



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

A Daily Reading Program on the Christian Theology of Creation

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

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

Month Five
May 1-31, 2020

The OFT is endorsed by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States

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Introduction

Christ is risen! This May edition of the creation care reading-a-day program again emphasizes the statements of Orthodox patriarchs and hierarchs as they address the Christian duty to care for God's creation. This is an essential part of our biblical heritage which has grown weak under the influences of American consumerism, individualism, materialism and secularism. These ancient Christian ecological teachings are critical for an ability to do on earth "as it is in heaven," a phrase which we declare in every liturgical service. Nevertheless a streak of resistance persists to this Orthodox responsibility to care for God's creation.

A review of Scripture may help correct this deficiency. The Holy Bible provides a comprehensive view of human responsibility to God. Scripture and observation make clear that humans have three great relationships – to God, to neighbor and to the earth. But teaching about this third relationship has become weak in recent centuries.

In the Old Testament this threefold responsibility is obvious. For instance, in just the first five books of the Bible, Jewish rabbis number each of God's commands. They count exactly 615 commands from God of which exactly 200 are requirements and prohibitions regarding a right relationship to the earth and the environment.

In the New Testament a higher theme emerges of the transfiguration of creation, following Jesus' Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. We learn more about *ascesis* and a eucharistic responsibility. Subsequently care for the earth was integrated into traditional society. In Old World Orthodox cultures, Christians embraced respect for the earth because this was integrated into the structure and design of traditional society.

Today we who are Orthodox in America live in a culture formed by a Protestant vision of God "up in heaven," but not down on earth. Thus the respect for creation that characterized traditional society has faded. In its place we encounter a materialist vision that makes it difficult for Christians to remember God's presence "everywhere present and filling all things." This lack of a guiding spiritual vision about the earth affects all of us, but especially young adults. Thus, young people particularly need direction on how to live rightly in the world and how to be thankful for God's presence "filling all things."

We may pray to live on earth "as it is in heaven" at every liturgical service, but that alone does not mean we know how to translate theology into action so that we respect the earth as we might. Thus these readings from our top hierarchs becomes important.

Yours in service to God's good earth,

LM - MR - EC - FK
The reading-a-day editorial team

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. Maximos 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 in 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 does the term ‘cosmology’ mean?

How much can you explain what is called ‘the Incarnation of the Word’?

How does this relate to the created world?

Reflection

A Call to Protect God's Creation

The Orthodox Church appreciates these efforts to overcome the ecological crisis and calls people to intensive co-operation in actions aimed to protect God's creation. At the same time, she notes that these efforts will be more fruitful if the basis on which man's relations with nature are built will be not purely humanistic, but also Christian.

One of the main principles of the Church's stand on ecological issues is the unity and integrity of the world created by God. Orthodoxy does not view nature as an isolated and self-enclosed structure. The plant, animal and human worlds are interconnected.

In the Christian view, nature is not a repository of resources intended for egotistical and irresponsible consumption. Rather, it is a house in which man is not the master, but a housekeeper. It is a temple in which he is the priest serving not nature, but the one Creator. The conception of nature as a temple is based on the principle of theocentrism: God Who gives to all "life, and breath, and all things" (Acts 17:25) is the Source of being. Therefore, life itself in its various manifestations is sacred, being a gift of God. Any encroachment on it is a challenge not only to God's creation, but also to the Lord Himself.

HB Patriarch Kyrill, Archbishop of Moscow and Patriarch of All-Russia,
Statement of the Russian Orthodox Church on Ecological programs,
#4, June 1, 2012

Q

What are the Orthodox Christian foundations for action to heal God's earth?

How might a person help protect the earth? List the different ways.

What is the practical meaning of each person as a priest of creation?

Reflection

An Awakening to our Problems is Essential

Unless everyone is made sensitive to the harmful character of [polluting] actions, it is almost impossible for any endeavor for the improvement of the [environmental] situation to succeed.

Religion can inspire the behavior of every individual or even mass movements; and it is able to transmit and spread the necessity and benefit of these behaviors.

This sense of a common fate, which is the polar opposite of the widespread individualistic and self-interested perception which is short-sighted in its appreciation of the world, is a basic teaching of the Christian faith, and especially of Orthodoxy.

Let us seek ... to energize the feelings of inertia about responsibility for the common good which we find in individuals and in whole peoples.

We call on every conscience to awaken! We invite you to a virtual apostolic commission to spread the word about the necessity for a common confrontation of these problems. The grace of God be with you all.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Trabzon, Turkey,
September 20, 1997

Q

How do people awaken to the seriousness of ecological problems?

Why should every Christian become sensitive to these issues?

What does it mean to have an apostolic commission to spread the word?

Reflection

The Human Role in the Cosmos

Man is a mediator. He is poised between two realities – God and the world. He shares in both, he is united to both. He cannot live apart from either. That is the meaning of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The only humanity that can survive is the new humanity, the humanity that has now been inseparably, indivisibly united with God in Jesus Christ.

The new humanity is a mediating humanity – a humanity that reconciles and unites God and the world. It is an incarnate humanity – a humanity that is an inseparable part of the whole creation and inseparably united to the Creator.

This is the meaning of the human presence in the cosmos. To be with the one who unites. To be in Christ, uniting the divine and the human, the Creator and the creation, the transcendent and the immanent, the spiritual and the scientific-technological. To enter the mystery of “Christ in us,” yes, in us Christians, but also in us human beings, and in us as an integral part of the whole creation.

The subtle art of image making for the future needs skilled craftsmen as well as the gift of the Spirit. The various crises of our time should be used neither as occasions for doom-saying pessimism nor as a chance to peddle empty-hope optimism. Every crisis is a judgement, a call to see where things have gone wrong and to seek to set matters right, both within our consciousness and in society.

The environmental crisis, the economic crisis, the crisis of justice, the crisis of faith..., the crisis of militarism – of all of these are symptoms not only that humanity has yet to become what it has to be, but also that it is on the wrong track.

HE Metropolitan Mar Paulos Gregorios,
Syrian Orthodox Church of India,
New Delhi, India, 1987

Q

What does it mean that humans are mediators?

How is a mediating humanity akin to humans as priests of creation?

Why are crises messages to society?

Reflection

Message for Earth Day 2020

Every day is an opportunity to celebrate “the earth as the Lord’s and that all who dwell therein belong to the Lord” (Psalm 24.1). Every day is a reminder of our vulnerability and solidarity. In fact, more than ever, we are reminded of our responsibility to the earth and each other in light of that interdependence between the earth and its inhabitants. The ecological responsibility and the respect of the sacredness and the beauty of every human person, of the elderly and the disabled, the poor and the marginalized, the sick and the suffering, are today the universal categorical imperative for the whole humanity.

In recent weeks, with the alarming spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), we have been painfully reminded of the interconnection among human beings throughout the world. So we are obliged to reflect further on the urgency of our response to issues that are increasingly gathering momentum and threatening our survival.

Crisis is a moment of clear and definitive judgment. The COVID-19 crisis is a moment of truth and assessment of our respect for the precious gifts that we have received and been entrusted with by God. Over the past decades, we have declared that when we are isolated from God, we also exploit the planet’s resources. Indeed, we have repeatedly associated such behavior against God’s creation with sin. Like us, the earth too is suffering from isolation and alienation. *“The whole of creation is groaning with labor pains to this day.. eagerly longing for.. its liberation by the children of God”* (Romans 8.19–22). This time of uncertainty has taught us to care for one another. Will we also learn, at last, to mitigate our impact on the environment?

As a result of the ecological disruption created by the global coronavirus, Earth Day will be celebrated electronically this year throughout the world. How paradoxical that the earth continues to inspire, instruct, and invite us toward a restored covenant with creation. How will we respond? Our prayer is that this critical moment will be for us an occasion for renewal and redemption, for liberation and transformation, as well as for inspiration and illumination.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Earth Day 2020,
April 21, 2020

Q

What is the spiritual foundation for the celebration of Earth Day?

Can you name some of the issues which threaten human survival?

How might this epidemic become a new inspiration in our treatment of the earth?

Reflection

Why Ecology is a Spiritual Issue

The ecological problem is, at root, a spiritual issue. Many people dealing with it tend to overlook its spiritual aspects. And yet both historically and from the practical point of view it is impossible to address it without reference to religion and ethics. ...

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 centre.

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

Q

Why is the ecological problem a spiritual issue?

Can you explain what are the duties of a priest of creation?

How does a sense of the sacred in nature lead to a liturgical sense about nature?

Reflection

Energy Conservation and Climate Justice

In light and wind, in land and water, energy resources are abundant gifts for human well-being from our Creator God. Because we are called to *"till and to tend the garden"* (Gen 2:15), we have a moral obligation to choose the safest, cleanest and most sustainable sources of energy to protect and preserve God's creation. Energy conservation is faithful stewardship.

Humans have a choice of priorities for the future. By depleting energy sources, causing global warming, fouling the air with pollution, and poisoning the land with radioactive waste, a policy of increased reliance on fossil fuels and nuclear power jeopardizes health and well-being for life on Earth.

On the other hand, by investing in clean technology, renewable energy, greater vehicle fuel efficiency and safer power plants, we help assure sustainability for God's creation and God's justice. Energy conservation is intergenerational responsibility....

Energy policy must be an instrument of social and economic justice here and abroad. The first beneficiaries of a new energy policy should be "the least among us," the low-income, the vulnerable, and the sick to whom we can provide assistance with high energy bills, inexpensive mobility through expanded mass transit, cleaner air by reducing pollution from power plants, and lower gasoline prices through strict monitoring of oil companies for price-gouging. Energy conservation is justice for all peoples and nations.

There is no single solution to the energy challenge. We do not have to sacrifice economic security to assure ecological health. Prudence – the application of moral principle in service to the common good -- should guide us to meet immediate needs in such a way as to enhance, not diminish future sustainability.

HE Archbishop Demitrios, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America;

HE Metropolitan Philip, Archdiocese of North America, Antiochian Orthodox Church;

HE Metro. Christopher, President, Episcopal Council of SCOBA, Serbian Orthodox Church;

HE Archbishop Mor Cyril Aphrem Karim, Patriarchal, Syrian Orthodox (Malankara) Church of Antioch;

HB Metropolitan Theodosius, primate, Orthodox Church in America (OCA);

"Moral Reflection on Energy Policy and Global Warming," Joint declaration, February 2002

Q

Why should Orthodox Christians be concerned about global climate change?

How does Christianity shape our attitude toward energy use?

How is there a connection between energy conservation and justice?

Reflection

Creation as an Integrated Whole

Orthodoxy's rich creation theology rests on the assumption that the entire cosmos is an integrated whole....

Orthodoxy's understanding of the human being as person, and as a microcosm of the cosmos, assumes that humanity is existentially meaningful only through the free and conscious engagement in relation with others. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is committed to transforming the human condition. Our vision of freedom and relationality is consistent with U.N. efforts at transforming post-conflict situations, by restoring the torn fabric of individual and community life.

The Orthodox Church transcends linguistic, ethnic and national divisions. Our Holy Orthodox Church is modeled on the Trinitarian principle of unity in diversity, whereby heterogeneity and uniqueness are fundamental aspects of our humanity. ...

We exhort you, to take up the responsibility which has been given to us by God, our Creator, to collectively renew our commitment to restoring the peace, justice and integrity of all creation. We ask you to consider the creative gifts of the Orthodox Christian community as a resource for change.

HAH, United Nations Luncheon, New York City, NY,
October 27, 1997

Q

What does it mean that the human is a microcosm of the cosmos?

How does the term “unity in diversity” reflect the Orthodox Church?

How may we play a role in restoring justice, peace and integrity within creation?

Reflection

Respect for the Animals

From time to time we realize that everything is from God, the animals, the plants, the earth, the celestial planets, and we are humbled before God and thankful for his creation....

It is traditional for us as Orthodox to have a good relationship with the animals. Our theology is favorable to the animals. We have never tolerated violence, but we have never said anything because I think it was not seen as necessary. Now, however, we see more and more the ill treatment of animals and it is true, it is time that we in the Church said something. Before there did not seem the need, but it is different now.

In the context of Cyprus we can do more and we should do more. Now when we see instances of violence or people bring us information, we must do something about it.

It is true that many of our teachings do not get through to the people, but this is true of many other things as well as the animals. It has to do with the nature of the individual person; some will listen and understand, while others will go their own way, against the teachings. If you are a good Christian, you will love the animals and they will love you back. There are many books showing this through the lives of the early saints. You cannot find a holy man who has mistreated animals....

Let me be clear. Animals are the creation of God. We should treat them with respect and not be cruel to them. What kind of soul they may have has no part of that discussion. We should not be involved in this type of argument as it only serves to confuse what should be very clear. We should not be cruel to animals. We should treat them with love.

HE Metropolitan Isaias of Tamasou and Orinis, Orthodox Church of Cyprus,
Interview with Presbytera Christina Nellist, March 4, 2014

Q

Why should Christians respect animals?

How would you describe an Orthodox Christian attitude toward animals?

Do you know how the saints treated animals? What does that teach us?

Reflection

The Continuing Work of the Church

From my heart I pray for all the workers and Missionaries of the love of Christ, the Metropolitans and Bishops of the Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, the Priests through out Africa and our blessed children, Greeks, Arabs, Africans, Serbs, Russians and Romanians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians and other nationalities, that the Grace of the Most Holy God will strengthen your lives always.

Now that the new period of Missionary and Catechetical work is about to start, we are all geared towards sowing and harvesting of the Word of God in the hearts of the people. The evangelization of the nations, the teaching of the people of God regarding the important issues of faith and Christian life, the great problems of the world and society, joblessness, narcotics, diseases, wars, the ecological problem, destruction and pollution of the environment and many others, create in us all a huge problem and an internal need for prayer, strong prayer, so that solutions can be found for all levels.

Having our faith in Christ as a rule, the joy and optimism which stem from this perspective, we will continue with the “good fight,” we will remain in the battlements and we will all be humble Missionaries of the good and the beautiful, that which our Orthodox Church teaches us, applying the exhortations of St Paul, which is beneficial for us all.

I send to you all the heartfelt Patriarchal blessing of the Apostle Mark and my Paternal prayer, that the Almighty God “who holds the times and the seasons in His own authority,” may protect and bless the whole world, the blessed and suffering land of Africa, the continent of the future, the crossroads of civilizations, granting health and happiness to all.

His Beatitude Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa,
In the Great City of Alexandria, September 1, 2009

Q

What is the work of the Church?

How can you participate in this great work?

Do you know what the exhortations of Saint Paul involve?

Reflection

The Experience of an Explosion of Love

Saint Isaac the Syrian and the Russian writer Fyodor Doestoyevskiy share a common focus on love. Both declare that love is truth. St. Isaac is widely respected because he speaks the truth bluntly and leaves his message to work within us. St. Isaac speaks to anyone who is genuinely struggling. He writes with a respect for those who are small and humble. His message is that man can learn to enjoy stillness while living on earth. His goal is to liberate each person from the cycle of corruption, to break down the barriers that block spiritual progress. In this way Orthodoxy leads to a glorious experience of theophany. ...

This is also a message that Doestoyevskiy imparts. There is a deep, indisputable connection, a spiritual kinship, between St. Isaac and Fyodor Doestoyevsky. We might say that Doestoyevskiy is a St. Isaac in the world.... Love and truth are connected. Out of silence, a radiation of spirit, of consciousness, takes place. ... The denying of one's self leads to salvation.

In prayer monks can sometimes experience an explosion of love. This opens and reveals a vision that God is present everywhere and in all things. When we experience how God fills all things with his life and love, a ministry of service to the whole world comes into focus....

His Eminence Archimandrite Vasileios, former abbot, Iveron Monastery,
Mount Athos, Greece, June 28, 2013

Q

Why is love also truth?

How is love related to God?

Why is service to creation also a form of service to God?

Reflection

The Challenge of Restoring Balance

The time we have been on the planet is insignificant in the life of the planet, yet we have now reached a defining moment in our story. We have expanded human dominion over nature to the point where limits to our survival are being reached. We have lost half of the world's great forests to the demand for timber and conversion to agriculture....

Irrigation for agriculture takes 70% of global demand for water, and – almost unimaginably – some of the world's greatest rivers are so depleted by human influence that they no longer flow to the sea; and those that do, carry all the chemical fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides and waste materials they have collected.... Desertification is increasing on land at the same time that the fish stocks of the oceans are depleted by over exploitation; and those that remain are being poisoned by toxic materials dumped carelessly in their habitat.

The dilemmas we face are created by human beings. Having struggled to escape hunger, disease, and want, technological advances have created the illusion of us being in control of our destiny as never before. We have cracked the DNA code; we can genetically modify crops, we can put men upon the moon – but we have lost our balance, externally and within.

The explosion of knowledge has not accompanied an increase in wisdom. Only wisdom could make us realize that the Creation is an interdependent, undivided whole, not an assemblage of isolated, unrelated parts that can be eliminated, replaced or modified as we see fit.

In addition to seeking balance between ourselves and our environment, we need to find balance within ourselves, reassessing our values as well as what is valuable. Let us remember that whoever we are, we all have our part to play, our sacred responsibility to the future. And let us remember that our responsibility grows alongside our privileges; we are more accountable the higher we stand on the scale of leadership.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Symposium on the Mississippi River: Restoring Balance," New Orleans, Louisiana, October 21, 2009

Q

What is wisdom?

How is wisdom different from knowledge?

What are the qualities that allow for a right human relationship to God's earth?

Reflection

Reintegrating Science and Religion

By the end of the 20th century, science and technology have acquired such influence that it has become the decisive force in the life of civilization. At the same time, despite Christianity's initial impact on the formation of scientific activity, under secular influences, they have led to serious fears and real problems. The ecological crises which have hit the modern world challenge the path forward. The scientific and technological level of civilization is such that criminal actions of a small group can cause a global disaster in which even the highest forms of life will perish irrevocably.

From a Christian perspective, these consequences arise because of the false principle underlying contemporary scientific and technological development. This principle requires that technological development should not be restricted by ethical or religious requirements. With this freedom scientific development finds itself at the mercy of human passions, including vanity, pride and thirst for the greatest possible comfort. This frustrates the spiritual harmony of life with negative consequences. Therefore, to ensure normal human life it is now necessary as never before to restore the lost link between scientific knowledge and religious, spiritual and moral values. The need for this link is conditioned by the fact that a considerable number of people believe in the omnipotence of scientific knowledge....

Mikhailo Lomonosov rightly wrote that science and religion "cannot come into conflict... unless someone excites strife in them out of conceit and desire to show off one's ingenuity."

St. Philaret of Moscow expressed a similar idea: "Faith in Christ is not in conflict with true knowledge, because it is not in union with ignorance." Noteworthy is the incorrectness of opposing religion to a scientific worldview.

Only religion and philosophy can fulfil the function of worldview, which no scientific knowledge is capable of assuming.

HB Patriarch Kyrill, Archbishop of Moscow and Patriarch of All-Russia,
"Russian Orthodox Church on Ecological programs," June 1, 2012

Q

How do ecological crises challenge the path forward?

How can religion and science be in harmony?

What is "the lost link" between scientific knowledge and moral values?

Reflection

A Bridge-Building Pathway

Nobody, not a religion, not a nation, not a state, not science and technology, can face the contemporary world's unforeseen challenges alone. In our present day and age, we must promote cooperation and mutual trust. Building bridges is the way to our common future.

Religions are diminishing their capacity to contribute to the precious culture of solidarity because of their antagonism and wide-spread fundamentalistic tendencies. The way to overcome these difficulties is the unwavering commitment of religions to peace in the world and to interreligious dialogue. To succeed in this task, together with the sensibilization of consciences, a stronger mobilization on the action-level is needed.

The credibility of religions today depends on their attitude towards the protection of human freedom and dignity, as well as on their contribution to peace. Peace between cultures and nations cannot be reached without the efforts of religions and without dialogue and peace between religions. It was in this spirit that our Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, established a sincere dialogue with Judaism and Islam nearly three decades ago, with remarkable results in mutual understanding, peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

Religions can fanaticize people, they can divide and foster hatred and violence. But, they are also able to humanize people and to support and empower their struggle for freedom, justice and reconciliation. We must work constantly and consciously, so that the contemporary, yet ambiguous, "return of God" and "renaissance of religion" will not become a return of war, conflict and violence in the name of God and of religion, but a return of the "God of peace" and the rebirth of the "culture of solidarity."

HAH, Eurasian Economic Summit,
April 5, 2017

Q

Why in our contemporary world must we cultivate cooperation and mutual trust?

Why do some religions cause a fanaticism in their believers?

How should different religions relate to each other?

Reflections

Globalization and Economic Inequality

The problem of social and economic inequality is one of the most pressing and at the same time one of the most complex problems of the modern world. Millions of people eke out a pitiful existence, suffering from malnutrition, disease, various forms of discrimination and the degradation caused to the environment. These problems become more acute as the world economy and technological growth become globalized.

Globalization creates advantages for a small number of people and risks for a huge part of the earth's population. Economists admit that the opening of markets in developing countries has mainly benefitted wealthy countries and has brought about an increase, not a reduction, of the gap between the wealthy and the poor countries.

The overriding principle of modern economic culture is profiteering, the resolution of one's objectives and the realization of one's interests at the expense of others. Humanistic values, which have at their root Christian principles, have been devalued. An economy built on the cultivation of hedonism is by definition immoral. Immoral too is humanity's rapacious attitude towards the natural environment, which suffers from the insatiable appetite of a man of the consumer world.

We must remember that material benefits by themselves do not make us happy. Moreover, a concentration solely upon material well-being leads to moral degradation. Christ warns us: "Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). The Church calls us to treat wealth as God's gift which is given to humans not so much for themselves, but for the benefit of their neighbors. Those who obtain profit should be made aware that a great responsibility rests upon them – to be attentive to the needs of other people, to help eradicate economic injustice in society, and thus fulfill the will of God.

HE Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, The Russian Orthodox Church,
Budapest Forum for Christian Communicators,
September 6, 2019

Q

What is globalization?

Why is it that material wealth cannot satisfy?

How does material wealth become a test of one's spiritual life?

Reflections

Prayers Are Solicited for Peace

In the Church of Antioch, we are currently experiencing ecological and social problems in a very urgent manner. At the heart of the Arab world there seems now, more than ever before, a searching for more democratic social structures together with issues related to freedom and human dignity. These goals now challenge our conscience and compel us to ever deeper reflection.

In this highly confrontational context, we commit ourselves to a more eloquent testimony to the power of the Gospel of Jesus, the comforter... It is in this humble fidelity to the life-giving spirit, stronger than the death that surrounds us, we pray the Lord to bless your meeting.

In addition, we ask you to offer prayers more fervently for a Middle East that is shaken by devastating waves of violence, so that the resurrected Lord may teach the way of the future, the ways of peace, in which love triumphs over hate, freedom over slavery, and dignity over humiliation.

HB Ignatius IV, Patriarch, The Church of Antioch
Damascus, Syria, September 8, 2012

Q

How do prayers help to reduce violence and suffering?

Why does love triumph over hate in the end?

What are the qualities which bring peace to society?

Reflections

Avoid the Evil of Pollution

We know that pollution of the environment can have repercussions far away from the point at which the pollution takes place....

Allow me to remind you of the ancient Greek philosopher Herodotus according to whom there was once a people which considered the rivers to be sacred and polluting them to be a sacrilege. Perhaps those who demythologize ancient beliefs may regard such a concept as superstition. However, this belief is preferable to the unscrupulous and irresponsible dumping of harmful substances into the rivers, temporarily relieving those who selfishly pollute the river, but harming their fellow humans who will use it.

Therefore, we must acquire a moral code higher than the one used by such crude people and learn to respect humanity, accepting as a basic principle that it is morally unacceptable to burden others with our wastes. This is the only way to ensure that the Danube, the longest river of this region, becomes a road of life for all....

This is the deeper reason why our humble person, whose mission is the Christian education and sanctification of the Orthodox faithful, has wholeheartedly sponsored the present series of ecological symposia. As the Church Fathers teach, the root of all evils 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 humans. The sensitivity of their conscience must be increased so that they are not indifferent even to the indirect consequences of their acts.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "The Danube, A River of Life," Passau, Germany, October 17, 1999

Q

Why is pollution of the environment harmful?

What are some consequences of pollution?

How may a person increase the sensitivity of his or her conscience?

Reflection

Through Creation, We See God's Love and Wisdom

The primary purpose of our interest for the protection of the environment is our concern for humanity in our own time and in future generations. Of course, we are not indifferent toward the preservation of natural elements that are endangered. Indeed, we see in them God's love and wisdom. Therefore, out of respect for God, we consider it a duty of our love toward Him to preserve His creation, which bears witness to His goodness.

Our attitude toward the whole of creation is influenced by our faith in God and our love toward Him and His works, and especially toward our fellow human beings. We see the entire world as an expression of the goodness that characterizes the Supreme Being.

We know that everything that exists has a reason for its existence. Nevertheless, we also believe that the original harmony of every being in the universe has been disrupted through the intervention of the human will, which has rebelled against it. The only way in which a complete harmony can exist in accordance with the original divine plan is if the human will embraces and voluntarily submits to this plan.

HAH, Oslo, Norway, June 12, 2002

Q

Why is it a duty to protect the environment?

How is the entire natural world an expression of the goodness of God?

What is the original divine plan for the world?

Reflection

On the Edge of Global Ecological Disaster

The Orthodox Church, aware of her responsibility for the fate of the world, is deeply concerned about the problems generated by contemporary civilization. Ecological problems occupy a prominent place among them. Today the face of the Earth has been distorted on a global scale. Its bowels are being damaged as are its soil, water, air, fauna and flora. Nature which surrounds us serves as the life support system for humanity. Man however is no longer satisfied with its diverse gifts, but exploits whole ecosystems without restraint.

Human activity has acquired an ability to affect global processes and these powers increase constantly due to the accelerated development of science and technology. Industrial wastes which pollute the environment, bad agricultural technology, the destruction of forests and topsoil — these suppress biological activity and cause a steady shrinking of the biological and genetic diversity of life. Limited and irreplenishable mineral resources are being exhausted; drinking water supplies are being reduced. A great many harmful toxic substances have become present in the biosphere, which are not naturally part of the earth's circulation and accumulating. The ecological balance has been violated. Man now has to face the emergence of pernicious processes in nature, including the failure of its natural reproductive power.

All this happens against a background of unprecedented and unjustified growth of public consumption, especially in the most highly developed countries, where the search for wealth and luxury has become a norm of life. This situation obstructs a just and fair distribution of natural resources, which are common human property. The consequences of the ecological crisis are proving painful, not only for nature, but also for man. As a result, the entire Earth finds itself on the verge of global ecological disaster.

HB Patriarch Alexiy II of Moscow and All-Russia, "Declaration on the Social Policy of the Russian Orthodox Church," Nr. 13, 2000

Q

Why do humans allow the pollution and degradation of the earth?

How can we join together to stop pollution and defilement of the land?

What are the consequences of failure to stop pollution?

Reflection

Pray for the Natural Environment

When we pray to God for the preservation of the natural environment, we are ultimately imploring God to change the mindset of the powerful in the world, enlightening them not to destroy the planet's ecosystem for reasons of financial profit and ephemeral interest.

In praying for the natural environment, we are praying for personal repentance for our contribution – smaller or greater – to the disfigurement and destruction of creation, which we collectively experience regionally and occasionally through the immense phenomena of our time.

HAH, September 1, 2012

[Therefore] we call upon all to be vigilant and to take every necessary avenue in order to save and protect God's creation.

HAH, September 26, 1995

Q

What is the best way to pray for the environment?

When do you pray for the healing of the earth?

How might you declare that mistreatment of nature is a sin?

Reflection

Man as Custodian of Creation

As Christians, taught by Holy Tradition and the experience of the Holy Church Fathers, we always link the theme of Man, Custodian of Creation, with the need of repentance.

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 of 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 is called to protect the work of God's hands because the deeds of God protect [or 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 Holy 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. We are firmly convinced that the chosen theme for the 20th International Conference in your monastery is for the good, benefit and joy of all Christians. With these sentiments We would like to greet you cordially, conveying to you, to your monastic brotherhood and to all the participants of the conference Our prayerful wishes for the grace of God and success in the forthcoming days of demanded, responsible but sublime sessions and inter-Christian prayerful assembly.

HB Irinej, Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgarde-Karlovci and
Patriarch of Serbia, Letter to Fr. Enzo Bianchi, August 31, 2012

Q

What changed because of the Fall of Adam and Eve?

How did human identity become distorted in the Fall?

Why is repentance essential for the restoration of our original identity?

Reflection

A Merciful Heart

According to the Church Fathers, a merciful heart will not only seek the heavenly kingdom and sense that it has no abiding city here on earth, seeking instead the heavenly city; it also cannot tolerate any harm to animals and plants, indeed even to the inanimate elements to nature. Such a person recognizes a value in nature, too, a relative value given by God Himself who created it.

Such a spirit should characterize every Christian. We do not limit our expectations simply to this world; nor do we abandon our pursuit of the heavenly reality, namely the divine kingdom. Instead, we recognize that the way that leads to the heavenly Jerusalem goes through the keeping of the divine commandments during our temporary sojourn in this world. Therefore, we are careful to keep the original commandment to preserve creation from all harm, both for our own sake and for the sake of our fellow human beings.

In any case, respect for the material natural creation of God, as well as indirectly for all people who are affected by the environment, reveals a sensitivity in human attitudes and conduct that should be characteristic of every Christian.

By contemplating the balance, harmony, and beauty of creation, humanity is lifted to a sense of wonder at the supreme perfection of the divine Creator... Respect for the material and natural creation of God... reveals a sensitivity in human attitudes and conduct that should be characteristic of every Christian.

HAH, Day of Prayer for the Environment
September 1, 1997

Q

How can a person cultivate a merciful heart?

Why should such a heart and spirit characterize every Christian?

What are the primary biblical teachings that relate to care for God's creation?

Reflection

We Must Protect Creation

Today the maternal sea is polluted, the heavens are rent, the forests are being destroyed and the deserts are increasing. We must protect creation. Better yet, we must embellish it, render it spiritual and transfigure it because Christianity has this responsibility.

In the East especially Christianity has not loved the earth enough. Orthodoxy knows that the earth is sacred, but for too long our history has been plagued with hostility, even captivity, and this has prevented her from giving definition to this intuition, from bringing forth this knowledge into the culture and the course of current affairs. Today she ought to try to do it for the sake of participation. This will not happen without cost. The cost is the “small change” of revolution, the only revolution that counts, that is, a revolution of the spirit.

But nothing will be done unless there is a general conversion of men’s minds and hearts. In the Bible men’s hearts and mind are the same thing. Nothing will happen unless our personal and liturgical prayer, our sacramental life, our asceticism regain their cosmic dimension.

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

Q

Why must Christians protect creation?

What does it take for a conversion of hearts and mind to take place?

How can we regain the cosmic dimension to our asceticism and sacramental life?

Reflection

Honoring the Creation of the World

We live in critical times.... But our calling is truly ecumenical! We are committed to extending the love of God to every human person and indeed to all creation....

We offer this service, not because it is timely or popular, but because our relationship to the natural world is directly correlated to our relationship with our fellow human beings who inhabit it. As we honor and respect the image of God in every human face, we must also honor the “creation of the world, by which the invisible things of [God] are clearly seen... even His eternal power and Godhead” (Romans 1:20).

HAH, Washington, DC, November 3, 2009

At the creation of the world, the Lord’s voice and original command that “nature may have its own laws remain in our world so that it is able to generate and bear fruit for all time” (Basil the Great, *On the Hexaemeron* IX PG 29.96) also guarantees the earth’s sustainability. So the earth will continue to generate and bear fruit if it is permitted to adhere to its own natural order and if we, as its inhabitants, live according to the commandments and laws of God, abiding by and practicing them. Then He alone “*will give rain in its season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit . . . And we shall eat our bread to the full and live securely in our land. And He will grant peace in the land*” (Leviticus 26.4-5).

HAH, September 1, 2013

Q

Why do we honor and recognize the creation of the world?

What does it mean that we now live in “critical times”?

What does behavior look like that honors the creation?

Reflections

Avoiding Greed and Exceeding Our Need

St. John Chrysostom, urges: “In all things, we should avoid greed and exceeding our need” (*Homily 37 on Genesis*) for “this ultimately trains us to become crude and inhumane” (*Homily 83 on Matthew*), “no longer allowing people to be people, but instead transforming them into beasts and demons” (*Homily 39 on I Corinthians*).

Therefore, convinced that Orthodox Christianity implies discarding everything superfluous and that Orthodox Christians are “good stewards of the grace of God” (1 Peter 4.10), we conclude with a message from a classic story, from which everyone can reasonably deduce how uneducated, yet faithful and respectful people perceived the natural environment and how it should be retained pure and prosperous:

In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers of the Sinai*, it is said about a monk that eight hungry Saracens once approached him for food, but he had nothing to offer them because he survived on raw, wild capers, whose bitterness could kill even a camel. However, upon seeing them dying of extreme hunger, he said to one of them: “Take your bow and cross this mountain. There, you will find a herd of wild goats. Shoot one of them, whichever one you desire, but do not shoot another.” The Saracen departed and, as the old man advised, shot one of the animals. But when he tried to shoot another, his bow immediately snapped. So he returned with the meat and related the story to his friends.

HAH, June 5, 2010

Q

Why does greed condition a person toward becoming crude and inhumane?

In what ways does consumerism encourage us to acquire more than we need?

What does the story of the monk in the Sinai desert teach us?

Reflection

The Orthodox Cosmic Vision

The breadth and depth of the Orthodox cosmic vision implies that humanity is a part of a “theophany,” which is greater than any individual. As St. Maximus states: “Human beings are not isolated from the rest of creation. They are bound by their very nature to the whole of creation.” Thus, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky urges:

*Love all God’s creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand.
Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love
the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will soon
perceive the divine mystery in things.*

HAH, Moscow, Russia, May 26, 2010

What is required is an act of repentance and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation....

HAH, The Common Declaration of
Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope John Paul II,
Venice, Italy, June 10, 2002

Q

What are the implications of the Orthodox vision of creation?

How should this vision shape our behavior?

Why does His All-Holiness call for repentance in how we have used creation?

Reflection

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, 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

Program Announcements

The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration is offering a series of tools and programs to help you and your 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 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

Watch for a program announcement for this summer, conditions permitting

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

Coming: A field representative program

If you are interested in a full time position in service to the Church, please send by mail a letter of inquiry and a resume. Thank you.

Websites

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

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

<https://faceofgodfilm.com/>

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Publication Department
P.O. Box 7348
Santa Rosa, CA 95407

web: www.Orth-Transfiguration.org



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