It is equally clear that the earth does not belong to us, rather we belong to it. Not only are we an integral part of the ecosystem, but at the end of our lives the earth will reclaim us and return us to her bosom.

God made us from the dust of the earth and He also breathed into us the spirit of life. We are, therefore, both of heaven and of earth. In a manner of speaking, we share in the image of the two natures of Jesus Christ, and so are invited to cultivate the sanctification of our incarnate way of being.

HE Archbishop LAZAR, Serbian Orthodox Archdiocese of Canada,
Carlton University, Ottawa, Ontario, July 18, 2007

Q

How do you think we acquired a utilitarian view of the world?

What is the purpose of the call to take dominion of the earth?

How might we participate in sustaining the earth?

Reflection

The Earth Is the Lord's and the Fullness Thereof (Part Two)

The Apostle Paul tells us that all of creation fell together with man, and that it has been redeemed together with man....

The purpose of man is not simply to worship God, but to serve as a point of unity for all that exists. Man alone consists in the spiritual, the material and the intellectual, and he is therefore a microcosm of the whole universe, both the visible and the invisible. We have the capacity through our worship to serve creation as God loves creation. “Ortho-doxa” is more than “right worship”; it also indicates the correct understanding of worship. Such ortho-doxa, or right worship with a correct understanding, makes it possible for us to serve creation with blessing and healing.

There is no relationship with our Lord and Saviour where there is not blessing.... There is no cultivation, but only a stripping away (a kind of spiritual strip mining), no healing but only harm. Man should have fulfilled this vocation as a unifying element in nature, for he is not only its crown, but also the microcosm of creation. This vocation could only be fulfilled through unselfish love and the absence of egotism. This would have constituted a proper use of his energies.

The fall constitutes a proclivity to habitually misuse our energies, not the loss of them. Christ healed this misuse through His perfect humanity, in whom perfect human nature is expressed, making unity with God and the cosmos again possible for human beings – a unity which Christ realized for us in His perfect humanity with complete divinity. Human nature, restored in Him, now has the ability to make proper use of its energies. This proper use is manifested in the Church, His Body, even if Church members often fall short of it.

Understanding this is necessary for us to understand the complexities of the Incarnation of God. Jesus Christ as Incarnate Word recapitulated our nature and became the new Adam in order to correct our failures, complete our calling, fulfil our purpose and therefore deliver not only us, but the whole cosmos from bondage to corruption.

HE Archbishop LAZAR, Serbian Orthodox Archdiocese of Canada,
Carlton University, Ottawa, Ontario, July 18, 2007

Q

How much can you identify that humans lost because of the Fall?

What in the concept of Ortho-doxa allows us to serve creation?

How might we restore a right use of our human energies?

Reflection

The Earth Is the Lord's and the Fullness Thereof (Part Three)

In the beginning – in the creation – man fit into the ecosystem in perfect balance. Had he truly acquired the knowledge of good and evil as a gift from God in the fullness of time, he could have maintained that balance. However, having accepted from Satan a counterfeit of that knowledge, man's relationship with the cosmos became counterfeit.

The fact that the human race has come so close to destroying the ecosystem upon which its life depends makes it clear that humanity has misunderstood not only its own Being, but its relationship with the earth, with the universe, with God, and even with itself. These misunderstandings, not forming ourselves on that which is foundational to creation – the Creator's love and affection – always come hand in hand. We misunderstand both our own being and creation, including the whole of the universe and God, in one and the same act. This set of misunderstandings, born of self-centered egotism, is a major aspect of what Christ came to earth to heal.

It is important to remember that self-centered egotism is not something most people are able to see and understand about themselves, but it is deeply embedded in their whole way of putting their understanding of the world together. It is a fundamental misrepresentation of self, world and God and the only way we can untie this knot is by coming to know how it began and shedding the light of Christ on this unconscious orientation...

HE Archbishop LAZAR, Serbian Orthodox Archdiocese of Canada,
Carlton University, Ottawa, Ontario, July 18, 2007

Q

How much can you name of what humans lost because of the Fall?

What in the concept of Orthodoxy causes us to serve creation?

What does it take to restore a right use of our human energies?

Reflection

The Earth Is the Lord's and the Fullness Thereof (Part Four)

“Thou shalt love [cherish and nourish] thy neighbor as thyself” ... and he, wishing to justify himself, replied, “and who is my neighbor?”

This is the second half of Christ's great “moral imperative.” It is often described as a “command,” but I would like to think of it as the truest form of morality. What is shocking to me is that so many people, many of them in positions of political and economic power, so callously disregard the welfare of their own children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, in their reticence to make a little lower profits or adjust our over-heated lifestyle, our so called “standard of living.” Yet, surely, our own children and grandchildren are our neighbors.

Even if we turned to a radical ecologically sound lifestyle today, we would still leave the next several generations with a depleted agriculture, an insufficient supply of fresh water and large areas of formerly food producing land in a state of desiccation and ruin. The earth came to us as a sacred trust, and we will pass it on in such a condition. As a whole, our generation will not respond to the current crises in an appropriate manner because our entire socio-economic structure is based on harsh competition for short term profits. Our current “standard of living” in North America is based on a self-centered and egoistic measure. It does not reflect the lifestyle of the lower middle class and the poor, but that of the upper income levels in Canada and America.

We ask what can we few Orthodox Christians do in the face of such huge problems. Aside from our prayers and our struggle for salvation, we can offer spiritual and social leadership in a sound process of education and action which is based in Scripture and the moral imperative of Jesus Christ, rather than the dreamy new-age romanticism that has dominated much of the ecology movement.... Glory to Jesus Christ!

HE Archbishop LAZAR, Serbian Orthodox Archdiocese of Canada,
Carlton University, Ottawa, Ontario, July 18, 2007

Q

Who may we count as our neighbor?

What is deficient in the secular ecological vision?

What can single individuals do to be part of the solution to ecological problems?

Reflection

A Universal Human Responsibility

In our time, more than ever before, there is an undeniable obligation for all to understand that environmental concern for our planet does not comprise a romantic notion of the few. The ecological crisis, and particularly the reality of climate change, constitutes the greatest threat for every form of life in our world. Moreover, there is an immediate correlation between protection of the environment and every expression of economic and social life.

For our Orthodox Church, the protection of the environment as God's creation is the supreme responsibility of human beings, quite apart from any material or other financial benefits that it may bring. The almighty God bequeathed this "very beautiful" world (Gen. 1.26) to humanity together with the commandment to "serve and preserve" it....

According to the theological understanding of the Orthodox Christian Church, the natural environment is part of Creation and is characterized by sacredness.... Thus we call everyone to a more acute sense of vigilance for the preservation of nature and all creation.

HAH Ecum. Patriarch Bartholomew, The Phanar, June 5, 2009

In our [Bulgarian] community the harmful exploitation of nature, the creation of God, is no longer tolerated. It is incumbent on us to use the material world which God has entrusted to us in a beneficial way [and] not to exploit it mercilessly. We should hand it on to the generations that come after us, not as a wasteland, but enhanced and with a greater capacity for supporting life.

HB PATRIARCH + MAXIM, Primate, Bulgarian Orth. Church
Varna, Bulgaria, September 26, 1997

Q

Why should humans should take good care of the earth?

How do we develop a vigilance for the preservation of nature?

What are some specific ways that we can do this?

Reflection

The Meaning of Christian Asceticism

Asceticism has been associated with a devaluation of matter for the sake of 'higher' and more 'spiritual' things. This implies a Platonic view of matter and the body, which is not compatible with the Christian tradition.... Such types of asceticism, involving a devaluation or contempt of the material world, aggravates instead of solves the ecological crisis.

An 'ecological asceticism' begins with deep respect for the material creation, including the human body. It builds upon the view that we are not possessors of creation, but are called to turn it into a vehicle of communion, always respecting its possibilities and limitations.

Human beings must realize that natural resources are not unlimited. Creation is finite and so are the resources that nature can provide. The consumerist philosophy seems to ignore this truth. We encourage growth and consumption by making 'necessary' things which previous generations could easily live without. We need to reconsider our concept of quality of life. Quality does not need quantity to exist. A restriction in our use of natural resources can lead to a life that is happier than the endless competition of spending and acquiring more and more. Qualitative growth must replace the prevailing conception of economic development.... Asceticism must become synonymous with qualitative instead of quantitative progress in society.

All this would involve major redefinitions in political, economic and social institutions. Such a reorientation of our culture requires the involvement and cooperation of all the factors responsible for forming it. It would require a change in people's deeper convictions and motivations, since no human being can sacrifice anything without a reason or motive.

HE Metropolitan John of Pergamon, "Production and Consumption, April, 1996

Q

What is Christian asceticism? Can you explain it?

Why is ascesis beneficial and preferable to the consumerist way of life?

What is the example that we receive from the life of Jesus Christ?

Reflection

The Great Challenge of Our Generation

As Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has written: “Climate change affects everyone. Unless we take radical and immediate measures to reduce emissions stemming from unsustainable excesses in the demands of our lifestyle, the impact will be both immediate and alarming.”

Therefore, each parish and every individual should seek out ways of practicing prayer and care for God’s creation by applying the fundamental principles of scripture, theology and tradition with regard to our relationship with the natural environment by considering changes in our attitudes and habits with regard to food and travel, by reducing consumption of fossil fuels and choosing alternative sources of energy with regard to lighting and heating, as well as by raising and promoting awareness with regard to the divine gifts of water and air.

Every parish and community is invited and encouraged to open a fruitful dialogue on this challenge of our generation.

HE Archbishop Elpidophorus, Protocol No. 22/19, September 1, 2019

Q

What is global climate change?

Why is climate change a significant issue for Orthodox Christians?

How might members of a parish address climate change?

Reflection

Program Announcements

The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration is offering a series of tools and programs to help you and those in your to parish develop awareness of creation care in your parish and in members.

The Face of God film: An Orthodox film on theology and climate change.

If you would like a showing of this film in your parish, please send a note to our office. This should be ready for viewing by late Spring.

Send an e-mail to: Fred@Ecostewards.org

Books

The Greening of the Orthodox Parish

This is a comprehensive guide that provides vision, commentary from the saints, and recommendations for what parishes and individuals can do to fulfill our Orthodox obligation to care for God's good earth.

Transfiguring the World: Orthodox Patriarchs and Hierarchs

The Orthodox patriarchs and bishops have been eloquent in articulating a healing ethic of the environment. Study of their writings provides an education on the vision...

Programs

Christ in the Wilderness

Watch for program announcement for this summer by late April.

This 2020 Reading-a-day program

Available by e-mail at no charge, or in hard copy form by U.S. Mail.

Websites

www.Orth-Transfiguration.org

<https://www.facebook.com/christinthewildernessprogram/>

<https://faceofgodfilm.com/>

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