



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

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

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Serving the Orthodox
Church Since 2006

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

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

**Based upon the official statements and public writings
of Orthodox Christian Hierarchs**

Month One
January 1 - 31, 2020

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



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Introduction

This creation care study course presents the public statements of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew together with other Orthodox patriarchs and hierarchs in an easy to use format. This daily study program is designed for Orthodox Christians, but all people may benefit from reflection on the depth, the beauty and intricacy of the ancient Christian vision of human responsibility for the care and keeping of God's good earth.

There are two guiding principles in this method of presenting the teachings of Eastern Christianity: First, "Let the patriarchs and bishops be your teachers in the faith." Second, let God's will be done "on earth as it is in heaven." If the faithful will do this much, we can extend the life of the Church into the life of the world.

The format is simple and designed to fit busy schedules. Review just one page of readings per day. Examine the attached study questions. Do this six days per week. No lesson is provided for Sunday.

As you read each daily entry, know that reading the text is only the initial layer of understanding. To go deeper, pray to understand WHY a particular reading is an element of Christian faith and HOW it can be integrated into your daily life.

When you begin, start with a simple prayer for insight and inspiration. Then read the text for the day and examine the questions that follow. You can summarize your response in the reflection section at the end of each day's reading or on a separate sheet of paper.

The readings are deliberately short and contain only a few paragraphs. The reflection questions are basic, but important as they allow for integration of the message. These reflections are critical as this is where readers may encounter new insights which can expedite the acquisition of fresh inspirations and expanded vision.

This simple process of daily readings can help priests and theologians as well as novices, catechumens, and everyone in between to absorb the gospel message of Christian responsibility for God's creation.

Yours in service to God's good earth,

Fred Krueger
editor

The Joy of Genuine Thanksgiving

When Paul, the Apostle to the Nations, advised the Thessalonians to "*give thanks in all circumstances*" (1 Thess. 5:18), he also counseled them to "always rejoice, and pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:16-17), thus demonstrating that thanksgiving as prayer and everlasting joy go together and coexist inseparably.

Truly, the one who gives thanks experiences the joy that comes from the appreciation of that for which he or she is thankful, and from the overabundance of joy they turn toward the Giver and Provider of the good things received in grateful thanksgiving.

Conversely, the person who does not feel the internal need to thank the Creator of all the good things of this very good world, but ungratefully and egocentrically receives them – when the person is indifferent toward the one who provided these good things and thus worships the impersonal creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25), that person does not feel the deep joy of receiving the gifts of God, but only sullen and animalistic satisfaction.

Such a person is given over to irrational desires, to covetousness, and to "robberies from injustice" (Isaiah 61:8) that are despised by God. As a result, that person will be deprived of the sublime, pure, and heavenly joy of the one who gives thanks gratefully.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Letter, September 1, 1999

Q

How often should Christians be thankful?

What does personal experience show are the byproducts of thankfulness?

Why is a person without thankfulness often without heavenly joys?

Reflection

Taking Care of the Earth

It is a source of sincere joy to us that ... young people are able to raise awareness about environmental concerns and promote the caretaking of the earth.... It has become evident that the consequences of our environmental crisis will directly affect and impact the generations to come.

It has taken the adult generation a long time to realize how destructive our selfish lifestyle has been for the earth and just how depleting our arrogant ways have proved for its resources.... The younger generation has grown up during these years of turmoil. You have learned by osmosis, appreciating ... the importance of a simple life for the survival of the planet....

Yet today, we cannot take for granted our caretaking of the environment. Jesus Christ spoke of birds in the sky; today oil slicks wash them ashore. He referred to the beauty of the flowers in the fields; today chemicals and wars leave entire lands barren. Christ mentioned fruit in the parables that He used; today the lifestyles of the rich are supported by the crops of the poor. He could assume that foxes had homes; today so many of our fauna do not survive. Christ multiplied loaves of bread and fishes to feed the hungry; today 800 million people worldwide, many of them young children, are clinically undernourished.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Ustein Monastery, Norway, June 30, 2004

Q

Can you name some of the environmental problems in your area?

What are the human consequences of these problems now and in the future?

How might a simpler way of living reduce a person's impact on the earth?

Reflection

The Orthodox Church and Ecological Problems

All of humanity is responsible for the state of nature - God's creation. Resource depletion and environmental pollution amid rising world populations raise this issue with special urgency for all nations to preserve the diversity of life, the diligent use of natural resources and the prevention of environmental disasters provoked by human activities.

The original fall resulted in a distortion of the primordial nature. Scripture testifies to this: "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but by the will of him who subjected it" (Rom. 8:20). Pollution and destruction of nature - a direct consequence of human sin - [become] its visible embodiment. Various manifestations of the sinful attitude toward nature, characteristic of modern "consumer society," places the main purpose of [human life as] making a profit. The only possibility to restore the health of nature is the spiritual rebirth of the individual and society, in a true Christian, ascetic man's relation to their own needs, curbing the passions, and consistent self-restraint....

Guided by God's commandment about keeping the created world (Genesis 2:15), and caring for its spiritual and physical health, the Russian Orthodox Church is committed to participate in discussion of environmental issues, to work in this field, and to participate in collaboration with all who are concerned about environmental thinking in maintaining health and a normal life.

HB Patriarch Kyrill of Moscow and All Russia,
translation from Russian, Moscow, Russia, February 4, 2013

Q

What is the right and proper Christian way for humans to live on earth?

How might a deeper inward change of heart correct one's lifestyle?

What is required to "regain humility" and thereby recognize our limitations?

Reflection

Before the Altar of Creation

Everything that lives and breathes is sacred and beautiful in the eyes of God. The whole world is a sacrament. The entire created cosmos is a burning bush of God's uncreated energies. And humankind stands as a priest before the altar of creation, as microcosm and mediator.

Such is the true nature of things; or, as an Orthodox hymn describes it, "the truth of things," if only we have the eyes of faith to see it....

Each person is morally obliged to refrain from pollution and destruction of the environment.

- HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, May 24, 1999

Q

How do humans stand before the altar of creation as a "priest of creation"?

As 'priests of creation,' what attitudes and duties inform our behavior?

Why is refraining from pollution of God's earth part of each person's duty?

Reflection

The Blessing of the Waters

In the Orthodox Church the Baptism of our Lord in the waters of the Jordan River constitutes the second most significant feast of the liturgical cycle after the celebration of the Resurrection. The hymns of that day proclaim:

The nature of waters is sanctified, the earth is blessed, and the heavens are enlightened and so that by the elements of creation, and by the angels, and by human beings, by things both visible and invisible, God's most holy name may be glorified.

The implication for Christians is that Jesus Christ assumed human flesh in order to redeem and sanctify every aspect and detail of this world. This is why, on this day each year, Orthodox Christians will reserve and bottle a portion of the blessed water, with which they subsequently return and bless their homes and families, offices and spaces, gardens and animals.

The breadth and depth of the Orthodox cosmic vision implies that humanity is only one part of this magnificent epiphany. In this way, the natural environment ceases to be something that we observe objectively and exploit selfishly; instead it becomes a celebration of the profound interconnection and essential interdependence of all things, what St. Maximus the Confessor in the 7th century called a cosmic liturgy... Thus the future of this planet assumes critical importance for the kingdom of heaven.

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

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

Q

Why does the blessing of water lead to a respectful regard for creation?

How are conservation and compassion intimately connected? Explain.

How are people and creation connected in the great cosmic liturgy?

Reflection

An Obligation of Love for the Future

The new element which elevates the ecological problem to a level above that of the plagues of Pharaoh is the irreversible character of many of the catastrophes that are now occurring.

HAH, Symposium of the Black Sea, September 26, 1997

The Orthodox Church, following Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, accepts that God created the world 'very good,' and that the poor functions of nature are a result of human disobedience to the correct path and way of life shown by God.

Today's technological development has invited unusual environmental aggravations, reaching far beyond the point of their origin. These [include] atmospheric, sea and water pollutants, radioactive pollutants, global warming of the atmosphere, toxic substances into the food chain, and others.

Regardless of how small each person's contribution to [this] condition may be, individual behavior may seriously worsen or better the situation. On account of this, we do not consider the attempt to sensitize the common opinion for the care of the natural environment to be in vain, but rather beneficial.

Keeping the environment clean and proper for life is an obligation of love toward our fellow persons who are directly touched by these problems and a providential responsibility for the future of our values and children. This responsibility of love... urges us to consider the protection of the environment as a serious concern for us, which is not motivated by a pagan worship of nature, but from a deep respect and love toward our Creator and our fellow man.

HAH, Manila, The Philippines, February, 2000

Q

How does Scripture guide us in our relationship to the environment?

Why is a clean environment a responsibility for every person?

How does love of God relate to love and care for the earth?

Reflection

The Whole Creation Belongs First to God

In order to respect God's creation we must become conscious that everything in the world belongs to God who created it. Consequently, we humans are under no circumstance proprietors of God's creation, but people who accept his commandments, that is, the rules of His management. Hence, we become conscious that we have a serious responsibility for environmental protection, which is associated directly with the respect, which we all owe to the Creator, that is, to God.

Hence, the whole of creation, our planet and whatever exists on it, is God's wider habitation. Man, as an inseparable part of this habitation of God, must be protected in every way... The same applies to every part of creation. In this way we show special reverence to the Creator. Under no circumstances may man create an opposition with his environment; that is, the wider space of nature in which he lives.

We must not fall victims to the new times where unfortunately many people from inhuman arrogance and the unacceptable issues of colonization and the inconceivable lack of control over the industrial revolution and the unjust exploitation of man by his fellow human beings, see nature as their adversary and enemy which they should besiege, pillage, conquer and rudely rape, changing her ... into a huge cemetery...

HB Patriarch Theodoros II, Pope of Alexandria
and All Africa, Alexandria, Egypt, Sept. 8, 2012

Q

What is a right human relationship to nature?

How do we show special respect for God by the way we live?

Is your city in right relationship to God? How might that condition be corrected?

Reflection

Mobilizing a United Effort for the Earth

We call upon all of you, beloved brethren and children in the Lord, to take part in the titanic and ‘righteous battle’ to alleviate the environmental crisis, and to prevent the even worse results that derive from its consequences.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2010

Christians must call upon humanity to come together in a united effort for the safeguarding of the earth and for its revitalization.... Yes, let us call humanity to a common task, drawn by the love of man as the image of God and of the universe as the creation of God.

It will be a common task if all Christians take part in it and share their experience and their hope, those of the West and those of the East, those of the North and those of the South....

Christians will act by giving a cosmic dimension to their prayer, their hearing of the Word, their sacramental life, and their asceticism. Christians will act by example, showing the cultural, social and ecological richness of traditional ascetic values when they open out onto history. Here, I am thinking above all of the voluntary limitation of our desires and needs along with a profound sympathy for all life.”

HB Patriarch +Ignatius IV of Antioch, March 12, 1989

Q

What is the “righteous battle” regarding the environmental crisis?

What is the common task to which HB Patriarch Ignatius IV refers?

How can Orthodox Christians put their asceticism into action?

Reflection

As Priests before the Altar of the World

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

People of all faith traditions praise the Divine, for they seek to understand their relationship to the cosmos. The entire universe participates in a celebration of life, which St. Maximos the Confessor described as a “cosmic liturgy.” We see this cosmic liturgy in the symbiosis of life’s rich biological complexities. These complex relationships draw attention to themselves in humanity’s self-conscious awareness of the cosmos.

As human beings, created “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26), we are called to recognize this interdependence between our environment and ourselves. In the bread and wine of the Eucharist, as priests standing before the altar of the world, we offer the creation back to the Creator in relationship to Him and to each other.

HAH, Santa Barbara, November 8, 1997

Q

What are vertical relationships and what are our horizontal relationships?

How and why do humans have a sacred responsibility for the creation?

How do we offer creation back to God? Why might we do this?

Reflection

Treat Creation with Love and Respect

Just as every human life is a gift from God, to be treated with love and respect, so too is all the rest of Creation – which is why the Orthodox Church has also been a leading voice for healing the environment.

What can Orthodox Christianity contribute to the movement to protect the environment? We believe that through our unique liturgical and ascetic ethos, Orthodox spirituality can provide moral and ethical direction toward a new awareness about the planet.

Our sin toward the world – the spiritual root of all our pollution – lies in our refusal to view life and the world as a sacrament of thanksgiving, and as a gift of constant communion with God on a global scale....

Our first task is to raise the consciousness of adults who most use the resources and gifts of the planet. Ultimately, it is for our children that we must perceive our every action in the world as having a direct effect upon the future of the environment.... We do this out of a personal love for the natural world around us. We are called to work in humble harmony with creation and not in arrogant supremacy against it. Asceticism provides an example whereby we may live simply.

HAH, Washington, DC, November 3, 2009

Q

What is the Orthodox ascetic ethos?

How would you define ascetic behavior?

Why is ascesis valuable for every person?

Reflection

Climate Change in the Arctic

The climatic changes taking place in the Arctic and the contamination of parts of its food chain are an accurate and unavoidable image of human thoughtlessness. If there is one single message in all the information which we have received during our symposium [on the Arctic], it is this: ‘time is short.’

The ice of the Arctic is shrinking at a frightening pace. That is what we are told by scientists, that is what we are told by Greenlanders who know the ice better than anybody. If all the ice in Greenland melts, the consequences for Greenland and the world could be devastating: a Biblical catastrophe in the most literal sense.

As Orthodox Christians, we use the Greek word “*kairos*” to describe a brief moment in time which has eternal significance. When Our Lord Jesus Christ began his preaching, he declared that a decisive moment, a *kairos* (Mark 1:14), had arrived in the relationship between God and mankind.

For the human race as a whole, there is now a *kairos*... We will either act in time to protect life on earth from the worst consequences of human folly, or we will fail to act.

On behalf of all of us, on behalf of our Greenlandic hosts and on behalf of all the people, allow me to offer up a public prayer: ‘May God grant us the wisdom to act in time.’

HAH, Greenland, September 12, 2007

Q

What does the word “kairos” mean? How does it apply to our time?

What are some of the changes to climate now taking place?

What do you think that it means to “act in time”?

Reflection

Prayers for Preservation of the Natural Environment

In our times, we observe an excessive abuse of natural resources, resulting in the destruction of the planet's ecological conditions, so that the divinely-ordained regulations of human life on earth are increasingly transgressed. For instance, all of us – scientists, as well as religious and political leaders – are witnessing a rise in the atmosphere's temperature, extreme weather conditions, the pollution of ecosystems on land and in the sea, and an overall disturbance of the potential for life in some regions of the world.

We are obliged to admit that the causes of the aforementioned ecological changes are not inspired by God, but initiated by humans. Thus, the invocation of the Church to God as the Lord of all for the restoration of creation are essentially a petition of repentance for our sinfulness in destroying the world instead of preserving and sustaining its resources reasonably and carefully.

When we pray to God for the preservation of the environment, we are imploring God to change the mindset of the powerful, enlightening them not to destroy the planet's ecosystem for profit and short term interest. This concerns each of us as we all generate small ecological damage in our capacity and ignorance.

In addressing this appeal, we pray that our gracious Lord... will speak to the hearts of everyone so that we may respect the ecological balance that He offered in His wisdom and goodness, so that we and future generations will enjoy His gifts with thanksgiving and glorification.

May this divine wisdom, peace and power, which created and sustains and guides all creation in its hope for salvation in the kingdom, always maintain the beauty of the world and the welfare of humanity, leading all people of good will to produce fruitful works toward this purpose. And we invoke His grace and mercy on all of you, particularly those who respect and protect creation. Amen.

HAH, The Phanar, September 1, 2012

Q

How do humans cause the disfigurement and destruction of creation?

What must we do to correct this problem?

How can we see our personal responsibility for this destruction?

Reflection

Reuniting the Creation 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.”

If this is so, it means that everything has been created by and for the Word, as the Apostle Paul says in Colossians 1:16-17. The Word is the archetype of all things, and all things find in him their consummation, their “recapitulation.” The Gospel ought to be preached “to all the creatures,” according to the Epistle to the Colossians, and the Church in this vision is nothing other than the creation reunified with God through Christ....

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.” Precisely in the transfiguration of Jesus do the shining garments signify the words of the Bible and the body of the earth. Both are illumined by God’s grace. The relationship between Scripture and the world corresponds to that of the soul and the body: he who has in Christ a spiritual understanding of the first will be given a profound understanding of the second.

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

Q

What is cosmology?

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

How does this relate to the created world?

Reflection

Orthodox Christianity is Profoundly Ecological

While most of us are aware of the ecological crisis around us, few of us realize that our Orthodox faith is profoundly concerned with ecology on the highest order.

Indeed, if we actually tried to live our faith, we would be the foremost ecologists as well.

HE Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, Serbian Orthodox Church in Canada,
Synaxis magazine, Chilliwack, British Columbia, December, 1989

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.

The urgency of the situation and the progress of science and technology pave the way for a low-carbon global economy, the development of renewable energy sources and the aversion of further deforestation. We all need to collaborate, in order to make sure that our children will be able to enjoy the goods of the earth, which we bequeath to them.

HAH, Bangkok, Thailand, Sept 28, 2009

Q

Why should Orthodox Christians be concerned about global climate change?

What are the implications of failing to address this problem?

How may the individual person address climate change?

Reflection

For the Restoration of the Divine Harmony

We [pray] that a proper environmental ethos may prevail for the restoration of the divine harmony in our universe.... Our Church regards the sensitization of its faithful in relation to the natural environment and in regard to the development of inter-religious dialogue as a central and essential part of its ministry of solidarity and co-existence.

HAH, Oslo, Norway, June 12, 2002

We Orthodox Christians are called to offer service to humanity without expectation of anything in return, and also, to be examples for others to do the same.

Christ tells us to do good, to practice virtue, to practice virtuous works, to love our enemies — not just to love our friends. Christ also calls us to be teachers and guides through example, to serve God's created order — whether we serve as priest or lay person.

HAH, New York, New York, October 26, 2009

Q

What is an environmental ethos?

What are the virtues? Why are they essential for transformation?

How does practice of the virtues relate to the Divine Harmony?

Reflection

We Share a Common Responsibility for the Earth

A special emphasis must be put on the spiritual and religious aspect [of improving the environment]....

One will meet ecological concerns from a religious point of view if one takes into account the words of Genesis which witness the spirit of God in creation.

It is in this sense that the Romanian people emerged in history as a Christian people, understanding God as a Sun that sends out light, life and love, the uncreated energies, over the whole of creation....

Both God's transcendence beyond creation and his immanence in creation are very important for the efforts we make for preserving the integrity of the environment.

HB Patriarch Teoctist, Romanian Orthodox Church,
Constanta, Romania, September 25, 1997

Q

What does it mean to meet ecological concerns from a religious perspective?

What are the teachings in Genesis that shape an Orthodox concern for creation?

How is it that we all bear responsibility for ecological destruction?

Reflection

Integrating Theology with Our Practice

As Orthodox Christians, we must admit our failure to integrate our theology with our practice.... The challenge requires a more urgent response by the Church. Our response, however, is fraught with difficulties and barriers because we are captive to a mentality of consumption and greed that is foreign to Orthodox Christianity and contradictory to the spirit of communion and generosity. Instead, we are called to participate in the “cosmic liturgy” of creation (St. Maximus the Confessor), where “everything that breathes praises the Lord” (Psalm 150:1).

We all recognize that we can no longer desecrate God’s creation. What we refuse to do is take the next step that is required of us as priests of creation, which entails consecrating creation to the Creator. Avoiding desecration is only a partial response to the ecological crisis; accepting and advocating consecration is the fulfillment of our divine mandate to “serve and preserve the earth” (Gen. 2:15). Such a sanctification and offering to God of “His own of His own, on behalf of all and for the sake of all” (From the Divine Liturgy) also unleashes a transformative potential and restorative capacity for healing and wholeness.

However, in order to heal the earth, we must purify our hearts and transform our habits. Every act of defilement on the body of creation is ultimately contempt for the Body of Christ. Whereas when we demonstrate respectful consideration for the earth’s natural resources, then we can also begin to discern the perspective of the kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” (From the Lord’s Prayer).

HE Archbishop Elpidophoros, New York City, NY, September 1, 2019

Q

How might we better integrate our theology with our lifestyles?

What does it mean to consecrate creation back to God?

Reflect on what it would mean to transform our hearts and habits?

Reflection

The Meaning of Sacrifice

Sacrifices will have to be made by all. Unfortunately, people normally perceive sacrifice as loss or surrender. Yet, the root meaning of the word has less to do with “going without” and more to do with “making sacred.”

Just as pollution has profound spiritual connotations, related to the destruction of creation when disconnected from its Creator, so too sacrifice is the necessary corrective for reducing the world to a commodity to be exploited by our selfish appetites.

When we sacrifice, we render the world sacred, recognizing it as a gift from above to be shared with all humanity – if not equally, then at least justly. Sacrifice is ultimately an expression of gratitude (for what we enjoy) and humility (for what we must share).

HAH, Washington, DC, November 4, 2009

Q

What is a sacrifice?

How does sacrifice make something sacred?

What are consequences of sacrifice for the world?

Reflection

An Immediate Duty for Orthodox Christians

We are all bound together by a deep concern and an active interest in the issues of the physical environment. ...

Various people, both within Albania as well as abroad, wonder and ask me why the Orthodox Church of Albania, which only a decade ago lay in total ruins, and which even today continues to have urgent inner needs, is so intensely involved in ecological projects. The answer is simple. An interest in the creation is an immediate duty for those who feel they have benefitted from God; it is a consequence of an Orthodox self-consciousness.

The horizon of Orthodoxy does not comprise only humankind. She has an immediate interest for the entire creation. Since the disturbance of the physical environment's equilibrium intensifies due to the careless actions of human beings, the Orthodox Church considers it her duty to invigorate – within her members and society in general – a sensitivity for the creation that suffers the worst exploitation of man's greed; to limit the consumer hysteria with a temperate "self-control" that forms an inseparable component of "the fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22), and to cultivate an effective respect for the physical environment, stressing unceasingly that this is the work of the Triune God, who reveals the sacredness and liturgical role that all creatures have.

His Beatitude Archbishop ANASTASIOS, Primate, Albanian Orthodox Church,
Durrës, Albania, June 6, 2002

Q

How and why are we all bound together in a concern for the environment?

How broad is the horizon of Orthodox Christian concern?

Why do so many people develop an insatiable greed for acquisition?

Reflection

These Actions are Sinful

To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation... for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands... for humans to injure other humans with disease... for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances... these things are sins.

Thus we begin the process of healing our worldly environment which was blessed with Beauty and created by God. Then we may also begin to participate responsibly, as persons making informed choices in both the whole of creation, and within our own souls.

HAH, Georgetown University, November 3, 2009

Q

Why are offenses against the natural world sinful?

What does repentance involve for this type of sin?

How do we address sins in the structure of society, such as polluting substances?

Reflection

Pollution and Poverty are Connected

Orthodox theology 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. Ecology is inevitably related to economy; our global economy is simply outgrowing the capacity of our planet to support it. At stake is not just our ability to live in a sustainable way, but our very survival. Scientists estimate that those most hurt by global warming in years to come will be those who can least afford it. Therefore, the ecological problem of pollution is invariably connected to the social problem of poverty; and so all ecological activity is ultimately measured and properly judged by its impact and effect upon the poor, as the Lord Himself warns us in Matthew, chapter 25.

It is clear that only a cooperative and collective response – by religious leaders, scientists, political authorities and financial corporations – will appropriately and effectively address these critical issues of our time.

HAH, Utrecht, The Netherlands, April 24, 2014

Q

How are economy and ecology related to each other?

Why is the global economy outgrowing the ability of the planet to support it?

How might the Church support a cooperative response to this problem?

Reflection

Correcting Our Vision of the World

We have repeatedly stated that the crisis that we are facing in our world is not primarily ecological. It is a crisis concerning the way we perceive the world. We are treating our planet in a selfish, godless manner precisely because we fail to see it as a gift inherited from above; it is our obligation to receive, respect and return this gift to future generations. Therefore, before we can effectively deal with problems of our environment, we must change the way we regard the world. Otherwise, we are simply dealing with symptoms, not with causes. We require a new heavenly worldview if we are to desire “a new earth” (Rev. 21.1).

This is the source of our optimism. The natural environment — the forest, water and land — belongs to all generations. Your generation is entitled to a better, brighter world; a world free from degradation, violence and bloodshed; a world of generosity and love. It is the selfless love for our children that will show us the path to the future. And it is your generation that will initiate the changes in lifestyle to secure this future. May God bless you in this sacred struggle.

HAH, Moscow, Russia, May 26, 2010

Q

What is a sacred vision of the world? How is this vision sustained?

If everyone in the world lived as you live, could the world survive?

What must change for the world to become free of pollution and degradation?

Reflection

The Orthodox Ecological Ethic

At the outset we should state that there certainly is an Orthodox Christian ecological ethic. It is an ethic that is not an option for Orthodox faithful. It is not a mere theological “specialty” [for] those who have reasons to be interested.

The Orthodox ecological ethic proceeds directly from our doctrine. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem said, “the method of godliness consists of two things – pious doctrines and virtuous practice.” Without any doubt, virtuous practice demands right attitude and action toward the environment....

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

Within the Orthodox Church, how is the environment viewed? Is it a great reservoir of untapped riches, waiting to be exploited for profit? Should we view the environment as a living, almost divine being? Or is the environment God’s Creation, where man is set with a profound, symbiotic relationship, and a definite, holy purpose?

Of course, the question begs preference for the latter. It should be obvious from Holy Tradition that the environment is better understood as Creation, and that man is not a separate entity, independent from the rest of nature.

We in the Orthodox Church see Creation as the foundational concept by which we understand all environmental issues. It is the fact that a creature is created that gives that creature meaning, value and purpose. This is true whether that creature is a human person, an animal, an insect, a tree, or an astronomical body. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of creation as foundational concept. It means that we must accept the reality of every creature as *meaningful*. In our Orthodox ecological ethic, we insist that man adopt a humbler, more honest and scientific outlook, in which he seeks to discern meaning in Creation.

HE Metropolitan Nicholas of Amisso, Primate, American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Church, The Antiochian Village, Ligonier, Pennsylvania, June 15, 2002

Q

How is the word “creation” different from the word “environment”?

What is different about concern for God’s creation and environmentalism?

Why is every creature in some way “meaningful”?

Reflection

The Book of Nature

Nature is a book, opened wide for all to read and to learn. Each plant, each animal, and each micro-organism tells a unique story, unfolds a wonderful mystery, relates an extraordinary harmony and balance, which are interdependent and complementary.

The same dialogue of communication and mystery of communion is detected in the galaxies, where the countless stars betray the same mystical beauty and mathematical inter-connectedness. We do not need this perspective in order to believe in God or to prove His existence. We need it simply to breathe; we need it for us simply to be. This is why, in the seventh century, St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662) spoke of a “cosmic liturgy.”

How unfortunate it is that we lead our life without even noticing the environmental concert that is playing out before our very eyes and ears. In this orchestra, each minute detail plays a critical role, and every trivial aspect participates in an essential way. No single member – human or otherwise – can be removed without the entire symphony being deeply affected. No single tree or animal can be removed without the entire picture being profoundly distorted, if not destroyed. Is it any wonder that Orthodox theology underlines the sacredness of the natural environment and our responsibility for its preservation?

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Utrecht, The Netherlands, April 24, 2014

The mystical way in Orthodox Christianity requires, as a necessary stage, the contemplation of nature.

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

Q

How might a person learn to discern spiritual lessons from the natural world?

Why does Orthodox theology underline the sacredness of the natural world?

How much do you observe the natural concert playing out around you?

Reflection

Orthodox Christian Spirituality

The word “spirituality” is unknown in the language of Scripture and Tradition. It has become a vague term of mere convenience.

While recognizing the value and insights of secular psychology and the contemporary culture of therapy, these disciplines are incomplete, reductive, and in some cases, antithetical to the healing traditions of the Church.

Orthodox spirituality does not exist in a vacuum. It presupposes Orthodox doctrine and ecclesiology.... It is intimately bound up with the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. Any attempt to practice it apart from active participation in that life is to cut it off from its living and life-giving roots.

Orthodox spirituality is liturgical, sacramental and eucharistic. Outside the experience of the Liturgy, it is impossible to understand the spirituality of the Orthodox Church.... It must be stressed that Orthodox spirituality is by nature ascetic and monastic. Dying to the world, the monastic person lives for Christ and for others. Unless we become dead to the world, and to the things in the world (1 Jn 2:15), how shall we live the “life that is hidden in Christ” (Col 3:3). We must die to this world, so that we may live in God, as St. Symeon the New Theologian says.

HAH, Baltimore, Maryland, October 23, 1997

Q:

What is the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church?

How does “dying to the world” relate to how we live as Christians?

Why does maintaining a clean environment relate to this “spirituality”?

Reflection

A Most Urgent Question

Care of the environment constitutes a most urgent question for each and every human person. ... Man takes from the natural world not only that which is necessary..., but he often seeks to satisfy false needs.... Twenty percent of humanity consumes eighty percent of the world's wealth and accounts for an equal percentage of the world's ecological catastrophes.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, June 25, 1997

The modern world is unfortunately plagued by a crisis that cannot be reduced to inter-personal relations, but extends to the relationship between humanity and the natural environment... Therefore, the Church cannot remain idle before the crisis that affects humanity in relation to the natural environment. It is our obligation to assume every possible initiative... so that our own flock may become aware of the demand for respect toward creation by avoiding any abuse or irrational use of natural resources....

HAH, October 10th, 2008

The care for and protection of Creation constitutes the responsibility of everyone on an individual and collective level.

HAH, June 5, 2009

Q

Why is care for God's creation (i.e., the environment) an urgent question?

What are the consequences of disregarding this issue?

How might you step beyond conventionality into a more complete life in Christ?

Reflection

Missionaries for the Protection of the Earth

With firm faith in the Pantokrator and Creator of all creation, we Orthodox Christians are called to carry out the work of an evangelist and missionary with regard to the protection of creation.

HAH, August 26, 2015

It will take no less than a high-profile crusade by religious leaders and civil society to force change.... We must persistently remind our political leaders that there is no way of endlessly manipulating our environment that comes without cost or consequence. There is no doubt in our mind that this is a movement as critically urgent and as morally imperative as any campaign for fundamental human and civil rights.

HAH, Halki, June 18, 2012

Q

What is a missionary with regard to the protection of creation?

How could this effort become a global crusade by religious leaders?

What are the costs of abusing the earth? What are the benefits of earth healing?

Reflection

Unifying How We View God and the World

What does preserving the planet have to do with saving the soul? It is commonly assumed that climate change and the exploitation of nature's resources are matters that primarily concern politicians, scientists and technocrats....

Nevertheless, there are no two ways of looking at either the world or God. There is no distinction between concern for human welfare and concern for ecological preservation. The way we relate to nature as creation directly reflects the way we believe in God as Creator of all things. The sensitivity with which we handle the environment mirrors the sacredness that we reserve for the divine.

Moreover, scientists estimate that those most hurt by global warming in the years to come, are those who can least afford it. According to the Gospel of St. Matthew, the questions that will be asked of us at the final moment of accountability will not be about our religious observance but on whether we fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, comforted the sick, and cared for captives. ...

We are all in this together. Our planet unites us in a unique way. While we may differ in our conception of the origins or purpose of our world, ... surely we can all agree on our responsibility and obligation to protect its natural resources – which are neither limitless nor negotiable – for future generations.

It is not too late to respond.... We could steer the earth toward our children's future. Yet we can no longer afford to wait.... We have a choice to make. The time to choose is now.

HAH, Warsaw, Poland, November 14, 2013

Q

How are saving souls and saving the planet related?

What is human responsibility to God for the care of the earth?

What should guide Christians in our response to ecological problems?

Reflection

To continue with this program of daily readings....

If you have benefitted from this first month of daily readings and wish to continue through the months ahead, but have not subscribed, please send a note to the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration.

For a complimentary electronic copy every month, simply send an email note to Fred@Ecostewards.org

To receive a printed copy by mail, a donation is appreciated to cover the costs of printing and mailing. Our address is:

OFT, P.O. Box 7348, Santa Rosa, California 95407

We will mail printed copies usually by the middle of the prior month.

Please let your friends and local clergy know about this program. You are invited to share this Reading-a-Day program with others. The more Christians can extend their heritage to care for God's creation, the healthier our world can become, and all of us as well.

Special thanks are due to Eleni Rose Collard, Elizabeth Mace and Marc Allen Richardson at the Saint Seraphim Orthodox Church in Santa Rosa, California for helping to prepare this mailing, for reviewing this text and assembling the mailing of materials.

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Mission Statement of the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration exists to hallow God's Name "on earth as it is in heaven" by seeking the transfiguration of creation through the activation of the Christian calling toward transfigured life. In the context of the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church, the Fellowship seeks to extend the transfiguring activity of the sacraments into all creation through ascetic practice, the keeping of the commandments and the acquisition of virtue, thus restoring the beauty and integrity of God's earthly temple.

The Vision and Spiritual Direction of
His All-Holiness
Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
together with other
Orthodox Church Hierarchs

A Reflection Course
on the Mind of the Church with
focus upon Christian Responsibility
for the Care and Protection
of God's Creation

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