

Man as Curse or Blessing

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My Brother Hierarchs, Reverend Fathers and Clergy gathered here, along with all the beloved Faithful who are with us this day: Glory be to Jesus Christ!

Whenever we consider the issue of the environment, we end up dealing with ecological ethics. We do not discuss environmental issues as much as we discuss how man deals with the environment, and how he uses the elements of the environment.

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 academic and professional reasons to be interested. The Orthodox ecological ethic proceeds directly from our doctrine. St. Cyril of Jerusalem said, “the method of godliness consists of two things – pious doctrines and virtuous practice.” Without any doubt, virtuous practice demands right attitude and action toward the environment, for our Holy Tradition demands nothing else.

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

We focus on an issue in ecological ethics that sets these differences in sharp distinction. This issue pertains to how the environment is viewed: Is it a great reservoir of untapped riches, waiting to be exploited for profit? Or is it an untouchable sanctuary, where nothing should be used? Should we view the environment as a living, almost divine being? Or is the environment God's Creation, where man is set with a profound, symbiotic relationship, and a definite, holy purpose?

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. But society, along with many Christians, seems to have turned aside from the obvious testimonies of Christian doctrine, and has adopted other beliefs.

Take, for example, this statement: "The environment is created by God." While you and I accept this as commonplace, this statement is not accepted by most in the present-day ecological dialogue. But 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 plant, a tree, a geological formation or an astronomical body.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of creation as a foundational concept. It means that we must accept the reality of every creature as *meaningful*. Nothing exists as a chance encounter. Each creature is created by God to exist, conceptualized from eternity and realized in time. God alone gives meaning to His Creation. In our Orthodox ecological ethic, we insist that man adopt a humbler, more honest and scientific outlook, in which he seeks to discern meaning in Creation.

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

This is not the case in other beliefs. In other perspectives, the meaning of creation is usually limited to theories on "how it came to be," and "how it continues to run." Outside academia, most ecological beliefs are "anthropocentric," or "man-centered."

Nature is practically meaningless unless it enters a relationship with man. Then, man invests it with meaning. That meaning may be religious, as in primitive societies and some neo-pagan cults. But more often, that meaning is usually economic. In our technological age, nature is seen as a reservoir of potential economic value, as something to be mined, or harvested, or drilled, or developed. A forest is meaningful in terms of board-feet... A river is meaningful in terms of how many kilowatt hours can be generated... In our technocratic culture, nature is meaningful *insofar as it is useful*.

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Orthodox ecological ethic.”*

This is a crucial point for us to understand and to defeat. Aside from the obvious fact that it is supremely materialistic and secular, it is a point that has garnered a lot of Christian sympathy, especially in the West. To this end, a passage from Genesis is often quoted: *“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”* (Genesis 1:28).

Many people have taken this verse... to fashion a supposedly Christian ecological ethic of “dominion.” They understand these passages to mean that God has given man the entire stuff of Creation *en masse* to do with as he sees fit.

It should be self-evident that such an ethic is utterly foreign to Christian piety. Christians, by their very nature, should recoil from such a wanton manifestation of the passions of pride, avarice and gluttony. Unfortunately we have become so habituated to this ethic that we no longer recoil. We no longer find it foreign. Why is it that we are not insulted, as we should be, when we are called – everyday – “consumers”?

The Orthodox Christian ecological ethic protests against the consumerist ethic. The truth of “dominion” in the Holy Tradition is clear: man was given primacy in Creation; but he was given primacy with the responsibility of *stewardship*. A good steward uses the resources of his Master, but he does not merely “consume.” A good steward is careful to protect the things of his Master’s house: he protects against destruction and decay. He would never permit pollution, rainforest burning, extinction of entire species. He would be alarmed by global warming, ozone depletion, and the loss of wetlands.

We say this while believing firmly in the primacy of man in God’s creation. We cannot agree with radical environmentalists who oppose human dominion... some of them go so far as to oppose any human place within the environment....

Mankind was given dominion over the world. He has been given the resources and the cunning to take things from Creation for his own benefit. He can hunt and kill

animals for meat and skins. He can harvest plants for food and resources. He can fell trees for shelter and fire. He can dig holes to mine the earth. All this we do not deny in the Orthodox Church: truly man has been given this right by God.

But man must use the things of Creation while acknowledging that these things are created. It is impossible to make [this] acknowledgment and exploit the environment at the same time: one cannot be, simultaneously, a mere consumer and a Christian steward who uses and enjoys the things of Creation responsibly and with great care.

But the Orthodox ecological ethic goes beyond responsible stewardship. "Stewardship" is an ethical concept that is accessible to all, even to those outside the Church. Its themes of responsibility, balance, and prudence are amenable to common sense.... The best of the secular ecologists reflect the ideal of stewardship in their statements. Anyone who is fair-minded, Christian or not, is able to condemn the wanton misuse of nature.

The ideal of stewardship is not enough. The Orthodox ecological ethic is also ecclesial – and it is this dimension of our ethic that is especially needed today. What is ecclesial in the Orthodox ecological ethic is the revelation that man is a source of blessing for the entire natural world. Mankind has a priestly role, a eucharistic vocation, in mediating God's grace to Creation.

This emphasis is reflected time and again in Orthodox ecclesial life. The *euchologion* frequently calls for man's interaction with the things of Creation in the Holy Mysteries. Palms and willow branches are blessed on Palm Sunday. Flowers and herbs are blessed on Transfiguration. Basil and flowers are blessed at Holy Cross. There are prayers of blessing for new fields, wells to be dug, beehives and orchards and gardens to yield great bounty and harvest. Through all this blessing, there is the constant theme of man gathering God's creatures, and bringing them into higher participation in Grace.

Man is the only creature in Creation that is a *person*, both body and soul. Thus, man has the task of harmonizing and uniting the world of the soul with the world of the body and matter. This is the task of blessing. It is a task that is comprised of the right use of the world. But it is a task that calls for man to be transformed.... The Orthodox ecological ethic calls for nothing less than for the ecologist to pursue the spiritual life.

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This should not be surprising. The man or woman who enters a life of repentance, seeking spiritual purification, will win freedom from the passions that inflame consumerism and other forms of environmental exploitation. The one who continues in the spiritual life, who seeks illumination, will discern in each creature its *logos*. He will discern the meaning and purpose that creature has received from God.

Finally, the one who seeks first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness will acquire the Holy Spirit. He will become a conduit for the presence of grace and God's Uncreated Energies. The unifying and restorative energies of God Himself will flow through his life, and will accomplish much salvation for the created world. Have we not seen this in the life of Saint Sergius of Radonezh? Or in the life of Saint Seraphim of Sarov?

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The Saint is the image of the Orthodox ecological ethic. The environment needs now, more than ever, such a source of Divine Grace. *“Creation awaits with eager longing for the sons of God,”* Saint Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans (8:19). Creation waits for man to take his rightful role in the natural scheme. For too long, man has been a “curse” to Creation. It began with Adam and Eve’s destructive declaration of autonomy at The Fall, and the curse continued through aeons of warfare, pollution and unbridled waste.

The Orthodox ecological ethic testifies that the long legacy of the ecological curse can be stopped by the moral freedom of each person. It can be stopped, and things can be put right again, when a Christian thanks God for every gift, and prays so that its use may be true to grace. In this way, and this way only, man can be a blessing, and not a curse.

Questions for Reflection

- Q: What are ethics? Why are they significant?
- Q: What is the Orthodox ecological ethic?
- Q: How and why does Holy Tradition demand an Orthodox ecological ethic?

- Q: What does the word “ecclesial” mean?
- Q: Why is the Orthodox ecological ethic not an option, but a necessity?
- Q: What is a right Orthodox view of the environment? Why is this?

- Q: Why is “creation” the foundational concept for an Orthodox understanding of the world?
- Q: What is different between the word “creation” and the word “environment”?
- Q: What is an Orthodox understanding of the concept of “consumerism”? Why should Orthodox Christians protest against the label consumers?

- Q: Why does the Orthodox ecological ethic call for the ecologist to pursue the spiritual life? Explain.
- Q: Describe an Orthodox lifestyle that is in harmony with grace and God’s creation. What changes might be necessary in your life to achieve this?
- Q: How can we be a blessing and not a curse to God’s creation? What is required?