

Saint Tikhon's Seminary hosts Conference on Orthodox Spiritual Life and the Environment

“Ecology is a spiritual issue,” declared His Grace Bishop Tikhon as he greeted seminarians, clergy and guests for a two-day conference at Saint Tikhon's Seminary in South Canaan, Pennsylvania. The purpose of this conference is to explore the many facets of “Orthodox Spiritual Life and the Environment.”



HE Metropolitan Tikhon

The purpose of this conference was to provide an Orthodox understanding of responsibility for God's creation and the opportunities that its care offers parishes.

Igumen Sergius Bowyer, abbot of Saint Tikhon's Monastery, examined the question of how monastics see environmental problems and the restoration of creation. He said that the problems are not with creation, which is “good,” but with human attitudes and behavior. At every

Matins, we read Psalm 103 which points to an amazing reverence and respect for creation.

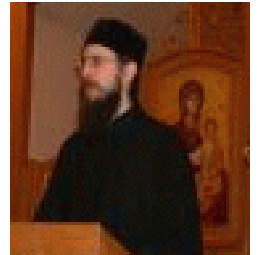
“We despoil the environment when we forget God.” The problem is with humanity and its behavior. Environmental problems are really spiritual problems. The misuse of creation is caused by the passions. The real enemy of creation is sin and death. By making Christ's victory over sin and death our own, the deep ontological fabric of one's being is changed and transfigured.

The monk or the nun understands that the ecological problem is a spiritual sickness. The challenge of the environment is the challenge of repentance and transformation.

For monastics, giving thanks for the world becomes a way to peer through it and to find God deeply in every thing. Then we see the mystery of the world, as Saint Paul says in Romans 1:20. Then the world becomes like a window, like a living icon, enabling us to see the Lord through it.

In contrast, when we use the world selfishly, it becomes opaque. Then it is hard to see God. When we offer it back to God, we remember God, then it again becomes a living icon of God. Transfiguration of the universe has to happen within ourselves first. Then when it happens here, God is put back into the center of things.

Dr. Elizabeth Theokritoff, a lay theologian from Oxford University, observed that environmental issues raise basic questions about man and his place in the world. From this premise, she identified three aspects of Orthodox theology that guide us in relating to the environment – i.e., to “God's creation.”



First, she cited the Orthodox theology of creation. St Maximus the Confessor affirms that ‘the Word of God is above and beyond all creation’ and that ‘the Word is a multiplicity of “words” (logoi). Because all things originate in God, he says that they participate in Him. This gives us the concept of a “sacred creation” because it is permeated by the divine. We are not merely surrounded by resources and raw materials, but by a creation which is infused by its Creator. How then do we perform daily tasks in a sacred creation? This question opens us to appropriate technologies that work with God's creation rather than against it, e.g., solar energy or cooling the house with strategically planted trees, curtains and shutters.

Second, she reminded us of our Eucharistic vision. “The sacraments,



quoting Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, lead to a revelation of the ‘original meaning’ of created things. The Eucharist teaches that ‘all things are [God’s] servants’ which means that they are not ours, but God’s. The world and its creatures then become a gift. Theologians observe that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are the result of human reshaping of creation. This affirms human manipulation of the world. This gives us a test for our use of the world: Do our actions make Christ more present or do they obscure His presence?

An Athonite elder reminds monks and nuns to perform every action as if standing at the altar preparing to receive the Eucharist. This should bring a reverence for matter that addresses our carelessness with material things. For instance, we may be quite able to go straight from the Eucharist to brunch, and then throw away food or cups and plates which may not be recyclable.

Any act of gratitude for the things we use can serve as a witness to a world made sacramental by Christ’s presence.

Third, she examined the testimony of the Saints. “To experience the Liturgy,” says Archimandrite Vasileios of Iviron monastery, is to perceive the ‘words’ of all that exists concelebrating with the incarnate Word of God.

Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra Monastery is an ascetic who was granted a vision of creation praising its Creator. What do such visions mean? Awareness of living in an alive and worshiping cosmos does not mean that we dare not mow the lawn or harvest lettuce. It does imply respect for each created thing, using it in a way worthy of the symphony of praise for which it was created. It implies care for the materials that we use, re-using and repairing them, and recycling them. It implies respect and care for the animals that serve us, especially those which serve as food.

These are just a few among many ways to bear witness to our vision of a world that is God’s creation.

Fr. Andrew Damick, pastor of St. Paul Antiochian Orthodox parish in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, addressed the theme of Orthodox Liturgy and Ecological Vision in a lecture entitled “The Cosmic Cathedral.”

“Man is the mediator between God and creation,” he began. Every person is a priest, partaking of Christ’s priesthood. “Every Christian should see the world as a place for glorifying God and sanctifying the material world.”

“We are at a point of crisis,” he observed. “Will we see the world in secular terms, or will we take up our priesthood and see the world with a sacramental vision?”

The Orthodox relationship to the world is summarized in *askesis*, or asceticism. Christian asceticism does not denigrate the world, but restores its proper place in the cosmic liturgy.

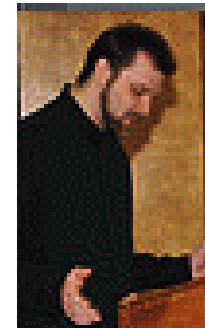
Christian *askesis* is training for prayer and for drawing close to God. It brings harmony with creation and

builds a worshipful way of life. The world then becomes a holy place or shrine for pilgrimage.

If the Earth is held in reverence because of God’s presence within it, mankind will treat it gently. In it he may encounter the face of God. His actions will then express the love and thanksgiving to God that he encounters in prayer.

The Orthodox understanding of Earth is not as an “environment,” but as a home, a house which is a temple. Orthodoxy sees man’s place in creation as its priest. His purpose is to offer the world back to its Creator. In this offering, God sanctifies created matter and returns it as a vehicle for sanctification. All creation has the potential for this Eucharistic action. Thus we may regard the Earth as a kind of cathedral, a place for communion.

No true priest would desecrate his church. Rather, he lovingly cares for it and shapes it to God’s glory, not in



an exploitative fashion, but with reverence. The care of creation as a church, as a model for ecological vision, yields surprising possibilities, because a church is

a place of mystical communion. Thus, it is here in this world that we may be united with God. This world is our church, our great and cosmic cathedral.

