



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

A Conference report: On Earth as it is in Heaven

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Over one hundred and twenty Orthodox Christians and friends gathered on Monday, November 11th, 2013, at the Frosene Conference Center of Saint Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral in the Nation's Capital. The conference theme was "On Earth as it is in Heaven."

The program focused on Orthodox theology and how it translates into a variety of perspectives on environmental issues, including climate change, water conservation, parish design, and a variety of actions that can and should be taken at the parish level to protect and sustain God's created world.

The first keynote speaker was **His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios**, leader of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. He and other hierarchs – notably His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholemew – have been leaders in the faith community on environmental issues.

His Eminence opened his presentation by declaring, "I am grateful to the organizers, the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration, an organization formally blessed and endorsed by our Assembly of Bishops. Indeed, in seeking to transfigure our parishes and parishioners, the Fellowship reflects precisely what the Assembly of Bishops seeks to do on a Pan-Orthodox level for the unified witness of our Church in this country."

His Eminence listed some of the attitudes within western society that give rise to a worldview at variance with the Orthodox view of creation. These, he declared, give impetus to the problems of the environment which penetrate into our parishes.

He emphasized that "...as people of faith, and particularly as Orthodox Christians, we are – first and foremost – obliged and called 'to put our own household

in order' (2 Samuel 17:23). We must address the environmental priorities and needs in our own parishes and among our own faithful.”

He concluded his insightful and inspiring message with the following remarks:

“We assume these [ecological] responsibilities, not because it is easy; nor again because it is politically correct. We do so because it is the right thing to do; because we have chosen to bear the Cross of Christ. We care for God’s creation because we have been commanded “to cultivate and care for the earth,” to serve and to preserve the earth (Genesis 2:15). We recognize that this involves a certain sacrifice on our part, that we must embrace a more ascetic and simple way of life, that we are called to care for and share with “the least of our brothers and sisters.” Indeed, we know that what we do our neighbor, we actually do to Christ Himself. (Matthew 25:40) This means that, whatever we do to this earth, we do to heaven itself.

“Thus we return to the theme of our conference: “On earth as it is in heaven: Putting our theology and ecology into practice.” St. Paul tells us: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now,” “awaiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” (Romans 8:22, 19) We must commence this “revelation” in the local parish, learning to live in harmony with God’s creation. As I have said some ten years ago: “The commitment of our Orthodox Church to protecting the environment must become a part of the local ministry of our parishes.” Against much of the secular culture that surrounds us, our faithful must learn how to apply Orthodox theology and ecological principles to their lives. Bishops and clergy must teach them about the Eucharistic and ascetic ethos of our Church tradition in order that our faithful may learn to give thanks to God for all things, while treating the earth’s resources respectfully and sensitively. Moreover, we must cultivate a liturgical ethos in our communities in order that sharing becomes central to our lives as Christians.”

In his foreword to *Greening the Orthodox Parish*, a book recently published by the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew wrote: “From the outset of our ministry, it has been our hope and prayer that the various ecological initiatives developed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate would

result in the parallel creation of 'green parishes' and 'green priests' throughout the world."

Many topics and themes were discussed during the conference. They ranged from the theological to the practical, including titles such as the following: "Orthodox Theological Foundations for Creation Care," "Putting Theology into Action" and "Campus and Cosmos: An Orthodox Roundtable."

Speakers included senior professionals such as **Dr. James Hansen**, a climate scientist and director of NASA's Goddard Space Center; **Dr. Lise Van Susteren MD**, a clinical psychologist; local clergy and laity, such as **Fr. Terry Baz** from Syracuse, NY; **Fr. Constantine Lazarakis** of Southampton, NY and **Mr. Alex Couloumbis** of Bethesda, MD; **Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis**, an advisor to the Ecumenical Patriarch; **Ms. Tyler Edgar** from Spokane, Washington representing the Native Alaskan Orthodox effort to stop a copper mine on their ancestral lands, plus a variety of clergy and student activists and researchers from several U.S. seminaries and universities.

The following are a few quotable excerpts from the sessions:

Fr. Terry Baz, Antiochian Parish, Syracuse, New York:

Orthodox theology talks about the need to bring about a cosmic transformation... We transform the cosmos from the profane to the sacred.... We must use the steps of prayer, fasting and almsgiving in a spirit of repentance, however, to achieve it.... When we respond to God in the way he has asked us to, the Holy Spirit will transform our response into something far greater than the limits that the sin of Adam and Eve impose on us.

Dr. Elizabeth Theokritof, from Oxford University and Mount Tabor, New Jersey:

Despite all the very inspiring theology articulated in recent years and the connections that we love to explore between Orthodox Christian faith and ecological action, the sad fact is that the 'greening' of our parish life ... does *not* usually start from our faith. More often, it is triggered by 'green' attitudes in the surrounding society. Where such attitudes are prevalent, one might say that there is no harm done; Christians who are initially influenced by secular environmental attitudes can and do

progress to a more churchly understanding of what is involved. But the fundamental problem lies elsewhere: in the fact that as Christians, and even as Christian communities, we so easily allow major areas of our lives to be dominated by social, political or ideological attitudes that may have very little to do with our faith....

The alternative involves a strong awareness that living as Christians frequently means departing from the norms of the surrounding society in all sorts of ways (and not just on the narrow spectrum of moral and social issues that seem to loom large in the thinking of many Christians in America). To speak of this tension between life in Christ and cultural norms is to speak of *asceticism* – the constant struggle against what comes 'naturally' to our fallen nature. It is no coincidence that monastic communities, which are in vanguard of the ascetic struggle, have generally been much more proactive than parishes in making environmental initiatives part of their everyday life.

Fr. Constantine Lazarakis, East Hampton, New York:

Without God, we are selfish and restless. With God, we are selfless and at peace...the environmental crisis comes from sin...our commitment to consume less is repentance....

Fr. Athanasius Shaw, Portland, Oregon, spoke about the value of modern Orthodox Christians taking time to visit the wilderness, not as monks, as in times past, but as pilgrims to the abundant lessons of wild places. He reported how “wilderness offers the opportunity to learn spiritual lessons from nature.”

He presented many insights from the saints. One time, for instance, St. Anthony the Great was asked how he got along out in the desert without any books. He answered “*My book is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, it is at my hand.*” Similarly, St. John Chrysostom tells us: “*From the creation, learn to admire the Lord...He has made the mode of this creation to be our best teacher...*”

Fr. Shaw described an Orthodox program to extract the lessons of the desert fathers called “Christ in the Wilderness,” which is sponsored by the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration. In *Christ in the Wilderness*, the goal is to “*exercise ourselves unto godliness*” (1 Tim. 4:7), as St. Paul tells us to do. This is done by practicing each day one of the virtues of thanksgiving, humility, seeing the beauty of the Lord in

and around oneself, silence or solitude, and love for Creation and one's neighbor. A result of this program is that most participants develop a commitment to continue the practice of these virtues in their daily life.

The next gathering for the Christ in the Wilderness program will be held at Mount Lassen National Park in June of 2014. Those interested in participating should register soon as it will be full.

Ms. Danille Xanthos, as student, from Holy Cross-Hellenic College, in Brookline, Mass, declared, "The relationship between humanity and creation is made authentic by experience – nature nurtures our skills."

Subdeacon Andrew Stoiko, from Detroit, Michigan and a student at Saint Tikhon's Seminary in Pennsylvania, observed, "The healing of the Earth must begin with the healing that needs to occur in each and everyone of us Christians by Christ to be made whole by the transformation of God's Grace."

Subdeacon Stoiko then presented a set of criteria for greening a local parish:

I suggest the following as necessary to transform our parishes, campuses and homes, so that they may 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 workshops for educating parishioners; the objectives are to change personal attitudes about wasting natural resources, while recognizing that 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.

Ms. Martha Carlisle, a student at St. Vladimir's Seminary, Yonkers, New York, compared academic exploration of ecology with a work-project to drag garbage out of a river: "it's like the difference between merely reading the text of a Divine Liturgy and attending one."

Mr. Athan Manuel, chairman of the Saint Sophia Cathedral's committee on environmental stewardship, presented practical ideas for the parish; Good stewardship of God's creation includes some of the following actions:

- Replacement of old, inefficient appliances to save energy.
- Reduction of paper and plastic usage, through introduction of permanent mugs for coffee-hour.
- The removal of disposable cups, styrofoam and all plastic throwaway utensils.
- Planting of trees to reduce heat-loss, reduce water usage and eliminate the need for lawn-mowing.

The entire conference was recorded (audio and visual) by the Orthodox Christian Network, and will be available after editing on www.myocn.net

Also attending were representatives from the Interfaith Power and Light organization, a multi-denominational national group promoting sound stewardship of natural resources in energy production and consumption.

Co-sponsors of this conference included: Hellenic College/Holy Cross School of Theology, St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese's Advisory Committee on Science and Technology.

Mr. Alex Patico, director of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, a co-sponsoring organization for this conference, shared the following thoughts:

Our speakers have made it quite clear that it is not hard to connect the dots between "environment" and conflict – interpersonal, intergroup and international.

Having spent half of my professional career working on environmental issues, I am very pleased that the Orthodox Peace Fellowship could make modest contributions to this conference.

The conference day ended with the celebration of a special version of Holy Vespers called the Vespers of Creation in the Cathedral sanctuary. This was written by monks at Iveron monasery on Mount Athos in Greece.

