

The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

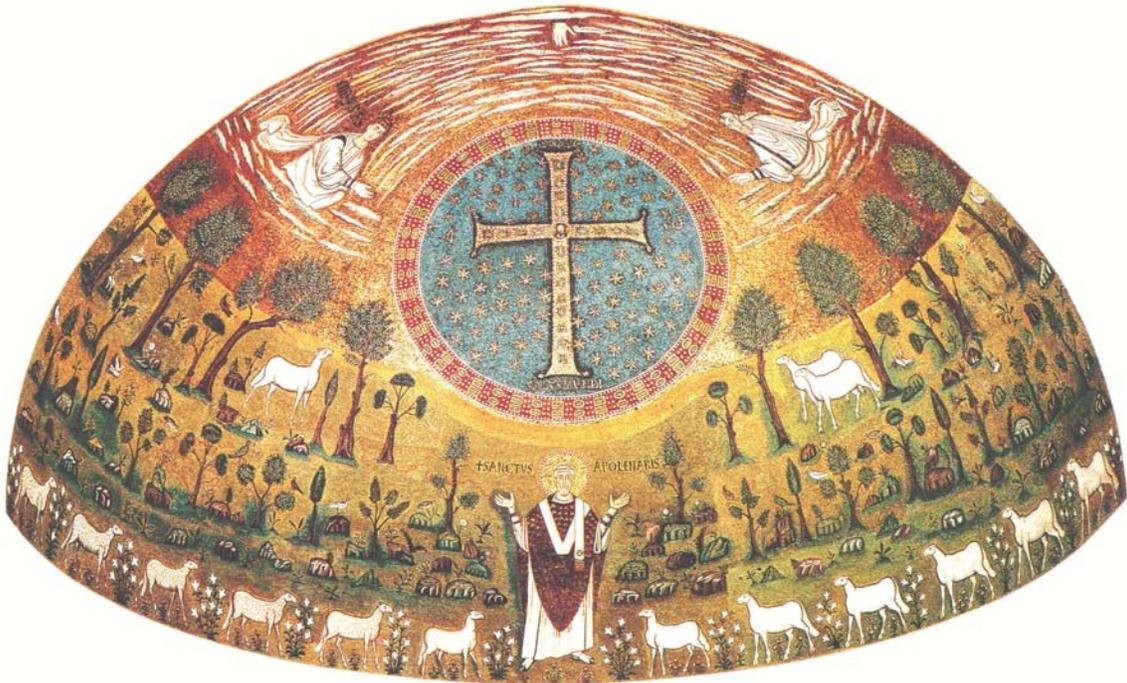


Image of the Transfiguration of Creation

Mosaic of St. Apollinare of Classe, Ravenna, Italy, Sixth Century

Safeguarding the Creation for Future Generations

by HE Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia

IT IS IMPERATIVE that we people of the Earth declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations. In all our ecological endeavors, we are called to keep in view, not only ourselves and our immediate needs, but also the well-being and happiness of women, men, and children as yet unborn. The vast industrial and financial corporations in the world around us... are concerned for the most part with short-term profit, and they lack any firm commitment to the distant future. But we, as ecologists, are required to take a long-term view.

Our Perspective is Intergenerational

By what means shall we safeguard the creation for future generations? What symbol shall we take to guide and inspire us in our intergenerational program? Let us not under-estimate the crucial significance of symbols. The human animal, it has been rightly said, is not just a logical animal, but, far more fundamentally, a creative animal, and this creativity we express above all through our ability to devise symbols. We are symbol-forming animals, and if we lose touch with our capacity for symbolic thinking, our imaginative vision will be grievously impoverished.

As a guiding symbol for our ecological thinking, I would like to propose the vast mosaic in the semi-dome of the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare in Classe, where His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew this morning celebrated the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. What did we see, as we gazed upwards during the service? The mosaic, one of the master-works of European and indeed of world art, is divided into two parts. In the lower part there is represented a hill, covered with green grass, and adorned with rocks, trees, flowers and birds; at the bottom of the hill there are twelve sheep looking upwards, while higher up there are three sheep also looking upwards. Here we see a depiction of Paradise. Then in the upper part of the mosaic there is a great jewelled Cross, a *Crux Gemmata*. Behind it is the firmament of heaven, filled with stars, and in the center of the Cross, if we look carefully, we can make out a human face. This is the face of Christ, and the mosaic as a whole – although this is not at once obvious – depicts the Transfiguration of Christ. The green hill is Mount Tabor, the twelve sheep are the apostles; the three sheep at the top of the hill are Peter, James and John, the three chosen disciples whom Jesus took with him up the mountain and who saw him transfigured in glory, as his face shone with divine light and his clothes became dazzling white (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36).

The mosaic of Sant' Apollinare in Classe, dating from the middle of the sixth century, is in fact one of the two earliest representations of the Transfiguration in Christian art. The other early depiction, more or less contemporary with that in Ravenna, is to be seen in the apse of the main church in the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. In this second case the iconography is more explicit and familiar. There is no *Crux Gemmata*. In the center stands a full-length figure of Christ, surrounded by a blue mandorla, with shafts of uncreated light radiating from him, while below him the three apostles are shown, not as sheep but in human form.

Within the entire Gospel story, the Transfiguration of Christ stands out as the ecological event *par excellence*. What, then, do these two mosaics, and more especially, that in Sant' Apollinare in Classe, have to tell us about our work for the environment, about the ecological program that we are undertaking, not for ourselves alone, but for all future generations?

Extending the Mystery of the Transfiguration

Let us consider three key points. In the first place, let us reflect on the basic significance of the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration. It shows us that matter can be transfused into spirit. It shows us, that is to say, how material things – not only Christ's face, hands and feet, but also his clothes; and not only the body of Christ, but also those of the three disciples upon whom the rays of light fall; and not they alone, but likewise the grass, trees, flowers and rocks of the mountain-side which also share in the radiance that emanates from Christ – all these can be transformed, rendered luminous, filled with translucence and glory. The Transfiguration reveals the Spirit-bearing potentialities of all material things.

Christ, so the event on Mount Tabor makes clear, came to save not our souls alone, but also our bodies. Moreover, we human beings are not saved *from* but *with* the world. In and through Christ – and, by virtue of Christ's grace, in and through each one of us – the whole material creation, as Saint Paul expresses it, “will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

We human beings, in other words, are called to continue and to extend the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration on the mountain. As Metropolitan John of Pergamon has affirmed, the distinctive characteristic of the human animal is not so much that we are a logical animal, but rather that we are an animal that is creative. Endowed as we are with freedom and self-awareness, entrusted with the power of conscious choice – “sub-creators” formed in the image of God the Creator, living icons of the living God – we have the capacity not merely to manufacture or produce but to create, to set our personal seal upon the environment, to reveal new meanings within nature: in a word, to transfigure. Through our creative powers, through science, technology, craftsmanship and art, we enlarge the radiance of the transfigured Christ, revealing in all material things the glory that is latent within them. That is precisely what we are seeking to achieve through all our ecological initiatives.

The Beginning and the End

The mosaic of Sant' Apollinare in Classe, as we have already suggested, sets before us Paradise. This brings us to a second point. The Transfiguration of Christ recalls and restores the beauty of the unfallen world; it shows us the glory and wonder of the material creation as God intended it to be. At the same time, however, Mount Tabor does not simply look back to the beginning, but it also looks forward to the end. It is not merely protological, but eschatological. As Saint Basil the Great affirms, the Transfiguration is the *prooimion*, the prelude and inauguration of Christ's second and glorious coming (PG 29:400CD).

What is true of the Transfiguration is true also of our ecological work. This too is teleological and eschatological. We are not seeking to return to some supposedly

“ideal” situation in the past, but we are advancing towards a future as yet largely beyond our imagination; and for this very reason in all our ecological endeavors we think not only of the past or the present, but of our responsibility to generations not yet born.

Transfiguration and Sacrifice

Coming now to our third point, let us recall the Cross which dominates the Transfiguration mosaic in Sant’ Appollinare. What is it, we ask, that links Paradise in the past (Genesis 1-2) with Paradise in the future (Revelation 21-22)? There is but one answer: the Cross. Without cross-bearing, there can be no cosmic transfiguration. Without sacrifice and *kenosis* (self-emptying) after the example of Jesus Christ crucified, there can be no ecological renewal. As the Ecumenical Patriarch will be telling us tomorrow, it is precisely sacrifice that constitutes the missing dimension in our work for the environment.

While it may seem paradoxical that the Transfiguration should be indicated in the Sant’ Appollinare mosaic through the figure of the Cross, this is in fact entirely appropriate. In the Gospel story the Transfiguration and the Crucifixion are closely linked, and chronologically there is no great gap between the two events. The Transfiguration occurred as Christ was making his last journey to Jerusalem, only a short time before he was to die on the Cross. The connection, however, is spiritual as well as chronological. It is no coincidence that in the conversation on the road to Caesarea Phillippi immediately prior to the ascent up the mountain, Christ insists on cross-bearing as an essential element in discipleship: “If anyone wants to be my follower, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

In Christ’s life as in the life of the Christian, glory and suffering go together. Moreover, during the actual moment of his Transfiguration, what Jesus speaks about with Moses and Elijah is precisely his coming “exodus” or departure at Jerusalem, that is to say, his imminent death (Luke 9:31). In the midst of the light of Tabor, there is planted the Cross. Most strikingly of all, exactly the same three disciples who accompany Christ at his Transfiguration are likewise present with him at his agony in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37). Witnesses of his uncreated splendor, they are witnesses also of his utter dereliction.

From this and from much else in the New Testament, it is clear that in Christ’s earthly experience light and darkness, joy and sorrow, are intimately connected. The *mysterium Crucis* (“mystery of the cross”) and the *mysterium Gloriam* (mystery of the glory) are a single and undivided mystery. Between the two hills Tabor and Calvary there is no great distance. If we divorce Christ’s Transfiguration from his Crucifixion, then we distort the meaning of both alike. As Saint Paul insists, “They crucified the Lord of glory” (Corinthians 2:8).

What is true of Christ is true also of each Christian. Sometimes in the window of funeral directors I have seen a notice stating, “Crosses or crowns to order.” But there is in fact no alternative. As William Penn shrewdly observed, “No cross, no crown.” It is only through the willing acceptance of suffering that we can come to understand the meaning of glory. To be a Christian is to share, at one and the same time, in the self-emptying and sacrifice of the Cross, and in the overwhelming joy of the Transfiguration and the Resurrection. To be transfigured with Christ does not mean that we escape all suffering; it means that we are to find transfiguration in the suffering. The transfigured Christ offers not a way *around* but *through*. This teaching about suffering and glory, indeed, is in no way limited to Christianity. The other great faiths affirm the same, each in its characteristic way.

All this needs to be applied to our ecological work, whether for our own or for future generations. There can be no transformation of the environment without self-denial, no fundamental renewal of the cosmos without voluntary sacrifice. In Christ’s words, “Truly, truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Gain comes through loss, life through death, transfiguration through cross-bearing.

Faith, Hope, Love

Such are three ways in which the mosaic in the apse of Sant’ Apollinare in Classe can help us to understand our environmental vocation. As a further guideline in our ecological endeavours, we cannot do better than take as our motto the familiar words of Saint Paul, “And now there remain three things: faith, hope and love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

Faith: for our present purpose this signifies above all faith in the essential goodness and beauty of the world, in the basic, inalienable, inexhaustible value of the universe. As is said in the opening chapter of the Bible: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). In the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, the final words here are “*lian kala*,” which are stronger in their impact than the English “very good”; the Greek means “altogether good and beautiful.” The goodness of the world goes hand in hand with its beauty, and this beauty is apparent not only to the romantic artist, painting a sunset, but equally to the physicist or biologist.

The Greek word for beautiful, *kalos*, is from the same root as the verb *kaleo*, signifying “I call, or invite.” Here we discern the primary characteristic of beauty: it calls out to us, draws us to itself, it is intrinsically attractive. Unless we feel the beauty and attractiveness of the world around us, our ecological efforts will be tragically weakened. It is all too true that human selfishness and sin have obscured this cosmic beauty, but none the less the world still remains a place of joy and awe. If we are to save the world for future generations, we need to renew our sense of wonder.

As Plato insisted, “The beginning of philosophy is to feel a sense of wonder” (*Theaetetus* 155D). Such also is the beginning of ecology.

Hope: this is also an indispensable element in our ecological vision. As Cardinal Casper has justly reminded us, our task is not to curse, but to bless; not to anathematize, but to convey hope to others. We have already seen how true ecology is not nostalgic, but eschatological. Our faces should be turned towards the future, not to the past. We are not seeking to return to some hypothetical “golden age,” and it is not enough to be totally immersed in the immediate present. We need also to be forward-looking, with our gaze fixed in firm hope upon emerging possibilities, as yet no more than dimly envisaged. Without this creative hope, without this far-reaching vision, we shall fail the generations to come.

Love: “the greatest of these is love,” adds Paul (1 Corinthians 13:13). Let us not forget the words of Archbishop Anastasios of Albania: “people protect only what they genuinely love.” We cannot save what we do not love. There can be no deep knowledge, and certainly no true wisdom, without love; and equally there can be no cosmic transfiguration without love. I remember the teaching of the *geronta* (“elder”) on the island of Patmos, Father Amphilochios (d. 1970) whom I knew when I was deacon at the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian. “Do you know,” he used to say, “that God gave us one more commandment, *Love the trees.*” Whoever does not love the trees, so he believed, does not love God. “When you plant a tree,” he affirmed, “you plant hope, you plant peace, you plant love, and you will receive God’s blessing.” An ecologist long before ecology had become fashionable, when hearing the confessions of the local farmers, he used to assign to them as an *epitimion* (a penance) the task of planting a tree. The consequences of his teaching and his practice are visible for all to see: in several areas on the island of Patmos, where at the start of the twentieth century the hillside was bare and stony. Today there are woods of pine and eucalyptus.

Let us then love the trees – and let us love the whole of creation, “every grain of sand of it,” as Dostoyevsky says – with a love that is hope-filled, forward-reaching and intergenerational. Let us begin here and now to plant trees, both material and noetic, which will perhaps require many decades before they grow to full maturity – trees beneath whose shelter in the future, not we, but our children, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, will be able to sit with security and eucharistic joy.

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His Eminence Metropolitan Kallistos was the Spalding Lecturer in Eastern Orthodox Studies at the University of Oxford. Reprinted by permission.

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Reflection Questions

- Q: Why should people today care for the well-being and happiness of women, men, and children as yet unborn?
- Q: What can we do today to safeguard God's world for future generations?
- Q: What is the meaning of the great mosaic of Saint Apollinare above the altar of the church that bears his name? How does it convey ecological purpose?
- Q: How is this image a representation of the transfiguration?
- Q: Explain how the transfiguration has ecological meaning. How does it address you and your actions?
- Q: What does it mean that humans are saved, not *from* the world, but *with* the world.
- Q: His eminence declares that we human beings are called to continue and to extend the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration. How do we do this? What is involved?
- Q: How does this mosaic recall and restore the beauty of the unfallen world?
- Q: His eminence observes that what is true of the Transfiguration is true also of our ecological work. Explain what he means here. Why is this true?
- Q: Why is it that without sacrifice and *kenosis* (self-emptying), after the example of Jesus Christ crucified, there can be no ecological renewal?
- Q: How are suffering and glory related? How do these relate to our ecological challenge? Explain why. Discuss this.
- Q: How does a love of trees relate to the care of the whole of creation? What is it about trees that might make them worthy of love?
- Q: What did you learn from this presentation and the questions that HE Metropolitan Kallistos poses for us?

