

The Fellowship of the Transfiguration

Proclaiming the Ecological Mission of the Orthodox Church as the Reconciling of all things in Christ

by Vincent Rossi

According to the Greek Fathers of the Church, to know Creation in the Christian sense is precisely – and ideally – a wisdom-knowledge grounded in prayer and contemplation and effectively realized in ethically informed acts that produce or sustain a transformed consciousness in a transfigured world. Let us seek to discern the lineaments of this traditional method of sacred stewardship: sacred cosmology as the art of creation-keeping by liturgizing the world.

A study of the lives and writings of the great spiritual masters of the First Millennium of the Christian Church, East and West, will show without doubt that a sacred cosmology was fundamental to the Church's worldview. The doctrine of Christ, from incarnation to ascension, had an undeniably cosmic dimension. Salvation, or deification, as the Church of patristic times calls the process of reconciliation with God, was cosmic as well as personal in scope, including not only human beings, but also everything else in the universe.

The self-understanding of the ancient Church, the united Christian faith of the first thousand years, as found in its Scriptures, doctrines and spiritual practice alike, clearly shows that for the Greek Fathers the relationship between Church and cosmos, however, was more complex and subtle than the rather simplistic idea of the Church, like everything else, merely being a part of the cosmic order. Patristic cosmology, as reflected in the insights of St. Maximos the Confessor,¹ is

¹ Cf. St. Maximos the Confessor, Migne, P.G., XC-XCI. For English translations of selected works of Maximos, see *Philokalia*, vol 2, Palmer, Sherrard, Ware, trans., (London: Faber & Faber, 1981); George Berthold, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); Polycarp Sherwood, *St. Maximus the Confessor: The Ascetic Life, The Four Centuries on Charity* (Ancient Christian Writers 21: New York: Newman Press, 1955); Andrew

based on a sense of reciprocity (*perichoresis*). For the sacred cosmology of the early Church, not only was the Church imbedded in the cosmos, but the cosmos was imbedded in the Church.²

In the new order inaugurated by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Church is the new cosmos. Not only is the “old man” to become the “new man” in Christ, but the old creation is to become the “new creation” in Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ, which is the new creation. As such, the Church is the *destiny* of the cosmos, its process of becoming, its future and fate. The Church is the cosmos becoming itself, what it truly is to be – its *telos* or end – as intended by God. The ecological mission of the Orthodox Church, then, follows the soteriological mission of the Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, which is the reconciliation, unification and glorification, not only of human beings, but of all things in the universe, even the cosmos itself.

The key Scriptural texts – which are the hermeneutical ground of this cosmic Christian world view are: the entire Gospel of John, especially John 1, John 3:16, “for God so loved *the cosmos* that he gave his only begotten Son” [*our English ‘world’ used to translate the Greek word kosmos does not convey the sense of universal order, harmony and adornment of the Greek*], John 17, Romans, especially 1:20 and Chapter Eight, the Epistles to the Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews and Revelation, of course, with their profound cosmic vision, and, above all, Second Corinthians 5:17-18:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world [the cosmos] to himself.

The patristic exegesis of Scripture had a profoundly cosmic and ecological dimension, which can be found in the Apostolic Fathers of the second century, in

Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (The Early Church Fathers: London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

² Cf. St. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogia*, chapter 2, For English translation, see George Berthold, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) p. 188.

Clement and Origen of Alexandria, the great Cappadocians and St. John Chrysostom, in the Desert tradition and among the hesychasts, in the “golden chain” of saints and spiritual masters, such as Sts. Dionysios the Areopagite, Maximos the Confessor, John of Damaskos, Symeon the New Theologian, Peter of Damaskos, Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas, Nicodemos the Hagiorite, as well as the Optina Elders and Ignatius Brianchaninov and Theophan the Recluse among the Russians.

The fundamental ecological intuition of the Orthodox Church is that creation is not a purely extrinsic order, but it is the manifestation of an Order which at one and the same time transcends it, sustains it from within and manifests itself through it. This intrinsic, transcendent, immanent order is the Logos, the eternal son of God. Therefore when one speaks of the “environment” from an Orthodox point of view, one has in mind a much fuller concept and meaning than the usual secular meaning of the term.

The “environment” for the Orthodox Christian is not merely the physical world of nature, but it possesses a three-fold dimension, including the Divine; the invisible, intelligible world; and the physical-sensible world. The presence of God, in His unitary and triune nature and in all things, the noetic dimension of the angelic hierarchies, and the complex web of life and being of nature, are all part of the true environment in which we live and move and have our being.

Let us consider the cosmological and ecological functions of liturgy. In the understanding of the early Greek Church, liturgy is not merely the *lex orandi* of believers, but is cosmology in action. The fullest example in the Christian tradition of the metaphysical, theological and ethical unity of science, religion, contemplation, and asceticism in a cosmic vision that is profoundly unifying, reconciling and ecological is the liturgical cosmology and cosmic liturgy of St. Maximos the Confessor, a great theologian and philosopher who lived in the 7th century.³

Liturgy, in the sense that St. Maximos uses it, and in the sense that the Greek Orthodox tradition has embodied, is not to be considered in terms of conventional church ceremonies consisting of outwardly figurative words and

actions in which one satisfies his religious duties by placing his body in a pew in an ordinary, untransmuted and unregenerate state of consciousness. This type of experience may by conventional language and untransmuted consciousness be called attending liturgy, but it is nothing of the sort that St. Maximos means.

The Orthodox Church of St. Maximos' time and in the present recognizes liturgy as the *topos* or place of the direct link between human knowing and ethical action with the well-being of the cosmos and the metaphysical transparency of things. The insight that the cosmos itself is a vast liturgy is a revelation of the cosmological dimension to the liturgy of the Church. This *theoria*, itself the fruit of natural contemplation (or *phusiki*, in Maximian terminology) leads St. Maximos the Confessor to interpret the Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine Church as sacred cosmology in salvific action. We can clearly see this conception fully expressed in St. Maximos' commentary on the Divine Liturgy, the *Mystagogia*.⁴ His very choice of title is instructive, for a *mystagogy* is an initiation into a mystery. The work is divided into three parts. In this division, we may see how St. Maximos conveys his understanding of liturgy as sacred cosmology in action. He begins his commentary by a lengthy section in which he presents his image of the universe as a living symbol in which God, the Church and humanity are presented as icons – or reciprocal symbols – of one another. Then he interprets the actions of the rite of the *synaxis* (or holy communion) in terms, not only of the life of Christ, but more specifically in relation to the eschatological goal of creation, and most of all, in accordance with the ethical, ascetical, contemplative and mystical transformation of the human soul. Finally, in the third section, he sums it all up in a unitive contemplation that unites the human image, the image of the cosmos, and the Divine image in and through the sacrifice of the Logos.

Because the human image and the cosmic image are reciprocal in the thought of the Byzantine spiritual master, the inner constitution and condition of the human soul or microcosmos will be seen to have a direct effect on the outer condition and order of the universe or macrocosmos. This understanding leads Maximos, in his commentary on the liturgy, to write:

⁴ English translation found in Berthold, *Maximus Confessor*, pp. 183-225. See also Dom Julian Stead, O.S.B., *The Church, the Liturgy and the Soul of Man: The Mystagogia of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Still River, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1982).

For thought is the act and manifestation of the mind related as effect to cause, and prudence is the act and manifestation of wisdom, and action of contemplation, and virtue of knowledge and faith of enduring knowledge. From these is produced the inward relationship to the truth and the good, that is, to God, which he [St. Maximos' teacher, the 'great elder'] used to call divine science, secure knowledge, love and peace in which and by means of which there is deification. This whole reality is science because it is the achievement of all knowledge concerning God and divine realities and virtues accessible to men. It is knowledge because it genuinely lays hold of the truth and offers a lasting experience of God. It is love because it shares by its whole disposition in the full happiness of God. Finally it is peace inasmuch as it experiences the same things as God and prepares for this experience those who are judged worthy to come to it.⁵

Clearly, St. Maximos understands liturgy to be an ethical science. "Divine science," or the attainment of authentic being in knowledge and virtue, leads to "knowledge," or the identity of knower and the known in the experience of truth, which leads to love, or the ethical harmony of being and knowing and doing in man, which leads to peace, or the fulfillment of the destiny of man, in which his deification and the transfiguration of nature are one and the same experience.

For St. Maximos the Confessor, then, authentic liturgy is sacred cosmology in action. The field of the action is the human person as microcosmos, united reciprocally to the macrocosmos, the universe as a whole. But even the cosmos as a whole is not seen as the spiritually empty mechano-organic universe of astrophysicists and evolutionists, but the universe understood liturgically and reciprocally as a Cosmic Man, the Macroanthropos,⁶ or, equally, as cosmic Church.⁷

⁵ St. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogy 5*, in Berthold, *Maximos Confessor: Selected Writings*, pp. 193-194.

⁶ "The whole world, made up of visible and invisible things, is man, and conversely...man, made up of body and soul, is a world." St. Maximos, *Myst. 7*, Berthold, p. 196.

⁷ "God's holy Church [is] a figure and image of the entire world composed of visible and invisible essences because, like it, it contains both unity and diversity." St. Maximos, *Myst. 2*, Berthold, p. 188.

The action of liturgy is twofold: First, the reconstitution of ordinary space and time into liturgical space and time, wherein the valences of eternity are manifest, as the Blakean “infinity in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour” intimates. Second, the transfiguration of human nature by uniting mind, heart, will, soul and body into graced wholeness and wellness, which results in a person whose faculties are energized and oriented toward truth, goodness and beauty in self, neighbor and earth. This cannot but result in a person capable of genuinely *feeling* the wrongness of the ongoing despoliation of the environment, which is a desecration of the temple of nature created by God. Enlightened and empowered by liturgy, humanity’s true work in the world, such a person is thus capable as well of responding with ethical and practical effectiveness toward making the necessary sacrifice that will lead to healing and harmony in person and cosmos.

Liturgy in its authentically Orthodox sense seeks and entails the transfiguration of nature (not just human nature, but all nature) through the living symbolism of the sacramental act, which unites men and women, this present world and paradise, earth and heaven, the sensible and intelligible dimensions of creation in its totality, and, ultimately, the creation and the Uncreated. The word liturgy is from the Greek *leit-ourgos*, which literally means the “work of the people.”

In the conception of St. Maximos, which is the view of ancient traditional Christianity, the liturgy is the divinely ordained work of the people in which the essence of religion and science is fully embedded in the cosmos because the cosmos is fully embedded in God. Through liturgy as cosmology in action, both the universe as macrocosm and the individual human being as microcosm are transformed, transfigured and deified. This transfiguration and deification is the ultimate destiny of both cosmos and man. Liturgy as sacred cosmology in action is able to accomplish this because the essence of liturgy is communication of and communion with the Archetypal Sacrifice which is the very foundation of the universe.

For St. Maximos and the early Christian Church, the purpose of liturgy was the transfiguration of the world, not just the moral well-being of believers. The heart of liturgy is sacrifice, and the purpose of sacrifice is to make holy. Liturgy was conceived (and is presently so understood in the Orthodox tradition) as the primary work of all people, and the field of this work was not merely the horizon of the individual soul, but the whole world. The Church was embedded in the

cosmos and the cosmos in the Church. The Church's mission is, through the Holy Spirit, "who is everywhere present and fills all things," to bring about the reciprocal transfiguration of the cosmos and itself as the New Creation. The responsibility of people on the earth was – and is – to liturgize the world, and by so doing, heal its divisions in an ecology of transfiguring light.

Two thousand years ago, the "integrity paradigm" was called the doctrine of the Logos:

"In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with *Theos* and the *Logos* was *Theos*. The same was in the beginning with *Theos*. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (Jn.1:1-5).

Fourteen hundred years ago, St. Maximos the Confessor (580-662) brought the *Logos* paradigm to new heights, creating an unsurpassed synthesis that truly brought together all that was ever known in the past, all that was currently known of the world and all that could possibly be known in every age, "melding topics that were once thought to have no connection whatsoever," to use Rose's words, and showing definitively that they are all representatives of one simple and supreme principle, the Logos Principle, which as the Archetype/image/likeness pattern that forms the deep structure of the cosmos, creates the "incredible mutually supportive assemblies of being and potential" which to the inner eye of those capable of theoria/vision, "blossom into the vast awe-inspiring beauty that is the universe" – a unity of simplicity, complexity and harmony of the Logos – the ultimate Principle of Being – and the *logoi* – the inner essences of all beings, a beauty which St. Maximos calls *diakosmesis*, or the ordered harmony of unity in complexity of truth-goodness-beauty in the microcosm-macrocosm-metacosm that is God's creation.

For St. Maximos the Confessor, the "house of horizons and perspectives" which was "a cognitive deep open-space for positioning, comparing, merging and morphing our metaphors, models, maps and views," in the words of Heiner Benking, was self-evident. It was the Church as the cosmic Living Symbol and "memory palace" par excellence – the image and likeness at one and the same time of:

- 1) God
- 2) the supra-sensible universe of universes
- 3) the sensible (aesthetic) universe of heaven and earth
- 4) the universe of imaginal and physical worlds
- 5) the human microcosmos as male and female.

For Orthodox Christians then, the Church is our house of all horizons and perspectives and the Logos is the ancient and ever-new paradigm which understands, explains and encompasses all. The words that St. Paul used when he preached his sermon on the Unknown God to the sophisticated Greeks on Mars Hill are equally applicable to the sophisticated cybernauts of today:

“In him, we live and move and have our being” (Acts17:28).

The principle of diakosmesis (diakose/sij)⁸ of the Greek Fathers of the Church reveals the perennial integrity paradigm – the Logos incarnate, yesterday, today and forever. The essence of *diakosmesis* is this: that what we know, all we do know, and all we can possibly know about humanity and what we know, all we do know and all we possibly can know about the universe are entirely correlative and reciprocal. This means that how we see the world depends upon how we see ourselves; and, equally, how we see ourselves depends upon how we see the world.

The model we have of the universe – our *weltanschauung*, our world-view or world-image, depends upon our view, our *weltanschauung*, of ourselves, our self-image. In philosophical terms, this is to say there is no physics without metaphysics, and ontology and epistemology are reciprocal. In science, it is to say that we live in a participatory universe where the observer and the observed are intertwined and interactive.

In Biblical terms, this principle is enshrined in Genesis, chapter one, where we are taught that God made humanity in His own image and likeness. In patristic terms, the image is the perfection of all nature and our nature as God intended; the likeness is the actual state of our nature; the distance between the

⁸ St. Dionysios the Areopagite, Ecclesiastical Hierarchy 1, 3 PG 3-373C; Maximos, *Myst.* 3, Berthold, p. 189.

image of nature – the way God made it, and the likeness of nature – what we have done with it, is the source of all disorder and disharmony in the world. It means creation is iconic, (the image); all knowledge is mimetic (imitates and reflects the living symbols of nature); all disorder is diastemic, i.e., the distance (diastema) between image and likeness.

Diakosmesis, then, following the great patristic, ascetic and hesychastic writers, as the perennial integrity paradigm, is composed of three principal elements, all interrelated to the single cosmogonic-epistemological principle of mimesis:

- 1) humanity as image and likeness of God
- 2) humanity as microcosm and mediator, that is, the link that harmonizes or brings disorder to all levels of being
- 3) the universe is a liturgy, a mighty work/song of praise enacting in timeless unity at every possible level the creation, redemption and transfiguration of the world in the Logos.

If there is dissonance in this liturgy, or disharmony, it stems from any principle of thought or action which enshrines the unnatural disorder and distance between the way things really are and the end to which they are intended (teleology), and what we have made of them and the end to which we actually put them (economy/ecology)

In the Orthodox patristic conception of sacred cosmology, we may discern several (five) key factors which will help to elucidate the Orthodox ecological vision regarding the practice of living according to the Law of Nature: the art of creation-keeping.

- 1) Creation is an order involving unity, diversity, scale, interdependence, hierarchy and harmony: cosmology is ecology.
- 2) Human beings are integrally a part of the order of creation: cosmology is ecology is anthropology.
- 3) The nature of the relationship of human nature with the order

of nature is one of dynamic reciprocity: that is, what human beings are and what human beings do is central to the sustaining or the destruction of the order in nature. Virtue is to sin as order is to disorder, and, as St. Maximos the Confessor is fond of repeating, as natural is to unnatural.

- 4) Metanoia – a change of heart followed by a change of life is the key to all earthkeeping. If human nature is integral to the order in nature, than disorder in nature can be restored only by restoring order in human beings.
- 5) The human energy that creates, sustains and restores the order in nature is the energy of love, grounded in ascesis. ...

The Striving of the OFT members

OFT Members will

- * practice the virtues as aspects of Jesus Christ in human potential
- * observe the commandments as found in Scripture
- * reflect on the ecological implications of biblical references
- * serve the healing and upliftment of creation
- * participate in the consecration of creation back to God.
- * study the lives of the saints and their interactions with the living creation
- * serve creation as the living symbol of Divine Logos made manifest
- * strive to integrate their lives harmlessly into God's creation
- * cultivate a vision of Christ and the Holy Spirit filling all things
