



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

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

A Spirituality of the Creation

by His Beatitude Patriarch IGNATIUS IV of Antioch

In response to an invitation from the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Switzerland together with the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV presented a series of lecture-sermons during Great Lent, 1989. As Primate of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East, Patriarch Ignatius presides from his patriarchal throne in Damascus, Syria over a community of one million Orthodox faithful throughout the Arab countries of the Middle East and Asia, Palestine excepted, with dioceses also in Europe, the Americas, and Australia. The following is the second lecture in this three-part series. It was delivered in Lausanne, Switzerland on March 11, 1989.

This lecture text was provided to the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration
in French by the Office of HB Patriarch Ignatius IV
Damascus, Syria

Translated and Reprinted with the Blessing and Permission
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A Spirituality of Creation

Lausanne, Switzerland
March 11, 1989

§1 **T**HE THEME OF “SAFEGUARDING CREATION” is thrusting itself more and more into the foreground of Christian reflection. Today I will try to present an outline of a spirituality of the creation. I will do this from the perspective of Orthodoxy, but without forgetting the convergent insights which are to be found in the Christianity of the West.

§2 The Church, it appears to me, exercises its cosmic ministry in the first place through the sacraments, which the East prefers to call “the mysteries.” In its depth, in spite of the historical sins of Christian believers, the Church is the mystery of Christ in the Holy Spirit, and as such, let us have the courage to say, as did the Fathers, that she constitutes the heart of the world. She is less in the world than the world is in her. It is through the Holy Spirit, for instance, that trees put out new leaves at the end of winter, and Christ of the Apocalypse holds the constellations in his hand.

§3 The world is safeguarded by the prayers, the blessings, and the transmutations which take place in the Church. “Throughout all this,” writes Saint Gregory of Nyssa, “matter, originally dead and insensible, transmits great miracles and takes into herself the power of God.”¹ The separative power of the adversary is then exorcized and matter can realize her sacramental potential. The baptism of Christ in the Jordan, for example, evokes the Pascal image of humiliation and resurrection, and the water which symbolizes the material universe is sanctified. On January 6th the Orthodox Church celebrates Holy Theophany, and it is at this time that this prayer of cosmic proportions, written by Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem in the 7th century, rings forth and resounds throughout creation. Then, the bishop throws a cross into the sea – and if you are in Russia, he throws it into a river where the ice has just been broken! – and the young people dive into the water to retrieve it.

¹ *In Baptismum Christi*, PG 46, 581B

§4 The *epiclesis* involved in all sacramental acts is a prolongation of Pentecost, whereby the Holy Spirit raises up the new creation in Christ. With new vigor it takes up the dynamism of the Resurrection and the original “cosmic Pentecost.” All culminates in the eucharistic transformation where the bread and wine find their completion in becoming, beneath the breath and fire of the Holy Spirit, the Body and Blood of Christ. For Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, it is the whole of nature that we offer so that she may be made eucharist. “In the offering,” says Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, “we remember the sky, the earth, the sea, the sun, the moon and all creation.”²

§5 The Armenian Liturgy proclaims, “The heavens and the earth are filled with glory thanks to the manifestation of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, Who by His Passion makes all creatures new.” The intricate complexities and integrities of nature along with the works and feats of human culture collaborate so that matter might become the chalice offered in the Light of the Spirit. From this bit of transfigured and reintegrated matter, the fire grows and reaches from the rocks to the stars. The light shines forth in increasingly vast waves, protecting the world and saturating it, little by little, with the *Parousia*.

An Ocean of Symbols

§6 THE MAN WHO TAKES COMMUNION should become a man who sanctifies. The mystical way in Orthodoxy requires as a necessary stage the contemplation of nature, a vision of “the secrets of the glory of God which is hidden in things,” to quote a great mystic who was both an Arab and a Christian, Saint Isaac the Syrian.³

§7 Another Christian Arab, Maximus the Confessor, interprets this contemplation as an extension of the eucharist. “Living things,” he said, “reveal themselves as the ‘body’ of the Lord, and their celestial roots as his ‘blood.’”⁴ Man can make his own the interiority of things; he can share in their praise; he can hear it in them; he can make it conscious and vocal in himself. Again, it is Maximus who says, “It is important to gather the spiritual truths, the *logoi* of all things, and to present them to God as offerings on behalf of creation.”⁵

§8 Yes, for us as monks, as it was for the Fathers of the Church, and for Saint

² “*Catecheses Mystagogiques*” 5, 6

³ “Spiritual Homilies,” translated from the French, Paris, 1981, 72nd chapter, p. 281

⁴ “Questions to Thalasius,” q. 35

⁵ “Mystagogia,” Nr. 2

Bonaventure in the West – the Franciscan adversary of Thomist Aristotelianism, and for the great Orthodox religious philosophers of our century, “the world,” and I am quoting from Saint Ephrem the Syrian, “is an ocean of symbols.” Saint Bonaventure declared,

The splendor of things reveals God to us. He, therefore, who is not illumined by such great splendor of created things, is blind; he who is not awakened by such great clamor is deaf; he who does not praise God because of all these effects is dumb.⁶

§9 Even before Bonaventure, Saint Maximus the Confessor wrote, “Here he is, the Invisible in visible things, the Impalpable in palpable things. Thus does He gather us into Himself from all things.”⁷

§10 Originally the word “symbol” meant “ring.” In many cultures two friends, having to separate, carried halves of a broken ring, which upon meeting many years later served as a sign of recognition. The symbol of the ring as applied to the earth is a sign of recognition between the spiritual heaven and the material earth. For a Christian this symbol is a sign of the Incarnation and its dwelling place in Christ.

§11 If we think that nature is sufficient, that it can be reduced to a mix of blind processes in a world which is immense and closed, then nature has no meaning and death has the last word. We are then nothing but people condemned to death, living in a universe which is itself condemned to cyclical or final extinction. But *ecclesial* man, the man-in-Christ, who is consciously an image of God, discovers meaning everywhere. Nothing is closed to him and the world is translucent. Look at a tree, how it grows against gravity, uniting earth and sky as a living axis. Then the tree is dug up, stripped of its branches and foliage, and replanted on the Mount of the Skull (according to an ancient tradition, the skull waiting under Golgotha – as pictured on icons of the Crucifixion – belongs to the First Adam). The tree becomes the living Cross, the Tree of Life at the heart of the cubic city spoken of in the Book of Revelation (cf. Rev. 21:16). The earth develops into a high place and its mountains become a place of prayer. The earth becomes the peaceful heart of creation which mirrors heaven in the way that the sky is reflected on the surface of a still lake. The waters of the Flood destroyed, but the waters of Baptism give life. The birds and the stars inhabit the sky with angel-like presence. The desert is the place of limitations, the place where life is difficult, the arid heart where God nevertheless transforms the tears of Haggar and causes manna, the symbol of the Bread of Life, to rain.

⁶ Cited in Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of the Modern Age*, Paris, 1947, p. 442.

⁷ Ambigua, PG 91, 1288

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

The World as Theophany

§13 BY WITHDRAWING THE INTELLECT FROM THE WORLD OF VIOLENCE and from mechanical, objectivized sexuality, asceticism transforms it, by uniting it with the heart into an “eye of fire” or “the dwelling place of light.” This light is linked to the secret light within things, “that ineffable and prodigious fire hidden in the essence of things as in the burning bush,” as Maximus said, alluding to the eucharistic Body of Christ, which is covered over by the ash of our blindness and of our greed.⁸

§14 The Fathers use an analogy here. Our physical eyes, they say, cannot see the light unless they open and purify themselves, and then only because they harbor in themselves, as the ancient Greek physiology believed, a spark of that same light. In the same way, the eye of the heart sees the secret hiddenness of things, this writing in light, only to the extent that it has purified itself and filled itself with this spiritual light. Only light can see light. A single light unites the subject and the object, abolishing both the enclosedness of the first and the exteriority of the second. The subject communes with the object, or rather, through the mediation of the object, communes with the Word, the Word of God, of which the object is a substantial word, a symbol.

§15 This experience, alas, rare in Western Christianity, has nevertheless found sublime expression in the “Song of the Creatures” by St. Francis of Assisi, which begins with praise of the sun:

Praise be to thee, my Lord, with all thy creatures,
Especially brother sun,
Who is the day, and
By whom thou dost enlighten us.
He is beautiful and shines with great splendor,
Bearing thy sign, Most High.

⁸ *ibid.*, 1148C

§16 This experience ought to enable us to include within Christianity the Hindu and Far Eastern understanding of the world as a theophany, not with a view to some impersonal fusion, as is often the case in the ecological movement, but with a view to personal communion. I am thinking of the cosmic sacredness in India of everything from the animals to the Ganges River, which is like the universe springing forth from a divine glacier in the North and which becomes in the South like a humble woman pouring out drops of milk in oblation on the roots of a banyan tree. I am thinking of the Japanese, beholding in wonder with the “ah!” of things, (their “*ahite*”) as Claudel has translated it. I am thinking of the poem of a Shinto monk of the 12th century:

How a divine thing can quietly radiate,
can be there...
I ignore it, and yet my tears overflow
with the penetrating call of its being.

§17 I am sure that the theology of divine energies shining from the resurrection for the transfiguration of the universe can help us to put these admirable intuitions into a right perspective, the one of a person “in communion.” They are “visitations of the Word,” as the apologist fathers call them, “divine touches” or “beacons” to guide us toward the One who came and the One who is coming.

§18 This experience should also help us join in and deepen the investigations of so many artists and scholars. Rilke saw the mission of the poet as “gathering the honey of the visible in the great, golden beehive of the invisible.” Van Gogh wanted to “record the words of nature and paint things as apparitions.” Klee commented on his artistic research, saying, “existence advances toward the unfathomable depths of the primordial Breath to the extent that the mystery of life reveals itself.” Certain American scholars who are attempting to “get to the point” of the world, think that there exists a kind of “mother language” which all beings are trying to speak, each in its own way.

§19 Albert Einstein marveled at the mysterious intelligibility of the universe, as if in the background there stood a “He knows.” Simone Weil believed that the scholar, if he probes deep enough, will see his heart taken hold of by beauty. “The scholar,” she said, “has as his aim the union of his own spirit with the mysterious wisdom which is eternally inscribed in the universe.”

§20 Someone who sanctifies himself by practicing the contemplation of nature ceases to make an object of the universe through greed and blindness. His presence lightens and brings peace. Numerous stories show man in a paradisaic peace with the most ferocious of beasts. These stories often arise in popular religion and attest to incontestable facts. In all ways they reaffirm the truth.

§21 Contemplation of nature transforms nature, not in the direction of Babel, but in the direction of the New Jerusalem. When an Orthodox hermit, well into the twentieth century, gives poisonous snakes little cups of milk to drink, he knows them in a different way than the scientist – though in our own time scientists of the school of Conrad Lorenz are on the way toward some sort of communion with the animals!

A Vertical Consciousness of the Universe

§22 MY QUESTION, THEN, IS TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THIS KNOWLEDGE of beings by the heart or spirit confront modern rationality, not to deny it – let us leave all anti-intellectualism to the sects – but to refine it, to broaden and open it, and help it to look for – and here I quote the philosopher of science Edgar Morin, “a principle of explanation which does not dissolve the mystery of things.”

§23 For the Fathers of the Church the knowledge of the glory of God hidden in beings and in things appears as an activity which is inseparably both spiritual and intellectual. In the long run, we go beyond the capacity of our reason not through a lack or a refusal of light, through obscurantism, but in a superabundance of light. This is why the Fathers took from Greek thought the word *Logos* which, while it has all the personal flavor of *dabar*, the Biblical word, nevertheless it also means reason. One of the aims of the contemplation of nature is to disclose the true reasons, or meanings, of things, in which the divine Reason (*Logos*) expresses itself. Such an investigation therefore does not despise, but rather enlightens human culture, whether it be art or science.

§24 At the end of the Second World War in a country of Southeast Europe, I was told that a group of Orthodox physicists used to practice the Jesus Prayer while carrying out their research. Father Lev Gillet, and I am quoting now, related, “the name of Jesus, when applied to the things that we see, becomes a key which opens up the world, a means of hidden offering, a placing of the divine seal on all that exists. The invocation of the name of Jesus is a way to transfigure the universe.” These young physicists were certainly working within this perspective.

§25 Difficult times followed. The physicists became scattered and I do not know what became of them. The fact itself, however, could be very precious. Is not a vertical consciousness of the universe able to complete and correct our horizontal knowledge? Can spiritual knowledge open up for science new dimensions of intelligibility, bringing with it certain limits, a certain common sense to a civilization which no longer knows what to do with its abilities and runs the risk of disaster?

Recovering Traditional Asceticism

§26 WE NEED TO RECOVER, WITH A VIEW TO THE TRANSFIGURATION OF NATURE, the three traditional forms of asceticism: fasting, charity and vigilance.

§27 “The nutrition which we receive through food,” wrote Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, “is our natural communion with the substances of the earth.”⁹ Our cosmic life therefore, includes blessing of the food which we receive from the earth and the way we treat it. In a similar way the labors of society for our necessities are also part of that cosmic life.

§28 Fasting – the voluntary limitation of one’s food requirements – makes it possible for us, at least in part, to cleanse desire so that it can recover its original character as desire for God and love of neighbor. Abstention from blood products, that is, from the flesh of warm-blooded animals, limits our relationship of death with the world. For monks, fasting takes place throughout the whole year – and for others during prescribed periods of fasting.

§29 The spirit of fasting, which should be diffused throughout the whole of our civilization, cultivates a change from an exploitive relationship with nature to one which is modeled on the Eucharist.

§30 Furthermore, tradition tells us that fasting is inseparable from mercy and sharing. The Fathers have underlined that physical matter passes continuously from one body to another, and that the universe is therefore but a single interconnected body, that of humanity. That is why, for them, the earth belongs only to God. Humans are only its managers, and the consequences of human activity, in a prolongation of eucharistic sharing and in a spirit of fasting, should be the subject of a beneficent circulation, that is a just distribution. A cosmology of transfiguration is thus inseparable from a sociology of communion, even though this has to be continuously invented anew in the concrete circumstances of history. This was identified as the “true communism” by Pierre Leroux, one of the great thinkers of evangelical socialism in France in 1848.

§31 It is in a spirit of fasting together with a profound sympathy for nature and our brethren (the brother, today, exists on a planetary scale) that Christians must face up to the absurdity of the present situation in which advertising encourages and even multiplies the false needs of some while others are dying of hunger, and where chemistry and biology overstimulate the earth in one place while elsewhere the desert expands.

⁹ “*L’Orthodoxie*,” edition of 1932, p. 240

§32 Chastity seeks to transform the cosmic life which flows through us and which often makes us its puppets. It integrates eros into our relationship with others, whether this be, as in monasticism, a direct meeting with the absolute, or, as in the asceticism of marriage, in profound affection and tenderness between two human beings.

§33 The crucifixion of cosmic *eros* and its transformation into a regenerating force could mean, wrote Vladimir Soloviev at the end of his book, *The Meaning of Love*, “producing, or freeing, real forces which would gradually take control of the material world and spiritualize it. The power which is needed for the creation of this spiritual-corporeal reality in man would come from this conversion inwards” of the power of *eros*. Chastity permits us to discover and respect the mysterious femininity of the earth. Now that the technological world view, extending far beyond the Biblical approach, has given birth to us out of an earthly womb, it is necessary for us to renew a nuptial pact with the earth.¹⁰

§34 During the first half of the 20th century the Russian theological school of Sophiology tried to express this intuition by celebrating Wisdom, much as Teilhard de Chardin in his little-known poem “The Divine Feminine” tried to express it.

Placed between God and the earth
as a point of common attraction,
Wisdom causes the One
to come ardently to the other.¹¹

§35 The function of vigilance is to resist the idolatries which close our eyes to the truth of things and to inaugurate between man and the world a relationship in which each embraces the other. There has been in modern times, and there still is, a blind will to power in the exercise of human knowledge and capabilities. Science has engaged only the quantifiable abstractions of things, and so technology has become our destiny.

§36 Vigilance makes us attentive to the humble and warm beauty of things which is certainly something precarious, but through which appears the Resurrected One in whom all is alive forever. An apple may be for me, if I am hungry, simply nourishment to be absorbed. For a statistician, it may only be an economic fact. But Cézanne in his paintings teaches me to look at it differently through a style which the French call *natures mortes*, but which the English and Germans, more correctly, call a still life. His

¹⁰ Tr. Fr. de 1985, p. 99

¹¹ “The Eternal Feminine,” Paris, 1983, p. 21

work is a distant but real reflection of the icon, which in the words of Father Gregory Krug, “is like a summit covered with snow which pours its rivulets down into the valley, communicating life to all things.”

§37 Vigilance teaches us to look at the world in the light of the icon, and of the still lifes of Cézanne. Then we shall understand that in it the face of Christ can be discerned, with its pain and its glory. And we shall have to choose: either add to this pain, or respect and increase this glory.



Thanks are due to Patricia Sivils Krueger for this translation

Questions for Parish Reflection

- Q: How does the church have a mission to “safeguard creation”?
What is the theological basis for this claim?
- Q: What is asceticism? Does it relate to our Christian practice today?
- Q: How does traditional asceticism relate to the safeguarding of creation? Explain.
- Q: What does HB Patriarch Ignatius IV mean when he speaks of a vertical consciousness of the universe?
- Q: What does the word “theophany” mean?
- Q: How does Jesus Christ relate to creation? What is the Orthodox Christian vision of creation?
- Q: How is the world “an ocean of symbols” as HB states?
- Q: Why does the mystical way in Orthodoxy requires the contemplation of nature?
- Q: What is our personal responsibility in the safeguarding of creation?

