



# Green Churches Forum 2017

## *Celebrating the Spirit of Creation!*

### **Workshop: Creation in the Orthodox Tradition**

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*Every thing that lives is Holy.*  
William Blake (+1827)

*The saints embrace the whole world with their love.*  
Saint Silouan the Athonite (+1938).

*Do you know that God gave us  
one more commandment,  
which is not recorded in Scripture?  
It is the commandment "Love the trees."  
Elder Amphilochus of Patmos (+1970)*

### **INVOCATION TO THE HOLY SPIRIT**

O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth;  
who art everywhere present and fillest all things;  
Treasury of blessings, and giver of life: come and abide in us,  
cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.

### **Through Creation to the Creator (extracts)**

Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia

#### **Theme 1: The World as Sacrament**

Nature is sacred. The world is a sacrament of the divine presence, a means of communion with God. The environment consists not in dead matter but in living relationship. The entire cosmos is one vast burning bush, permeated by the fire of divine power and glory:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
and every common bush afire with God;  
but only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.  
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*)

Certainly there is nothing in itself wrong about plucking blackberries. But as we enjoy the fruits of the earth, let us also look beyond our own immediate pleasure, and discern the deeper mystery that surround us on every side.

In *The Book of Divine Works* [St. Hildegard of Bingen] affirms, "All living creatures are, so to speak, sparks from the radiation of God's brilliance, and these sparks emerge from God like the rays of the sun." Elsewhere in the same treatise she records the remarkable words addressed to her by the Holy Spirit:

I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every living spark and I have breathed out nothing that can die ... I am ... the fiery life of the divine essence — I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; in the sun, the moon and the stars, I burn. And by means of the airy

wind, I stir everything into quickness with a certain invisible life which sustains all. For the air lives in its green power and its blossoming; the waters flow as if they were alive. Even the sun is alive in its own light ... I, the fiery power, lie hidden in these things and they blaze from Me, just as man is continually moved by his breath, and as the fire contains the nimble flame. All these things live in their own essence and are without death, since I am Life ... I am the whole of life — life was not torn from stones; it did not bud from branches; nor is it rooted in the generative power of the male. Rather, every living thing is rooted in Me.

When it is said, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gn 1:1), the word "beginning" is not to be interpreted in a temporal sense. Creation is not a once-for-all event happening in the remote past, an initial act that constitutes a chronological starting point. It is not a past event but a present relationship. We are to think and to speak not in the past but in the present tense; we are to say, not "God made the world, once upon a time, long ago," but "God is making the world, and you and me in it, here and now, at this moment and always." "In the beginning" (*en arche*), then, does not signify, "God started it all off, billions of years ago, and since then He has left things to keep going by their own momentum." It means, on the

contrary, that God is at each and every instant the constant and unceasing *arche*, the source, principle, cause and sustainer of all that exists. It means that, if God did not continue to exert His creative will at every split second of time, the universe would immediately collapse into the void of non-being. Without the active and uninterrupted presence of Christ the Creator-Logos throughout the cosmos, nothing would exist for a single moment.

If we adopt the sacramental understanding of the world..., we shall gradually find that our contemplation of nature is marked above all by two qualities: distinctiveness and transparency.

Distinctiveness . If we are to see the world as sacrament, then this signifies that, first of all, we are to discover the distinctive and peculiar flavour of each created thing. We are to perceive and to value each thing in and for itself, viewing that thing in sharp relief, appreciating what in the Zen tradition is called the special “Ah!” of each thing, its “is-ness,” or *haeccitas* . The point is vividly expressed by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame...  
each mortal thing does one thing and the same...  
selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells;  
crying What I do is me: for that I came.

To see nature as sacred is, in the first instance, to recognize how each thing “selves” and “speaks myself.” We are to perceive each kingfisher, each frog, each human face, each

blade of grass in its uniqueness. Each is to be real for us, each is to be immediate. We are to explore the variety and the particularity of creation — what St. Paul calls the “glory” of each thing: “There is one glory of the sun, and another of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory” (1 Co 15:41).

Transparency: Having evoked and savoured the particular “is-ness” of each thing, we can then take a second step: we can look within and beyond each thing, and discover in and through it the divine presence. After perceiving each kingfisher, each frog, each human face, each blade of grass in its uniqueness, in its full reality and immediacy, we are then to treat each as a means of communion with God, and so to ascend through the creation to the Creator. For it is impossible to make sense of the world unless we also look beyond the world; the world only acquires its true meaning when seen as the reflection of a reality that transcends it.

The first step, then, is to love the world for itself, in terms of its own consistency and integrity. The second step is to allow the world to become pellucid, so that it reveals to us the indwelling Creator-Logos. In this way we acquire Blake’s “double vision”:

For double the vision my Eyes do see,  
and a double vision is always with me...  
May God us keep,  
from Single vision and Newton’s sleep!

## Theme 2: Humans as Priests of Creation

We can now attempt to specify our responsibility as humans toward the world around us. Our human vocation, briefly expressed, is to be *priest* of the creation. As logical animals possessed of self-awareness and free choice—and at the same time as *Eucharistic* animals who are *being deified*—it is our supreme privilege, consciously and gratefully, to offer the created world back to God the Creator. This distinctively human function is precisely indicated just before the *Epiclesis* or Invocation of the Holy Spirit in the Divine Liturgy, when the celebrant elevates the gifts of bread and wine, saying; “Thine own from Thine own we offer to Thee, in all things and for all things.”

“Priest of the creation” and “offerer”: what do these two terms signify? First, we say in the Liturgy, “Thine own from Thine own.” What we offer to God is nothing else than what He Himself has given to us. Unless God had first conferred the world upon us as a free gift, we could make no offering at all. The offering is His rather than ours; without Him our hands would be empty. Indeed, in the Divine Liturgy it is Christ Himself who is the true Offerer, the unique High priest; we, the ordained ministers and the people present at the Eucharist, can only act as priest by virtue of our unity with Him. He alone is Celebrant in the true sense; we are no more than concelebrants with him. Indeed, not only is this true of the primary act of offering that is made in what Charles Williams called “the Operation of the Mass,” but it

applies to every act of offering throughout the whole of human life.

Second, in the Divine Liturgy we say not “I offer” but “we offer.” As offerers, whether in the Eucharist or in other ways, we do not act alone but in union with our fellow humans. As *political* animals, our thanksgiving is social and corporate. Whenever we offer, we are acting as persons in relationship: in John Donne’s words, “No man is an Island, entire of itself.” This corporate character of our humanness, as we have already emphasized, is more important today than ever before. Unless we can learn to share the world, we shall destroy the world and ourselves in it. “One world or none.”

Third, when we offer, we are ourselves part of what we offer. As cosmic priests, we stand within nature, not above it. In Kathleen Raine’s words: Seas, trees and voices cry, “Nature is your nature.”

Fourth, we are offerers rather than rulers or even stewards. The language of ruling and also sometimes of stewardship can easily be misinterpreted to signify arbitrary control and exploitation, as if the creation were our exclusive property rather than a gift that we hold in trust for the Creator.<sup>30</sup> All too often we Christians have tragically misapplied God’s words to the newly created Adam, “Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion ... over every living thing” (Gen.

1:28). Let us remember that dominion does not signify domination. And let us remember also that this dominion is given to us specifically because we are made in the divine image. It is therefore a dominion that we exercise in obedience to Christ and in imitation of His own example. Since He said, "My power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor.

12:9), since He exercised His power by "emptying" Himself and accepting death on the Cross (Phil. 2:7-8), it follows that our dominion within the realm of nature is essentially kenotic, after the divine example, a dominion of humble love, compassion, and self-sacrifice. "Love the trees."

From Kallistos Ware, "Through Creation to the Creator."

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### Theme 3: How Can We Be Priests of Creation?

Kallistos Ware, Alexandre Schmemmann and other modern Orthodox theologians emphasize the role of humans as priests of creation. What does this mean? How can we be priests of creation? Here are some avenues of reflection;

1. *By knowledge of creation.* This touches the world of science. God granted his human creation the ability to know him but also to know divine creation. This is symbolized in the Bible when God brought creation to Adam: "Out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Gn 2:19). To name a thing is to acquire knowledge of what is named, to internalize it in some fashion. God thus gave humanity the capacity and the mandate to acquire knowledge of the universe. The universe is not an incomprehensible chaos, but is infused with the Spirit of God (Gn 1:2), and is indeed comprehensible. Einstein said: "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible." True scientific knowledge about creation is not harmful to faith or salvation, but on the contrary can be a way to God, which the Fathers call "natural contemplation," and in our times "the contemplation of God in nature."

2. Beyond knowledge of creation is wonder. Knowledge may remain solely at an intellectual and abstract level, disconnected from the spiritual heart. But wonder, awe, at the

beauty, ingenuity, complexity and precision of the universe goes beyond human intellectual capacities, penetrating into the essential of human existence. Jesus himself points to an example of this type of wonder when speaking about the lilies of the field, from which he derives a moral lesson: "Why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Mt 6: 28-29). Wonder or the contemplation of God in creation can be true mystical experiences, accessible to all. But wonder or contemplation by themselves are incomplete in terms of human relations with the created world: we must go even further.

3. The duty of a priest is to bring offerings to God. As priests of creation, *humans offer creation to God*: "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures" (Ps 103:24).

4. Humans offer creation to God and God then makes creation available to humans: God has given humanity the power to "have dominion" over creation, not in the egotistic sense of the unrestricted exploitation of nature, but rather as *steward of creation*. Humans have the responsibility of being faithful stewards of creation, as in Jesus' parable (cf. Mt 24:45-51; Lk 12:42-48).

Paul Ladouceur

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**Liturgical Texts for the Feast of the Protection of the Environment  
(September 1st in the Orthodox Church)**

Troparion: In wisdom you created all things well, and fashioned humanity in your likeness. Sanctify our time, our Lord and King, for the fulfillment of your commands, that we may sing without ceasing your unbounded mercies for the renewal of the whole cosmos.

To “Lord, I cry unto thee”: O Christ, who brought all things into existence from nothing, and with ineffable wisdom gave to each one to accomplish unerringly the goal which you laid down in the beginning, O Saviour, Lover of humankind, as you are powerful, bless the whole creation which you fashioned.

For your name's sake I have waited for you, O Lord; my soul has waited for your word, my soul has hoped in the Lord. Give peace to all the nations, Lord, and understanding in all things, so that we may lead our life in tranquillity and always keep the laws which you laid down for all creation for the unalterable maintenance and government of the universe.

Lover of humankind, keep unharmed the environment that clothes the earth, through which, by your will, we who inhabit the earth live and move and have our being, that we, your unworthy suppliants, may be delivered from destruction and ruin.

Fence round the whole creation, O Christ Saviour, with the mighty strength of your love for humankind, and deliver the earth we inhabit from the corruption which threatens it; for we, your servants, have set our hopes on you.

Put an end, O Saviour, to the evil designs which are being devised against us by senseless intent, and turn aside from the earth every destructive action of the works of human hands which contrive corruption leading to perdition.

O Lord, who wraps creation in clouds, as godly David sang, watch over the environment of the earth, which you created from the beginning for the preservation of mortals, and give us the breath of the winds and the flow of waters.

Almighty God, who created all things with wisdom and who watches over and guides them by your all-powerful hand, grant well-being that all creation may prosper and remain unharmed by hostile elements; for

you, Master, commanded that the works of your hands should remain unshaken until the ends of the age; for you spoke and they came into being and they receive from you mercy for the turning away of all harm, and for the salvation of the human race which glorifies your name which is praised above all.

Litita: O Lord, who created the universe at the beginning and gave to each thing his own rank, do not despise the works of your hands, but with an eye of mercy look from heaven upon this vine and restore it according to your will, turning aside from it every purpose that brings corruption and every destroyer; for you are our Shepherd and Deliverer and Saviour and from you we receive help in mercy and acts of compassion, as we glorify you, O Master.

O Lord and Master who fenced about the domain of the earth and made it sure with an enveloping band, deliver its whole structure from harm and disaster; for you are a treasury of strength and the source of life, and all things minister and are subject to your will as your servants, Lord. And so grant us your mercies and turn away from us every disaster, and save our souls as you love humankind.

Threats and scourges and destruction hang over us, Lord, because of the multitude of our transgressions; for we have sinned and transgressed and gone far from you, and we are affected and afflicted by dire perils; but deliver us, Lord from dangers that beset us, and keep the whole structure of the earth unharmed, granting equable breaths of wind and ever-flowing springs of water for our safe-keeping and salvation, O Lover of humankind.

O Lord, who holds the circle of the earth and establishes its foundations, as the Prophet says, accept our suppliant entreaties, as our guardian and protector and Saviour; for we are your people and the sheep of your pasture and by your infinite mercy we shall be delivered from expected dangers. Do not then utterly destroy us, Master, but may your goodness conquer the multitude of our offences, that we may glorify the ocean of your acts of pity.

### References

Kallistos Ware, “Through Creation to the Creator,” Third Marco Pallis Memorial Lecture, *Ecotheology*, 2 (1996). Also in John Chryssavgis and Bruce Foltz, eds., *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature and Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

Part I: <[www.incommunion.org/2004/12/11/through-creation-to-the-creator/](http://www.incommunion.org/2004/12/11/through-creation-to-the-creator/)>

Vespers for the Protection of the Environment: <[www.goarch.org/chapel/texts](http://www.goarch.org/chapel/texts)>.