

THE ECOLOGICAL STEWARD:
A NEW MINISTRY FOR ORTHODOX PARISHES AND CAMPUSES

by Subdeacon Andrew Stoiko

Your Beatitude Metropolitan Tikhon, Your Graces, reverend clergy, distinguished guests, panelists, and
brothers and sisters in Christ —

Glory to Jesus Christ. Glory Now and Forever !

There are three parts to my presentation, entitled “The Ecological Steward: A New Ministry for Orthodox Parishes and Campuses.” In the first part I will mention several ways in which St. Herman of Alaska is a prototype of the Orthodox attitude towards creation. In the second part, I will explain how the cross is a symbol of reconciliation of the alienated world in which we live. And in the third part, I will give specific suggestions for a new ministry of ecological stewardship for Orthodox parishes and campuses.

PART 1: ST. HERMAN OF ALASKA AS A PROTOTYPE OF ORTHODOX STEWARDSHIP

In this first part I will mention some ways in which St. Herman of Alaska, the First-Sanctified of North America, can be viewed as a prototype of the Orthodox attitude towards creation. Because “the light of his holy life and great deeds guides those who follow the Orthodox Way,” (to quote the words of his Troparion), I feel that the new ecological ministry can be aided by St. Herman’s example.

Most of all, his life reveals a reverence and love for creation and all life. This holy monk, Fr. Herman, is known for his supreme love of Christ and all creation, as well as for his wisdom and miracles. This true wilderness saint lived on Spruce Island, near Kodiak, Alaska, in humble simplicity of spirit and heart. He is a model of stewardship of God’s creation, wherein he exemplifies a *synergy* between man and nature. Examples are manifold: he cultivated the land in stewardship of God’s gift of nature, and replenished it; he fed the animals, including ermine, bear and birds; he helped fish by clearing blocked river-flow so that the fish could swim unhindered (*SHOWICON*); he not only taught, but also lived the science of all sciences, the Law of God; his garden provided for his subsistence; he taught his beloved native Alaskans organic

farming (as it would be termed today), and God provided everything in abundance.

In addition to his living in harmony with the natural world, St. Herman's continual prayer for all creation was fervent: he prayed for the salvation of his neighbors; and because he cared for the moral enlightenment of the Alutiiqs, he built a school. As he believed, so he acted — gentle, meek and compassionate, yet powerful in his speech when he taught. His life demonstrated self-sacrifice and he wasted nothing; he was a caretaker of not only the Alutiiq natives who came to him, but of all creation that was entrusted to his care. Two supreme examples of Fr. Herman's love for people and for all of nature are manifested when both a tidal wave and a rapidly spreading forest fire were miraculously stopped, as a result of his fervent prayers before an icon of the Theotokos.

To conclude this first part — in which we affirm that Fr. Herman is a prototype of Orthodox ecological stewardship — we must emphasize how St. Herman's holy life bore witness to the Orthodox (*SHOWICON*) cosmological world-view: by replenishing the earth; by caring for all of creation; by living in humility with sacrifice, yet in abundance; by having love and joy; by being in the constant presence of God; by abhorring the abuse of any living creature that God has created; and by having joyful gratitude for all that the Lord provided. The witness of his life-long conservation and protection of creation, that was inseparable from his constant praise of God and his obedience to Christ, changed the lives of others. Indeed, the grace-filled miracle of changing hearts and minds, whereby others were converted to Christ, is the greatest miracle brought about by St. Herman's actions, great deeds, spiritual teachings and his many sayings.

PART 2: THE CROSS AS A SYMBOL OF RECONCILIATION & THE TRANSFIGURATION

The fallen world in which we live is characterized by alienation from that with which we were originally united: alienation from ourselves, from God, from our fellow humans and from the animals and the world of nature. Reconciliation with that from which we are separated is what constitutes salvation. To be saved means to be made whole and holy — to be healed from the disease of our alienation. Orthodoxy

teaches that our relationship with the natural world is an essential component of our salvation, and that just as nature fell when man fell, so likewise, nature is intended to be restored to its original state of beauty when people are healed from their fallen state of alienation — that all of nature shares in the restoration of communion with God.

Christ's Holy Cross is a symbol of our salvation, wherein that which is separated, is reunited or reconciled. The vertical member represents the reconciliation between God and man, and the horizontal bar — where Christ is embracing the whole world — symbolizes our reconciliation with our fellow human beings and with the whole natural world. (SHOW ICON OF THE CRUCIFIXION) Thus the Holy Cross is an ineffable expression of God's Love for His children and for all of His creation, and of the goodness of His original creation. To understand the mystery of the Cross is to begin to perceive the theological dimensions of the Orthodox attitude of ecological stewardship.

Another expression of this transformation of man and nature is the great feast of the Transfiguration of Christ (SHOW ICON). This feast and its icon affirm that the physical world is good, although fallen, and is intended to participate in sanctification. Therefore it is sinful and contrary to God's purposes to abuse and exploit any part of creation — human beings or nature.

PART 3: SUGGESTIONS FOR A NEW MINISTRY OF ECOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP

In implementing the OFT's vision of creating an action-oriented ecological ministry in each parish, I can't emphasize enough that we must first and foremost have an active teaching ministry that will change people's hearts and minds. The result would then be a change of attitudes about their relationship with all the created world, and their role in taking responsibility to conserve and protect that world, because of their love for Christ. We must keep in mind that we must effect this change of an individual's inner self, in order to change the outer world. To do this, naturally, we must have volunteers in each parish and campus, adapting recommendations to the circumstances of each parish and community.

I suggest the following as just a handful of many possible suggestions necessary to transform our parishes, campuses and homes, so that they function in harmony with the created world around us.

- ◆ Establish an ecological steward in each parish and campus; gather a team of like-hearted volunteers;
- ◆ Have regular meetings of the team to evaluate means of conserving renewable and non-renewable resources of parish's interior and exterior property, and the elimination of toxic materials;
- ◆ Establish parish ecological seminars and workshops for educating parishioners whose objectives are to change individual's personal attitudes about wasting natural resources, while recognizing that personal habits will change when attitudes change;
- ◆ Emphasize action-points that everyone can enact, such as personal, parish and community recycling; reducing consumption of power; and promoting thrift and frugality, both in the parish and at home;
- ◆ Establish a parish garden, where possible; have clean-up action days to combat litter and pollution in the community;
- ◆ Change the mind-set and pattern of people's daily lives from endless consumerism to communion.

For the best-developed and presented action-list for ecological stewardship, please consult Fred Krueger's handbook, "*Greening The Orthodox Parish: Handbook for Christian Ecological Practice.*"

[Before concluding, I would like to interject a personal note, by mentioning how an ecological conference at St. Tikhon's Seminary in April 2010 was a seminal and transforming experience for many of us who attended, and that illuminated our understanding of the sacredness of creation. It also made clear the connection of Orthodox theology and the need for both spiritual and practical action to address the needs of preserving and taking personal and corporate responsibility as Orthodox Christians for all creation, including the unborn, that has been entrusted to our care. The following day some of us were able to participate in a life-changing, one-day "Christ in the Wilderness" guided-pilgrimage, led by the OFT Executive Director, Fred Krueger.]

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that ecological stewardship within Orthodox Christianity must proceed from a change of attitude towards the universe, recognizing that we are PART of nature, and that nature is part of us. Therefore, we reject the secular Western view that humans have “dominion” over nature, and are to “subjugate” nature, which results in the abuse and exploitation of creation, and the dehumanization of life in all forms. This prevailing immoral and abhorrent secular world-view, with which we are socialized, is the polar opposite of the Orthodox reverence for all life.