



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

A Daily Reading Program on the Christian Theology of Creation

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

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

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Introduction

This June edition celebrates the season of Pentecost. This is the time when we place attention on the descent of the Holy Spirit. As Orthodox Christians we prepare to receive the Holy Spirit in ways that resemble what was required of the original Apostles. We follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, we strive to purify ourselves by prayer and fasting, and we seek to do God's will on earth as it is already done in heaven. And we submit to our circumstances and seek integrity in all aspects of our lives.

In this year 2020 we face situations that require us to find “new wine from old wineskins,” to use the metaphor that Jesus uses in the Gospels. In this 21st century we encounter new conditions never mentioned in Scripture. We have communications that instantly circumscribe the world. We may converse with people in any corner of the world. For the first time in Christian history we possess global consciousness. We can learn of events in Africa, Asia, Europe or the Americas all in one news program.

Technology allows us to do things people never before could do. We can travel quickly to distant locations. We can learn of science, the human body or ancient history like never before. We can split the atom and unleash previously unimaginable power. But with these advances, we become caught up in so many possibilities that we easily forget God. In this forgetfulness, we fail to treat the fabric of creation with respect and holy regard even though our vision emphasizes that we are in God and all creation has a sacred dimension. Thus we unwittingly accept pollution and the degradation of God's world. We may do this with such regularity that we ignore the harm we cause by our use of fossil fuels which pollute the air, or we use plastic convenience containers which cause the degradation of the oceans, or we employ toxic substances such as pesticides that contribute to the poisoning of the food chain. We forget that pollution of the planet, meaning God's world, is a sin. We are forgetful because we rationalize away these actions away by presuming that everyone else does it too.

Now we face a polluted world and the possibility of the suicide of humanity as we drown in the wastes and debris of our lives. Yet the voice of the Orthodox patriarchs and bishops calls out to cease and desist from all of these sinful habits.

Because this is the month of the descent of the Holy Spirit, let us restore an awareness of the difference between right and wrong in our modern context. Let us hear the guidance of our spiritual leaders and, unlike the people of Prophet Noah's time, let us hear the voice of God calling to us and respond to the prophetic words of our time. They seek to guide us into obedience to God and Jesus Christ. Among the great issues of our day is global climate change. The guidance from our leaders is strong, but our hearing is weak. For many it negligible. May these readings help to correct this willful ignorance.

Yours in Christ's service,

The Reading-a-Day Editorial Team
LM - MR - ER - FK

Facing the Challenge of Technology

If nature is not transfigured, she becomes disfigured. Today we are threatened by a barbarism... of all humanity. By barbarism I mean the sense which the French philosopher Michel Henry gives to this term, the transformation of technology into “destiny,” which is the same sense that destiny had for the ancient Greeks, an inevitable, death-like fatality. The fatality lies in doing everything that we are capable of doing without first questioning the consequences....

We are beginning to realize that the suicide of humanity is a possibility, what with Chernobyl and the determination of the great financial organizations to destroy the forests of the Amazon.

Only the highest of forces, that of the spirit united with the heart... can face up to the challenge of technology. Asceticism is necessary in order to fight against the instinct of possession, of blind power and a flight into hedonism....

Asceticism therefore is indispensable if we are to achieve that limitation of desires which will make it possible for us both to better respect the earth, its rhythm, and the life which belongs to it, and to bring into practice the necessary sharing on a planetary scale....

His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV, Antiochian Orthodox Church,
Address before the Catholic Bishops Conference of Switzerland,
Lucerne, Switzerland, March 12, 1989

Q

Why must nature be transfigured? What is the alternative?

How does asceticism relate to the challenge of technology?

What must we do to address the limitation of consumeristic desires?

Reflection

Climate Change: A Profoundly Moral Problem

Religious leaders throughout the world recognize that climate change is much more than an issue of environmental preservation. Insofar as human-induced, it is a profoundly moral and spiritual problem.

To persist in the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly. It is no less than suicidal, jeopardizing the diversity of the very earth that we inhabit, enjoy and share. It has rightly been described on several occasions by His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew as a sin against God and creation. After all, a handful of affluent nations account for two thirds of global GDP and half of all global carbon dioxide emissions.

Ecological degradation also constitutes a matter of social and economic justice. For those who will most directly and severely be affected by climate change will be the poorer and more vulnerable nations (what Christian Scriptures refer to as our "neighbor") as well as the younger and future generations (the world of our children, and of our children's children). Those of us living in more affluent nations either consume or else corrupt far too much of the earth's resources.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Aichi, Japan,
September 20, 2005

Q

Why does the Church consider climate change a moral and spiritual problem?

What makes climate change a serious danger to future generations?

Why is a desire to continue on the present path an immoral and sinful attitude?

Reflection

Urban Blight and Decay

I was once asked, “Our Earth is not becoming any cleaner. How should we deal with this?”

This problem has two causes. First, it is due to people’s worldview; and second, it is due to our personal household culture. I remember a situation in the 1990s, when I was speaking at a neighborhood center in the Kaliningrad region. It was a difficult time and decay, collapse, and ruin filled many cities. The community hall where I would speak was filled to capacity.

We had been walking past buildings covered with graffiti and sidewalks littered with broken glass. I came into this hall and the first thing after some remarks was criticism of the mayor for the decay and ruin. I listened as the criticism increased in anger. Then I stopped the comments. “I saw all this. I did not go into the apartments, but I suspect they are in even worse condition. I suspect there is mess in the kitchens, unwashed dishes, and old shoe boxes in the closets. I think the beds are not made and the ashtrays are filled with cigarette butts. Who is to blame? You might say that the mayor is guilty, but the mayor did not paint them. He did not break the windows and glass. You require that the mayor correct all this, but it is you who made this mess.”

Sin destroys the person. This isn’t our invention, this is what God said. He created man in such a way that sin destroys the human person. Where there is sin, there is death. This is stated in the word of God.

What is death? Death is the disintegration of the human person, it is the collapse of life, even the end of life. Thus, if sin is imposed by force of law, by the power of government or propaganda, then life is in danger. Personhood loses integrity. It means the destruction of social cohesion and the vitality of civilization. What is the end of the world? The end of the world is the state of society in which evil becomes greater than good.

HB Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia,
as reported on Rossiya television,
Kaliningrad, Russia, January 7, 2014

Q

Can you examine the effects of sin on people and the environment?

What is necessary to heal this condition?

Do you have conditions of this sort in your community? How can you address it?

Reflection

Love the Trees

On the Holy Mountain of Athos, the monks sometimes put up beside the forest paths special signposts, offering encouragement or warning to the pilgrims. One such notice used to give me particular pleasure. Its message was *"Love the trees."*

Fr. Amphilochios, the "elder" on the Island of Patmos when I first stayed there, would have been in full agreement. "Do you know," he said, "that God gave us one more commandment, which is not recorded in Scripture? It is the commandment "love the trees." Whoever does not love trees, so he believed, does not love God. " When you plant a tree," he insisted, "you plant hope, you plant peace, you plant love, and you will receive God's blessing."

An ecologist long before ecology had become fashionable, when hearing confessions of the local farmers he used to assign to them a penance, the task of planting a tree. During the long summer drought, he himself went round the island watering the young trees. His example and influence transformed Patmos: Photographs of the hillside near the Cave of the Apocalypse, taken at the start of the twentieth century, show bare and barren slopes, where today there is a thick and flourishing wood.

Fr. Amphilochios was by no means the first spiritual teacher... to recognize the importance of trees. Two centuries earlier, St. Kosmas the Aetolian, martyred in 1779, used to plant trees as he traveled around Greece on his missionary journeys. In one of his "prophecies" he stated, "People will remain poor, because they have no love for trees." We can see that prophecy fulfilled today in too many parts of the world.

"Love the trees." Why should we do so? Is there indeed a connection between love of trees and love of God? How far is it true that a failure to reverence and honor our natural environment -- animals, trees, earth, fire, air, and water -- is also, in an immediate and soul-destroying way, a failure to reverence and honor the living God?

HE Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, "Through Creation to the Creator,"
London, UK, 1996

Q

Can you examine the effects of sin on people and the environment?

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Reflection

The Vision of the Sacred in Daily Life

We offer you the opportunity and the motivation to study more deeply, not only the technical and humanitarian parameters of the problem of pollution, but also its Christian and theological perspective. This will enable you to become more deeply conscious of your mission to work with love and piety, and to cooperate with each person dealing with the subject of the environment, for its protection from actions that create pollution and destroy the environment.

This sensitization of ourselves and of those around us, especially those who direct the great pollutants, together with the voluntary avoidance of ecologically destructive lifestyles by members of our society, and their influence over those who do not conform, constitutes the most fruitful way of environmental correction and of revival for the Black Sea and every burdened ecosystem.

We repeat... our invitation to all of you - to the Orthodox and other Churches, and to the religious leaders of the faiths in the neighboring region, as well as in the depths of Europe, Asia, and Asia Minor..., to convey to all peoples the need to raise awareness about pollution, to the level at least of those people who some 2,500 years ago would not even wash their hands in the rivers.

We thank all those who are mobilized together with us for the reintroduction of the sense of sacredness as the guideline for our life, as well as all those who from whatever position carry on the struggle for the preservation of life in the Black Sea, thereby contributing to and assisting our neighboring peoples.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, The Halki Ecological Institute,
June 13, 1999

Q

Why is the avoidance of pollution a Christian duty?

Why is study needed to understand pollution's implications?

How can a person raise awareness about the need to protect creation?

Reflection

The Ecological Problem is a Spiritual Problem

Every year on this day, World Environment Day, we say that we “celebrate the environment!” However, this expression shows that for many, ignorance and indifference still exist about this day. Because it is not just a celebration, but a day of reflection and taking stock of efforts made to protect creation. It is a decisive day for the renewal of the fight for the salvation of our house, which was offered to us by the Creator, our planet Earth.

I have many times expressed the opinion that quite often, the discussions on this subject are reminiscent of dialogues of the deaf. While in theory, all of us perceive the critical state of the issue and many actually do take initiatives or strive eagerly to contribute to its resolution, the problem remains and has not been corrected.

The saints of the Orthodox Church, having accomplished the purpose of their existence and participating in the divine glory, show and teach us the ecological idea. Thus St. Isaac the Syrian defines a merciful heart as “a heart burning for the whole creation, for people, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for all creatures.” As for Saint Cosmas of Aetolia, he prophesied that “people will become poor because they will not love trees.”

Therefore, the ecological problem is fundamentally a spiritual problem, with enormous moral dimensions. If we do not free ourselves from egocentrism and eudemonism (the belief that happiness is the test of right behavior), if we do not have an ascetic vision of creation and of our use of material goods and wealth, the ecological problem will spread, instead of being stopped. This is why the fundamental challenge of World Environment Day is for all to repent, to return to God the Creator, and to reintegrate ourselves in the perspective of the divine plan for creation and the environment.

HE Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens, World Environment Day sermon,
Athens, Greece, June 4, 2019

Q

Why is care for the environment a spiritual problem?

How may we correct our relationship and interactions with God’s creation?

What is the ideal relationship that we as Christians should have with creation?

Reflection

The Deteriorating Condition of the World's Oceans

Over the past two decades, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has highlighted the deteriorating condition of the world's oceans. Now, more than ever, it is crucial to respect and protect this invaluable and inalienable resource of our planet, which is a unique source of nurture and biodiversity.

As industrial development becomes the norm of global behavior, so too our dependency on fossil fuels drives society's indifference toward creation care. This fosters ever rising levels of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, which in turn irreversibly pollute the earth's atmosphere, creating the conditions that allow for climate change and disruption. Furthermore, about one-third of carbon emissions dissolve into the ocean causing rising levels of acidification. This acidification is killing coral reefs, dissolving the shells of clams, oysters and other shellfish, while also destroying the bottom of the ocean food chain.

Many of us unfortunately cannot comprehend these consequences of climate change due to our complacent and perhaps even complicit circumstances. However, the more vulnerable among us – who depend on the oceans for food and sustenance – understand this dire situation as they witness changing conditions in the ocean and rising sea levels from melting polar icefields.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew,
World Oceans Day, June 8, 2016

Q

Why is it that so many Christians still do not grasp the threat of climate change?

What are the causes by humans of global climate change?

How does climate change particularly harm the poor?

Reflections

A Sacramental Vision of Creation

If we do not change within ourselves the attitude of our heart towards our fellow humans from an attitude of indifference or even enmity to an attitude of friendship, cooperation and acceptance, then we will achieve nothing in the confrontation of the ecological problems....

HAH, Thessaloniki, Greece, September 28, 1997

We have far too long focused — as churches and as theologians — on the notion of sin as a rupture in individual relations with each other or with God. The environmental crisis reminds us of the cosmic consequences of sin, which are more than merely social or narrowly spiritual. Every act of pollution is an offence against God as Creator.

Repentance implies a radical change of ways and worldview.... In order to achieve this sacramental vision of creation, humans are called to practice a spirituality of thanksgiving and self-discipline.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew,
Moscow, Russia, May 26, 2010

Q

What does the Christian sacramental vision of creation involve?

Why is repentance essential?

How does the regular practice of thanksgiving shape our worldview?

Reflection

Climate Change as Urgent Christian Issue

As a theologian who has spent his life serving God and striving to make the world a better place, I am deeply committed to do everything I can to stop the crisis that is climate change.

The United Nations summit on climate change, COP-24 [in Poland], brings us to a crossroads in our striving to build a better world for our children and future generations. As the meetings in Katowice will show, we are failing in our climate change efforts. We are on a bus without brakes, traveling towards a major destination. But we keep arguing about how to get there.

Whilst there is almost unanimous belief that the world is warming, there are different opinions about how to address it. There is an ongoing presumption that one view is better than the other? Some of us are very familiar with this debate. The reality is, all beliefs are legitimate.

If we have any hope of protecting humankind and the planet, we need to examine and test every solution. Carbon capture and storage (CCS) is an obvious solution. Proven by science, commercial application and common sense, CCS must form a vital part in our climate change response because it removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Just as the UN Security Council is working with member states to ensure the survival of humankind, we all need to work together – countries, industry, organisations and individuals – using everything at our disposal to protect our planet by reducing how much carbon dioxide we release.

Climate change success will only come when everyone is working together and everything is embraced.

HE Archbishop Serafim Kykotis, Archbishopric of Zimbabwe and Angola,
Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa,
Harare, Zimbabwe, November 29, 2018

Q

Can you name some solutions to the problem of global climate change?

What does the idea of carbon capture and sequestration mean?

What is your parish doing to address climate change? Why?

Reflection

Climate Change: A Moral and Spiritual Challenge

As Church leaders, our concern is service to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose Gospel teaches us that our response to the welfare of our neighbor and respect for the creation are expressions of our love for God. This means that we are all personally responsible to identify and adopt appropriate moral and ethical approaches to the changing conditions of the world.

Faithful to the responsibility that we have been given within God's good creation, it is prudent for us to listen to the world's scientific leaders as they describe changes occurring in the world's climate, changes that are already being experienced by many people throughout the world....

It cannot be predicted in precise detail how climate change is going to unfold, but the seriousness of this situation is widely accepted.... Three crucial considerations make the current changes serious and unprecedented:

- ◆ The rapid extent of temperature increase is historically unparalleled....
- ◆ The human role in changing the climate is unique. In earlier centuries, people did not have the technological capability to make such radical changes to the planet as are now taking place.
- ◆ The impact that climate change will exert upon society is great and diverse, including conditions which deeply disrupt the lives and livelihoods of people on an unprecedented scale....

Climatologists label these changes as the result of measurable increases of carbon dioxide and other so-called “greenhouse gases” in the atmosphere. These gases are produced primarily by the burning or combustion of gasoline, coal and other fossil fuels.

Importantly, the conditions that we observe now are only the early alterations to our climate. Much larger and far more disruptive changes will result unless we reduce the forces causing climate change. ...

Excerpt from The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States,
“Global Climate Change: A Moral and Spiritual Challenge,” declaration by SCOBA,
May 23, 2007

Q

Why is global climate change now taking place?

What are the consequences if we do not now halt its progression?

What are the solutions to climate change?

Reflection

A Prophetic Warning

No earthly endeavor succeeds without the grace of God, but it is also true that no human enterprise succeeds without the contribution of many people, people whose labors or material contributions are often silent or unacknowledged, sometimes by their own humble choice.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Symposium on the Arctic,
Narsauraq Greenland, September 12, 2007

The late Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios issued a message of warning about the destructive consequences of abusing the environment. He noted that, in contrast with most other forms of human misuse and violation, environmental pollution has the potential to cause vast and irreversible damage, by destroying virtually all forms of life on the planet.

At the time, this warning sounded exaggerated to certain skeptical ears; however, in light of what we now know, it is abundantly clear that his words were prophetic. Today, environmental scientists emphasize that climate change has the potential to disrupt and destroy the entire ecosystem, which sustains not only the human species but also the entire wondrous world of animals and plants that is interdependent upon one another like a chain.

Finally, we know that this destruction actually comprises self-destruction. Therefore, we invite all of you, irrespective of position and profession, to remain faithful to a natural use of all God's creation, "offering thanks to the God, who created the world and granted everything to us."

HAH, To the Plenitude of the Church,
September 1, 2008

Q

How can these words be said to be "prophetic"?

Why is environmental degradation self-destructive?

What do the Scriptures teach us about care of God's creation?

Reflections

Compassion for Animals

Compassion for animals is vividly expressed in the writings of a recent Athonite Saint, the Russian monk Silouan (1866-1938). “The Lord,” he says, “bestows such rich grace on his chosen ones that they embrace the whole earth, the whole world within their love. ...”

“One day I saw a dead snake on my path... and I was filled with pity for every living creature, every suffering thing in creation, and I wept bitterly before God.” Such is in truth the compassionate love that we are called to express towards the animals.

All too often they are innocent sufferers, and we should view this undeserved suffering with compunction and sympathy. What harm have they done to us, that we should inflict pain and distress upon them?

As living beings, sensitive and easily hurt, they are to be viewed as a 'Thou', not an 'It,' to use Martin Buber's terminology: not as objects to be exploited and manipulated but as subjects, capable of joy and sorrow, of happiness and affliction. They are to be approached with gentleness and tenderness; and, more than that, with respect and reverence, for they are precious in God's sight. As William Blake affirmed, “Every thing that lives is holy.”

HE Metropolitan Kallistos [Ware] of Diokleia,
Intl Orthodox Theological Association Conference, “Compassion for Animals,”
Iasi, Romania, January, 2019

Q

Why do you think it is that every thing that lives is holy?

What would it mean to embrace a sense of compassion for animals?

How would your life change if it included a sense of respect for all living things?

Reflection

We Must Distinguish Between Needs and Wants

Each of us is called to draw a distinction between what we want and what we need, or – more importantly – what the world needs. Greed and gratification reduce the world to a survival of the fittest; whereas generosity and gratitude transform the world into a community of sharing.

We are invited to pursue a way of sacrifice – not a sacrifice that is cheap, but a sacrifice that is costly. As King David once said: “I will not offer to the Lord my God a sacrifice that costs me nothing” (2 Samuel 24.24).

We must be prepared to make sacrifices – material and financial – that are genuine and even painful. And in this regard, whether we like it or not, more is demanded from the rich than from the poor.

Of course, sacrifice is primarily a spiritual issue and less an economic one. Similarly, in speaking of the environmental crisis, we are referring to an issue that is not technological or political, but ethical. The real crisis lies not in the environment but in the human heart. The fundamental problem is to be found not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem, but in the way we think. Without a revolutionary change within ourselves, all our conservation projects will ultimately remain insufficient and ineffective.

HAH, Halki Summit, June 18, 2011

Q

What is the difference between needs and wants?

What is the value of sacrifice in terms of creation?

Why is a person’s ability to sacrifice a spiritual test?

Reflections

Taking Action to Address Climate Change

The potential impacts of climate change proliferate before us. We hear of air and water pollution, of global warming and the threatened extinction of numerous animal and plant species. Human suffering in the poorest countries increases; nowhere is this shown more vividly than in Africa, where global warming and human interference with ecosystems have brought a new threat to Africa's water and all who depend on it. Pasture land gives way to desert at an accelerating pace. Lake levels fall, animal and bird migrations change, fish stocks dwindle. River waters grow polluted and aquifers are drained for 'development.' The predicted rise in ocean levels threatens to submerge Africa's coastal cities (including Alexandria). The evidence and statistics are indeed alarming. How should we react?

Perhaps for the first time in the history of our world, we recognize that our decisions and choices immediately impact the environment, ultimately undermining our human security and ability for economic growth.

HAH, "Climate Change, Human Security and Development Cooperation,"
May 30, 2008

Taking action against climate change should not be understood as a financial burden, but as an important opportunity for a healthier planet, to the benefit of all humanity and particularly of those states whose economic development is lagging behind. ...

We need to secure justice and love in all aspects of economic activity; profit and more specifically short-term profit making can not and should not constitute the sole incentive of our deeds, specifically when it undermines our common and God-given natural heritage.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew,
Bangkok, Thailand, Sept 28, 2009

Q

Why is global climate change an Orthodox Christian issue?

What are the probable consequences of failing to address climate change?

Are you addressing climate change in your own life?

Reflection

The Future of Humanity Requires Safeguarding Creation

It is our profound conviction that the future of the human family depends on how we safeguard – both prudently and compassionately, with justice and fairness – the gift of creation that our Creator has entrusted to us ...

Together, we pledge our commitment to raising awareness about the stewardship of creation; we appeal to all people of goodwill to consider ways of living less wastefully and more frugally, manifesting less greed and more generosity for the protection of God’s world and the benefit of His people.

We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental....

[We require] “an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature....

HAH, Quoted in TIME magazine,
June 18, 2015

Q

Why is dignity for the poor a Christian issue?

How might you, the reader, live more frugally and with more generosity?

How could an integrated approach to human poverty and ecology be designed?

Reflection

Regaining Our Identity

As Christians, we are taught by Holy Tradition and by the experience of the Holy Church Fathers, to link the mentioned theme [of living conditions in the modern world] with the need of repentance because when man fell, due to his sin, he lost his identity. Because of his tendency toward transgression, man became weak and cannot find in himself strength to go back to his Creator. Man accepts God's love and becomes a being of communication, a being as communion, improving, with all the Saints, his God-likeness.

So man becomes the custodian of creation which is created by the will of God for the only reason - to become one in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1: 22-23; 4:15). The human being is called to protect the work of God's hands because the deeds of God protect [nurture] him. The creation needs God for its existence, as it cannot exist by itself. Man is searching for eternity and he is determined to care for the conjunction of unity and differences. Love disables divisions, while the Spirit assembles all.

We are profoundly hurt by the divisions in witnessing the Christian truth before the modern world which is yearning for spiritual direction and the meaning of the mystery of life....

HB Patriarch Irenej, Serbian Orthodox Church,
"Letter to Abbot Enzo," August 31, 2012

Q

What does it mean for humans to be "custodians of creation"?

How do the themes of repentance and custodianship fit together?

Why can't the Creation exist by itself?

Reflection

Acquire a Moral Code

We must acquire a moral code ...and learn to respect humanity, accepting as a basic principle of behavior that it is morally unacceptable to burden others with our wastes.

This is the deeper reason why our humble person, whose primary mission is the Christian education and sanctification of the Orthodox faithful, has wholeheartedly adopted the series of International Ecological Symposia. The Church Fathers teach that the root of all evils that plague humanity is selfishness, and the highest expression of virtue is selfless love. It is not permitted for faithful Christians who are seeking sanctification to remain indifferent to the effects of their acts on their fellow human beings. The sensitivity of their conscience must be increased so that they are not indifferent even to the indirect consequences of their acts.

As Abba Issac says, the sensitive and charitable heart “cannot bear even to hear of sorrow, even a small one, in creation. That is why his heart grieves even for creatures not endowed with reason, even for enemies of the truth and even for those who harm him. He addresses to God a prayer for them in tears, that God may spare them and have mercy on them, and similarly for reptiles, his heart being full of mercy like the one that fills the heart of God” (Hom. 81). This saintly sensitivity is, of course, possessed by very few. But this does not mean that we should go to the other extreme, the complete lack of sensitivity, because, as St John of Climacus says, the hardened person is a foolish philosopher (Homily 17, #3).

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Symposium on the Danube,
October 17, 1999

Q

What is a moral code? How does the Church help us acquire one?

What are some indirect consequences of our actions?

How are sanctification and concern for these indirect actions connected?

Reflection

Ecological Asceticism

The ecological problem, at root, is a spiritual issue. Many people dealing with it [the environment] tend to overlook its spiritual aspects. Yet both historically and practically it is impossible to address it without reference to religion and ethics. What motivation can religion offer people facing the ecological crisis? Here are some suggestions:

Stressing and promoting the idea of the sacredness of creation in all its aspects, spiritual as well as material...

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... 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 centre.

A spirit of asceticism. An 'ecological asceticism,' if we may coin such a term, begins with deep respect for the material creation, including the human body, and builds upon the view that we are not masters and possessors of creation, but are called to turn it into a vehicle of communion.... This last point is of paramount importance. Human beings must realize that natural resources are not unlimited. Creation is finite and so are the resources that nature can provide for our needs. The consumerist philosophy of life seems to ignore this truth.

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 happier life than the endless competition of spending and acquiring more and more. Qualitative growth must replace the concept of economic development which is dominated by quantitative statistics. Asceticism must cease to be a notion referring to a class of religious eccentrics and become synonymous with qualitative - instead of quantitative - progress in human societies.

HE Metropolitan John of Pergamon, "Ecological Asceticism: A Cultural Revolution,"
April, 1996

Q

What does it mean that God's creation is sacred in terms of human behavior?

How would you define ecological asceticism?

What does it mean to be a priest of creation?

Reflection

The Orthodox Ecological Ethic

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of creation as a foundational Orthodox 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.

The proper apprehension of a creature's *logos* must begin with the simple affirmation that it exists by God's *fiat*. This is a profound recognition that a creature is basically a "creature." It does not appear by its own determination. It does not exist in and of itself. Its life, or reality, is the result of God's decision and continued provision. This is a crucial point for us to understand.

The Orthodox Christian ecological ethic protests against the consumerist ethic. The truth of "dominion" in the Holy Tradition is clear: Man was given primacy in Creation; but he was given primacy with the responsibility of *stewardship*. A good steward uses the resources of his Master, but he does not merely "consume."

A good steward is careful to protect the things of his Master's house: he protects against destruction and decay. He would never permit pollution, rainforest burning, or the extinction of entire species. He would be alarmed by global warming, ozone depletion, and the loss of wetlands.

HE Metropolitan Nicholas of Amisso, Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Church,
"Man as Curse or Blessing," Antiochian Village, June 15, 2002

Q

What is an Orthodox understanding of the biblical principle of dominion?

How is dominion different from stewardship?

How do Orthodox Christian teachings address the concept of consumerism?

Reflections

A Sin Against God and a Crime Against Humanity

We conveniently tend to overlook - although we are compelled to remember - that we are all responsible for the future of our planet and for human life. Climate change affects all people and all nations.

Climate change is a global problem. We share one world and the same resources, one atmosphere and the same habitat. We are all inseparably interconnected. Any genuine solution demands the ability to think for the whole world. We are all connected and our actions affect each other. Conservation and compassion are intimately interrelated.

When will we face the inevitable truth that all ecological activity is ultimately judged by its impact on the poor? When will we sense the painful reality that the continent that has scarcely contributed to global warming is bearing the most detrimental repercussions, even while being the least equipped to cope with its consequences? The greatest delusion is that measures to deal with climate change must not or may not affect economic growth. Without sacrifice, both personal and national, we cannot reach the unity necessary for an enduring agreement.

Global climate change presents an unprecedented threat to the integrity and diversity of life on earth. At the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we have already denounced ecological abuse as sin against God; we should recognize how it is also a crime against humanity. Blame is no solution. Instead, we must discover the resources that lie deep within the human spirit in order to develop a sense of urgency and resolve.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew,, UN Climate Conference,
Durban South Africa, November 28, 2011

Q

Why is climate change a global problem?

What is the effect of global climate change on the poor?

Why is ecological abuse both a sin and a crime against humanity?

Reflection

The Moral Choices We Face

We have an ethical responsibility to consider carefully the way that we inhabit the world and the lifestyles that we choose to adopt. We can no longer live as isolated individuals, disengaged from events in our world. We are created for encounter; and we are judged based on our response to each encounter.

The Orthodox Church recognizes the natural creation as inseparable from the identity and destiny of humanity, because every human action leaves a lasting imprint on the body of the earth. Human attitudes and behavior toward creation directly impact on and reflect human attitudes and behavior toward other people.

This connection is detailed in the Parable of the Last Judgment, where the Lord says: “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink” (Matt. 25.35). A poor farmer in Asia, in Africa or in North America will daily face the reality of poverty. For these persons, the misuse of technology or the eradication of trees is not merely harmful to the environment or destructive of nature; rather, it practically and profoundly affects the very survival of their families. ...

In our efforts for the preservation of the natural environment, how prepared are we to sacrifice some of our greedy lifestyles? When will we learn to say “Enough”? When will we learn that treating all people, including the poor, in a just manner is more beneficial than charitable acts of good will? Will we direct our focus away from what we want to what the world needs?

HAH, 12th Eurasian Economic Summit May 7, 2009

Q

How do our lifestyle choices impact other people?

Why is the just treatment of others more beneficial than charity?

How is the destiny of humanity connected to the destiny of creation?

Reflections

A Vision of Wholeness

The general impression that people in western societies have of asceticism is negative. Asceticism carries with it the baggage of dualism and denial, developed over many centuries, both inside and outside the Christian church.

Yet this is not the vision of wholeness that Orthodox spirituality proposes through its ascetic dimension.

Asceticism is the conscious awareness and deeper recognition that humanity is dependent not only on God, but also on the world, and indeed on the food chain, just like every other creature made by God.

Asceticism, then, aims at a sense of refinement, not at any form of detachment or destruction. Its goal is always moderation, never repression. The content of asceticism is positive, not negative. It looks to service and not selfishness, to reconciliation and not renunciation or escape. Without asceticism, none of us is authentically human. Without asceticism, none of us can hope to heal our broken environment.

HAH, Ustein Monastery, Norway,
June 23, 2003

Q

Why is asceticism viewed negatively in the West?

How might Orthodox spirituality provide an ascetical corrective?

Why is asceticism critical to the healing of the environment?

Reflections

The Living Symbolism of Creation

The man who takes communion should become a man who sanctifies. The mystical way in Orthodoxy requires as a necessary stage the contemplation of nature, a vision of “the secrets of the glory of God hidden in things,” to quote a great mystic who was both an Arab and a Christian, Saint Isaac the Syrian.

Another Christian Arab, Maximos the Confessor, interprets this contemplation as an extension of the eucharist. “Living things,” he said, “reveal themselves as the body of the Lord, and their celestial roots as his ‘blood.’” Man can make his own the interiority of things; he can share in their praise; he can hear it in them; he can make it conscious and vocal in himself. Again, Maximos says, “It is important to gather the spiritual truths, the *logoi* of all things, and to present them to God as offerings on behalf of creation.”

Yes, for us as monks, as it was for the Fathers of the Church, the world, and I am quoting St Ephrem the Syrian, “is an ocean of symbols.” St Maximos wrote, “Here he is, the Invisible in visible things, the Impalpable in palpable things. Thus does He gather us into Himself from all things.”

If we think that nature is sufficient, that it can be reduced to blind processes in a world which is immense and closed, then nature has no meaning and death has the last word.... But *ecclesial* man, the man-in-Christ, who is consciously an image of God, discovers meaning everywhere. Nothing is closed to him and the world is translucent.

To this symbolic structure of the world there corresponds a symbolic knowledge; one which detects “verticality” in things, which detects the glory of God, a glory which by definition cannot be grasped, but nonetheless reveals itself to our understanding when we are seized by it. Think of the importance of the notion of “wonder” in the Bible. The symbol gives rise to a form of awareness which is resplendent with its own self-evidence and which cannot be separated from a feeling of tenderness at the beauty and gentleness of God.

HB Patriarch IGNATIUS IV of Antioch, “A Spirituality of Creation,”
Lausanne, Switzerland, March 11, 1989

Q

What is the role of symbols in the Church?

How does one detect a symbolic “verticality” in all things?

What is a symbolic knowledge?

Reflection

Humans as Miniature Oceans

We share the miracle of water with the entire community of life. Indeed, each one of us is a microcosm of the oceans that sustain life. Every person here, every person in the world, is in essence a miniature ocean.

The oceans provide one-sixth of the animal protein consumed by humans, more than chickens, beef, mutton or pork. Oceans generate half of the oxygen we breathe and cleanse the atmosphere of carbon dioxide that people, automobiles and power plants produce. Removing this carbon dioxide is vital because the human-caused increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide threatens our planet's biological diversity and our own human civilization.

So what we do to the oceans, God's vast blue Creation, we also do to God's other creations, including ourselves. Once we humans did not know that we could harm God's Creation. The oceans especially seemed so vast as to be invulnerable.

If we can find the faith to love each other and to love God, then we can find the faith to help His vast water planet live and flourish. We invite you to join in pledging to protect the oceans as an act of devotion.... If we love God, we must love His creation. ...

HAH, World Oceans Day, Stockholm, Sweden, June 7, 2003

Q

How can humans be called miniature oceans?

Why does harm to the ocean connect to harm to others and to ourselves?

How is love of God connected to love of His Creation?

Reflection

Opening Up To God's Creation

We must ask ourselves: Do we see beauty in others and in our world? The truth is that we refuse to behold God's Word in the oceans of our planet, in the trees of our continents, and in the animals of our earth. In so doing, we deny our own nature, which demands that we stoop low enough to hear God's Word in creation. We fail to perceive created nature as the extended Body of Christ.

Opening up to the heart; opening up to the other; and opening up to creation. Our age demands no less than openness from all of us. We hear it stated often that our world is in crisis. Yet, never before in history have human beings had the opportunity to bring so many positive changes to so many people simply through encounter and dialogue. The interaction of human beings and ethnic groups is today direct and immediate as a result of technological advances in the mass media and means of travel. While it may be true that this is a time of crisis, it must equally be underlined that there has also never been greater tolerance for respective traditions, religious preferences and cultural peculiarities.

The human heart, the other person, and the natural creation are icons of the living God. May you always remain open to the heart, to others, and to creation. This is the only way to discern the presence of God in our world.

HAH, "Discerning God's Presence in the World," New York,
October 27, 2009

Q

How do we perceive the presence of God in the world?

Why does Christian theology see God as "everywhere present and filling all things."

What are the implications of God's presence everywhere present in creation?

Reflections

Living Icons of the Divine Creator

Any theory about “the clash of civilizations” is invariably naive inasmuch as it oversimplifies differences between peoples, cultures and religions. How ironic that religion promotes a more “liberal” position than the “realism” of a political scientist! The visit in November 2006 of Pope Benedict XVI to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul was historical not only for relations between the Eastern and Western Churches, but also for Christianity and Islam.

We affectionately recall how Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (1886-1972), an extraordinary leader of profound vision and ecumenical sensitivity..., would resolve conflict by inviting the embattled parties to meet, saying to them: “Come, let us look one another in the eyes.” This means that we must listen more carefully, “look one another” more deeply “in the eyes.” As Saint Nilus of Ancyra wrote: “You are a world within the world; look inside yourself and there you will see God in the whole of creation.”

Each of us comprises a living icon of the divine Creator. And we are, furthermore, always — whether we know it or not — closer to one another in more ways than we are distant from one another; closer than we might ever suspect or even imagine.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Discerning God’s Presence in the World,”
New York, NY, October 27, 2009

Q

Why is the idea of an inevitable clash between civilizations naive and wrong?

Why may people be described as living icons?

How then should we see one another – and even the whole creation?

Reflection

Beauty in Nature and in Every Person

According to the sixth century theologian Dionysius the Areopagite, the most fundamental name of God is 'good.' This essential good, by the fact of its existence, extends goodness into all things. For Dionysius, what exists is good, and what is good is beautiful.

Dionysius gives us a picture of the universe in which God is the source of all that is. For Dionysius, perceptible beauty is a dim reflection of the unutterable Beauty of the Creator. It lifts our minds and hearts to its source.... The inanimate world and the world of plants and animals conforms to models that express the will of God, divine paradigms we are unable to perceive directly, but whose mediated presence, we can intuitively perceive.

Mankind alone does not conform to the divine paradigm... and therefore does not conform to the image of God within. That image is not confined to his conscience, or his reason.... It is found in the whole of his being. Each individual human being is a hologram of the universe: everything that is 'out there' is also 'in here.' Each of us is a microcosm of the whole. That is why we can experience plants and animals as our sisters and brothers, because their existence is implicit in the deeper levels of our being.

Thus our ecological task is to find ourselves in the universe, and find the universe in us. Our understanding will never reach the depths that are within us. However, we do not have to know everything before we begin to act. The truth of our actions will depend on our conforming to the deep structure of our own nature, and thereby bring our mode of behavior, into conformity with the will of God, which is known to us in part, through the world. All religious traditions have ways of helping their members to do this, and we must use the resources of our traditions for a common goal, a common good.

HG Bishop Basil of Sergievo, Russian Orthodox Church,
Symposium on the Black Sea, September 26, 1997

Q

What is beauty?

How may beauty become a teacher of personal behavior?

What does it mean that each person is a hologram of the universe?

Reflection

Program Announcements

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

The Face of God film: An Orthodox film on theology and climate change is in preparation. If you would like a showing of this film in your parish, please send a note to our office. Send 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. Available on www.Amazon.com

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 and the mind of the Orthodox Church.

Programs

Christ in the Wilderness 2020

Watch for a program announcement for this summer (delayed by coronavirus)

This 2020 Reading-a-day program

Available by e-mail at no charge. For a printed copy sent via U.S. Mail, please send a donation to cover printing and mailing costs.

Websites

<https://www.Orth-Transfiguration.org>

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

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