

# The Transfiguration of Creation

by Andrew Vincent Rossi

*“Thou wast transfigured on the mount, O Christ God, revealing Thy glory to Thy disciples as they could bear it. Let Thine everlasting light shine upon us sinners. Through the prayers of the Theotokos, O Giver of Light, glory to Thee”* (Festal Troparion).

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS on Mount Tabor is one of the absolutely central events in the Scriptural revelation of Christ. In our Orthodox tradition, the Transfiguration is celebrated liturgically as one of the twelve great feasts of the liturgical year, contemplated theologically by many of the greatest Fathers of the Church as a foundation of Orthodox mystagogical theology, and concentrated upon ascetically by the great Neptic Fathers of the *Philokalia* as the paradigm and goal of Orthodox spiritual practice: *theosis* or divinization. Thus the place of the Transfiguration in the Orthodox Church, its universal, integral and definitive meaning in the traditional Orthodox *ethos* (distinctive character, spirit, attitude, imagination and piety) and *phronema* (mindset, worldview, cognitive paradigm) and *praxis* (method of spiritual realization), simply cannot be overestimated.

The Orthodox Church teaches that the Transfiguration manifests the divinity of Christ hidden under the veil of the flesh, stressing also that the light of the Transfiguration is the uncreated light of the Divine nature, which reveals the truth of Orthodox theology’s teaching about the distinction between the Divine uncreated essence and uncreated energies. Patristic theology connects the meaning of the Transfiguration event to ascetic effort (the “high mountain apart” to which the apostles were led) and to the transfiguring power of noetic prayer

(St. Luke: “as He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered”). The ascetic Fathers point out that the grace of *theoria*/vision is meted out according to God’s will in synergy with our efforts (Our Lord singled out only three disciples, Peter, James and John to share this experience). The Orthodox liturgy clearly shows that the Transfiguration reveals the full meaning of the Crucifixion:

*“On the mountain wast Thou transfigured, O Christ God, and Thy disciples beheld Thy glory as far as they could see it; so that when they would behold Thee crucified, they would understand that Thy suffering was voluntary, and would proclaim to the world that Thou art truly the Radiance of the Father”* (festal kontakion).

This also points to the appearance of Moses and Elias as representing the Law and the Prophets, thus signaling the fulfillment and completion in Christ of the whole of the Old Covenant.

In the Orthodox Church today it is not as fully appreciated as it could be that the Transfiguration of Christ upon Mount Tabor has equally profound implications for the creation or the natural order as a whole. It is a central conviction of the Fathers of the Church that the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Christ, the *Theanthropos*, and the establishment of the Church at Pentecost, have for their purpose, not only the glorious confirmation of the Divine nature in Christ, not only the divinization (*theosis*) of humanity in Christ, but

also the total transfiguration of all of creation, animate and inanimate. An exclusive emphasis on an anthropocentric (human-centered) interpretation of the Transfiguration event is therefore a serious limitation, not to say, distortion, of the fullness of Orthodox teaching on the subject, which is at once Trinitarian, Christological, anthropological (doctrine of man), cosmological (doctrine of creation) and eschatological (doctrine of the end times).

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The three synoptic Gospels all bear witness to the Transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-9; Luke 9:28-36). The Gospel of John, written by one of the three Taboric witnesses, is surely reflecting this most awesome event in the words: *“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth”* (1:14). For brevity’s sake, let Saint Mark’s account represent the Gospel witness since his words come undoubtedly from Saint Peter, his spiritual father, who was also one of the three apostolic witnesses to this great theophany. And let Saint Maximos the Confessor represent the patristic witness, since he synthesizes the entire Byzantine theological enterprise.

The whole of Saint Mark’s Gospel is built around three key moments in the life of Christ, which reveal the precise beginning, middle and consummation of His earthly mission: His Baptism, Transfiguration and Crucifixion. Each of these events is a transfiguring theophany, a showing-forth of the glory and reality of God. Each of these theophanies is a moment of

extreme metamorphosis (the English form of the Greek word for “transfiguration”): the Baptism signaling the metamorphosis of the Uncreated Logos assuming a created human nature, the Transfiguration, the moment when the human nature of Christ reveals the glory of the Divine nature; the Crucifixion, the moment when sin and death are transformed by Christ’s supreme sacrifice. Each of these sublime moments of metamorphosis contain a cluster of motifs – images or actions that are similar in each, linking the three theophanies together as a triptych of “transfiguration” through parallel sacred, symbolic images. These images are *sacred* because they reveal the Divine presence, and they are *symbols* because they are images of creation transformed by the uncreated energies that reveal the Uncreated Divine Presence.

The motifs that occur in all three theophanies are: (1) the heavenly apparition or disturbance (the tearing of the heavens-- Baptism), the searing, unendurable brightness of the “bright” cloud covering the disciples with shadow – Transfiguration, the darkness of the heavens and the rending of the temple veil, a gigantic curtain 80 ft high that symbolized, according to Josephus, the entire creation – Crucifixion; (2) the voice declaring Jesus to be the Son of God (at the Baptism and Transfiguration, it is the voice of God the Father; at the Crucifixion it is the voice of the centurion), (3) the figure of Elijah, the prophet who will announce the Day of the Lord-- Malachi 4:5 (present as John the Baptist at the Baptism, Elijah with Moses at the Transfiguration, and onlookers thinking Jesus is calling for Elijah (Crucifixion); (4) something descending: the Spirit in the form of a dove (Baptism), the Spirit as the bright cloud overwhelming the senses (Transfiguration), and the tear in the temple veil, which Mark explicitly says ran from the top to the bottom, as Jesus gives up His spirit/pneuma (Crucifixion).

All of these sacred, living symbols reveal that these three moments of extreme metamorphosis in the life of Christ are “boundary events.” They signify the crossing of, or better, the passing through, or best of all, the transfiguring, of a boundary. The three primary boundaries of created existence are space, time and matter. The transfiguration of Christ breaches all three at once: Divine infinity transfiguring space, eternity transfiguring time, and limitless, uncreated light transfiguring matter. The cosmos itself is this three-fold boundary, and it is breached, torn open and transfigured by the power of the Triune God revealed in these climactic moments in the life of Christ. The boundary is between the Divine and the human, the uncreated and the created, eternity and time, the heaven and the earth, death in life, and life in death. Christ’s life is thus revealed as the paradigm of spiritual initiation, transformation and transfiguration, a paradigm that includes not only the Divine and the human, but all created nature. Thus the witness of the Gospels.

Now we turn to a summary of the patristic theology of creation in the teaching of Saint Maximos the Confessor. One of the basic principles of the patristic theology of creation as synthesized by Saint Maximos is the underlying integrity of the creation as created by God. Creation and all created being are held in being by the thought, word and will of God. Everything God creates and holds in being is a particular manifestation of God’s will. Creation is God’s will incarnated in each creature. Each created thing is itself a word, or *logos*, spoken by God, which finds its meaning, purpose, goal and end in and through the Divine Logos. According to Saint John of Damaskos, all creation is a single vast icon of God. The integrity of the created order, the integral harmony of the world-icon, was disturbed by the Fall, bringing sin, disfigurement, corruption and death. This cosmic

tragedy bound all creation in a bondage of corruption (Romans 8:21) that has become a “law” of nature working against the true law of nature found in the will of God. This results, as Saint Isaac the Syrian says, in three basic states for all beings: (1) that which is according to nature (i.e., when the creature is in accordance with God’s will for that creature; (2) that which is contrary to nature, the state of disharmony between the will of God for creatures and their actual state (this is particularly manifested in human beings, who, as fallen, continually exercise their God-given freedom in sinful acts contrary to nature; and (3) that which is above nature, which is the uncreated grace and energy of God manifested in the created world, primarily through the Incarnation of Christ, and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the Church as the Body of Christ. The Church as Body of Christ is the new creation, the seed and surety of the transfigured creation – the new heaven and new earth – when all creation is restored to its true being in Christ, when each created *logos* or living symbol is fulfilled in the One Logos, and God will be “all in all.”

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According to Saint Maximos and the whole patristic tradition, the face of Christ, radiating on Mount Tabor a dazzling, unendurable light, reveals Christ’s divinity, which both illumines, dazzles and blinds (*Ambiguum 10*). The garments

of the Lord, which Saint Mark's gospel says became "exceedingly white," impossibly bright, reveal the transfiguration of the creation. Saint Maximos says the transfigured garments of the Lord are both the words of Scripture and the forms of creation (*Ambiguum 10*). The cosmos is a book of revelation and the Scripture is a revealed cosmos. Both consist of *logoi*, words, which reveal, when read with the Spirit, the will and mind of God. Both are transfigured through Christ. The disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration were also transfigured, not only in spirit and soul, but also in body. The uncreated light and grace of Christ, streaming from his transfigured face, body and garments, transfigured the very senses of the apostles, allowing them to behold his glory, as of the only begotten of the Father, "full of grace and truth." Since the human nature shared by Christ with all humanity, according to the Fathers, is a microcosm of the whole created order, the fact that the transfigured body of Christ reveals His divinity in a flood of uncreated light, and that this same transfiguring uncreated energy streams from his face, body and clothing and illumines and transfigures the bodies of the apostles, means without doubt that the whole of creation is lifted up, and is meant to be lifted up, transformed and transfigured by the irresistible power of the grace of the Logos.

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The glory of the Transfiguration is "the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." The grace is the effulgent, all-pervading uncreated energy of God that transfigures all things. The truth is the immanent presence of the triune God in the ineffable

totality of his infinitely loving being in the uncreated energy that is everywhere present and fills all things. Thus the truth that embraces all creation in love is not only that all who believe on Him shall be saved, but that all creation will

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be transfigured in Him. As St. Maximos says, "when the world rises renewed in Christ, then the body will become like the soul, and sensible things like intelligible things in dignity and glory, for the unique divine power will manifest itself in all things in a vivid and active presence proportioned to each one, and will by itself preserve unbroken for endless ages the body of unity" (*Mystagogy 7*).

## Part II

IF IT IS AMONG THE GLORIES OF EASTERN Orthodoxy that it has placed a high value on the creation, that it has consistently understood Christology to have a cosmic dimension, and that it has always taught that the cosmos itself has a transfigured destiny, it is disappointing, to say the least, to find that in practice the contemporary Orthodox Church, particularly in the West, is far from being a strong, consistent and effective witness for the preservation and restoration of God's much-suffering, human-beset creation, much less its transfiguration.

There are a number of reasons for this – historical, cultural, and economic – but, practically speaking, the fundamental reasons for this lapse are three: first, the dislocation of

Orthodox peoples from traditional cultures in which the bond of people, land and livelihood was traditional, immediate and concrete, and thus an “*oikonomia*” of permanent, if unconsciously understood, value; second, the failure of the hierarchical and pastoral leadership of Orthodox communities in the New World to recognize that the peculiar qualities of modern post-industrial society, originating in the West, but now world-wide, are inimical and destructive to authentic Orthodox values.

These first two causes are understandable and excusable to some extent. It is not easy making a living under any circumstances, and the circumstances facing the immigrants who brought Orthodoxy to the West were difficult and all-consuming. Again, church leaders are as susceptible as anyone else to the subtle and incessant cultural conditioning that besets us all in our techno-consumerist society. Archpastors may simply be totally preoccupied with doing their best to provide for the liturgical, pastoral and spiritual needs of their flocks under all manner of circumstances, unaware that many of the “circumstances” faced by their flocks are not simply the perennial difficulties of life, but are rooted in the systemic evils of a godless society. It is necessary to state here that the thrust of this critical observation is not to suggest that Christians must return to some kind of idealized, primitive society, but that the values of contemporary culture are not to be assimilated mindlessly or uncritically.

There is a third reason, however, not so excusable: willful ignorance, culpable forgetfulness or selfish disregard of the Orthodox Church’s clear teaching, based on the witness of Scripture and the Saints, and on the sacred and sacramental character of all created things. It is simply impossible – and to pretend or teach otherwise is a grave spiritual error – to integrate the Orthodox understanding of the sacred,

sacramental character of creation with the modern world’s inhuman, god-forsaken exploitation, desecration and destruction of the God-given gifts of nature, land and people. It is fundamentally contrary to the Orthodox *ethos* to reduce nature, land and people, as modern society does, to the rationalized abstractions of “resources,” “capital” and “consumers.” Modern society desecrates and disfigures the world; the Orthodox Church seeks to consecrate and transfigure the world.

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It may be that the idea of “transfiguration” and all that it implies is too vast or too vague a concept for us to grasp, too hard for us to believe that it actually applies, not just to Jesus, but to each one of us and even all of creation. Yet “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” says the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 11:1). Saint Maximos, following Saint Dionysios the Areopagite, sets the theological paradigm for the Orthodox Tradition when he teaches three key principles of Orthodox cosmology (1) that every created thing has its “word,” principle or “logos” rooted in the Divine Logos; (2) that these created words or “logoi” are gifts and wills (“*thelemata*”) of God, and (3) that the divine energies that hold these *logoi*/wills in existence are intended by God to draw all things to their transfiguration. These three principles are grounded in the patristic insight of the immanence of God in all created things. Saint Simeon the New Theologian confirms the immanence and inseparability of God in his creation.

*How then was {the Word} everywhere before making the world and, when He had made it, how was He shining in it without the world comprehending Him? (cf. John 1:1-15).*

*Pay careful attention: God ‘Who is everywhere present and fills all things’ was not, Scripture says, separated from it by location when He created this sensible world, but by the nature of the glory of His divinity, it being evident that nothing created approached or comprehended Him at all. Indeed, being inseparable from all He is as clearly in all.*

If the transfiguration of creation appears to be too impractical, or “out of this world,” or too unrealistic a notion to have any real meaning or impact in our daily lives, we need to ask ourselves if we are truly following the Scriptural command to “put on the mind of Christ.” How should we raise ourselves up so that the doctrine of the transfiguration of creation becomes comprehensible? How can we understand it so that it makes a difference in the actions and decisions we make in our daily lives? How can we get our minds around it so that it might influence our hearts, and be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (Psalm 119:105)? The most important thing of all is to instill in our minds by every means possible that the loving care for creation is an absolute requirement placed by the Triune God on all humanity, that it is infinitely pleasing to God and, that, as such, it is a basic part of living the Orthodox Christian life.

Genesis One tells us that at the creation of man and woman, God commanded them to be fruitful, multiply, replenish, subdue and have dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:28). Genesis Two calls on man to “cultivate” and “keep” (in other words, nurture and protect) the garden (Genesis 2:15). These strong words, given to mankind by God at his creation, are a law fixed

in human nature, but whether as word or concept or law, they all must be seen as being totally within the context of human nature created in the image and likeness of God. No amount of research into the “true” meanings of these Greek or Hebrew words can ever change the fact that they must be understood as referring to that way of understanding, believing and acting toward the world that is in the image and according to the likeness of God.

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Finally, the fact that it is only according to being created in God’s image and likeness that human beings can properly care for the natural world is also the implicit Biblical link with the transfiguration of creation. For as the Patristic witness of the Orthodox tradition is unanimous in declaring, the process of *theosis* or divinization is precisely the process by which the image nature of human beings becomes harmonized with integral likeness to God in knowledge, action and truth. Therefore, as Christ became transfigured before the three chosen apostles, and through them before all humanity, as their beings were transfigured even to be able to see the Lord’s transfiguration, and thus to prefigure the promised transfiguration of all humanity (“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2), so too the command written into human nature by God at the creation to love and care for creation means ultimately that human beings are to participate in the transfiguration of creation.

*“To remember that God is in all things is the foundation of the Orthodox ethic of the healing of creation...”*

If we as Orthodox Christians find it difficult to hold in our minds and hearts that the transfiguration of creation is a fundamental responsibility of being an Orthodox Christian, this only shows how much we are under the control of what the patristic writers call the “three noetic giants,” ignorance, forgetfulness and slothfulness. These three giants represent the debased conditions of the soul, how far one is from “putting on the mind of Christ” in spite of the all the grace one has received. Ignorance, forgetfulness and sloth are the symptoms of our spiritual sickness, and a purpose of the Church is to be an agent and place of healing for these basic ills. The state of the creation reflects the state of our souls. We must, therefore, seek to overcome the three noetic giants. Not only our souls, but the very earth itself, hangs in the balance.

First, we must resist and overcome the noetic giant of ignorance. The ignorance spoken of by the Fathers, especially Saint Mark the Ascetic and Saint Gregory of Sinai in the *Philokalia*, is ultimately a spiritual ignorance. It is not that we do not know this or that fact; it is the condition of not knowing God in oneself and in creation. Our ignorance of creation is probably more central than our forgetfulness, if that is possible; for ignorance leads always to forgetfulness, although the opposite may also be true. What are we ignorant of, as far as creation is concerned, especially since humanity has achieved unprecedented results in many spheres of knowledge, science, medicine, technology, based on our accumulated scientific knowledge of

natural forces and processes? Our ignorance is, to repeat, a spiritual ignorance: we no longer know the spiritual basis of all created things; we no longer see with the poet “infinity in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour.” This kind of knowledge is not “poetic” in the sense of a pleasant linguistic fantasy that we might take or leave, but it is the salvific recognition of Divine immanence in creation, for infinity and eternity are “names” or attributes of God. We must, as Orthodox Christians, fix in our minds and hearts the knowledge that creation is a liturgy, a cosmic liturgy in which the Triune God communes with us in truth and grace and love, and without communion with God in creation, we cannot be saved.

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The next thing to do is to resist the evil giant of forgetfulness. We must remember and never forget, no matter in what walk of life we find ourselves, that the responsibility for the healing and restoration of creation is not an option, but is integral to the fundamental human task given by God to mankind in the Garden of Eden. It is, therefore, part and parcel of the Orthodox *ethos*, incumbent upon every Orthodox Christian. Again, the forgetfulness the Fathers speak of is a spiritual forgetfulness. It is forgetfulness of the presence of God, as Himself, in oneself, in all things. We are, as Orthodox Christians, all called to the remembrance of God. To remember God is to be conscious of His Presence in all things and in oneself. To remember that God is in all things is the foundation of the Orthodox ethic of the

healing of creation, for all created things are gifts that God has willed to exist, both for humanity's sake and in themselves.

*“To be healed in oneself from spiritual sickness... is also to begin to heal the sickness of creation. For the spiritual sickness in our souls and the physical destruction and degradation of creation have the same cause and source.”*

Thirdly, we must do battle with the evil giant of slothfulness. This is the temptation to believe that we in our individual lives can do nothing to stop or change the present destructive order or things, or that because of the enormity of the global crisis, nothing we do will have any perceptible effect, so why bother? Slothfulness is the child of forgetfulness, because we can only succumb to the temptation of sloth or laziness toward the healing of the earth or the healing of our spiritual sickness if we have forgotten the Presence of God in all things and in oneself.

Finally, although because of the shape and logic of language, one is forced to speak of first, second and third when speaking of the three noetic giants, I do not mean to suggest that they are to be overcome by some kind of schematic method. Ignorance, forgetfulness and slothfulness exist in us simultaneously as three aspects of one illness, our lack of unity with God. To struggle with one condition, such as

forgetfulness of God, is to struggle simultaneously with all three. By seeking the cure of our souls in the eucharistic and ascetic practices of our Orthodox faith, we will be attacking simultaneously the foothold that the three giants have established in our minds and hearts and souls. By recognizing the presence of the effect of ignorance, forgetfulness, and slothfulness in ourselves, we will be able also to see clearly their presence in creation itself. To be healed in oneself from the spiritual sickness caused by the three noetic giants is also to begin to heal the sickness of creation. For the spiritual sickness in our souls and the physical destruction and degradation of creation have the same cause and source.

Equally, the healing and transfiguration of human nature and the transfiguration of creation have the same cause and source: Christ Jesus, our life and salvation, the same yesterday, today and forever.

*For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God... because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God"*

- Romans 8:19,21

