

Prayers for Paris

together, we reflect, sing, act and pray for climate justice



A Sermon on the Environment

by Paul Ladouceur

Readings: Genesis 1, Genesis 2:15, Romans 8:19–21.

On a path on Mount Athos, the monks put up a sign for passing pilgrims: “Love the trees.” Father Amphilochios, an elder on the island of Patmos in Greece, used to say, “Do you know that God gave us one more commandment, which is not recorded in Scripture? It is the commandment ‘Love the trees.’”

“Love the trees.” Why should this be important for Christians?

The Genesis account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden contains two valuable indications of how humans should relate to the world around them. In the first chapter of Genesis we read, “God said to the man and the woman: Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gn 1:28). This suggests that humanity stands at the summit of creation and that the rest of creation exists to serve humanity.

Why should this be so?

God created humans in his image and likeness (cf. Gn 1:26) – no other part of creation has the dignity of being in God’s image and likeness. But a different command of how humans should relate to the world is given in the second chapter of Genesis, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it” (Gn 2:15). This suggests that humans do not own the garden – the world or creation – but that creation belongs to God and humans are its custodians.

God tells humans “to till and to keep” the garden. “To till” suggests that humanity is to use the garden – all of creation – in order that creation may produce what is necessary for the survival of humanity – for the fulfilment of God’s command to be fruitful and to multiply.



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But how are we to understand the command “to keep” the garden?

Both the Hebrew word (shamar) and the word in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (phylassein in the Septuagint) clearly imply the idea of “keeping” in the sense of guarding, watching over, caring for something. Not possession, but a watchful, caring, even cherishing custodianship.

Humanity has a divinely-given responsibility for caring for creation, of protecting and fostering creation, as creation’s steward. Since the industrial revolution, humanity has acquired increasingly powerful means of transforming the earth for its own uses. Humanity has all too often concentrated on the first Genesis indication of “dominion” over creation and has neglected the second command of “keeping” creation.

This attitude has led to an unconscionable large-scale, self-centred exploitation and destruction of the natural world and the environment with all the consequences that we are aware of: pollution of land, water, oceans and air; the disappearance of animal and plant species of all kinds; an increase in the temperature of the earth, accompanied by melting of glaciers and permafrost; an increase in the level of the oceans; and unpredictable climate change and more severe climatic conditions.

It is time to concentrate on our responsibility before God for the caring, protection and fostering of God’s creation. Creation care is thus both a spiritual duty and a spiritual opportunity.

Many Orthodox writers (such as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Metropolitan John Zizioulas and Father Alexander Schmemmann) speak of humanity as the “priest of creation.”

How are we all priests of creation?

A priest makes an offering to God on behalf of the community. The Eucharist is the model of the offering to God. Christ is simultaneously the one who offers to God, on behalf of the community and through the agency of the priest, the one is offered as the divine-human sacrifice, and the one who receives the offering, as one of the Holy Trinity. The bread and the wine used in the Eucharist are the material offerings of the community, harvested from nature and transformed by human agency.

The idea that all of creation is sacred underpins Orthodox concern for the environment. The Genesis account of creation repeats after each day’s creation, “and God saw that it was good” (Gn 1). All of creation is good before God and hence all of creation is sacred.

There are several aspects of humanity’s task as priest of creation.

The first is to see the handiwork of the Creator in creation – to rise in our spirit from creation to the Creator. Beauty and harmony in creation can uplift us to see God’s hand at work. God is reflected in creation, he is truly but mysteriously present in the universe, and creation becomes a means to elevate the human spirit to the contemplation of God.

Fr. Dumitru Staniloae stresses the personal spiritual importance of the contemplation of God in the natural world. From the contemplation of God in nature, we can offer thanksgiving to God for creating such marvels and for allowing us to witness them and to partake of them. This is the essential meaning of “eucharist” – to offer thanksgiving.

The natural sciences are also an aspect of humanity’s response and reasonability to creation. By seeking to understand creation, we can better appreciate God’s handiwork and providence at work in the world. To be in awe before creation is to offer a prayer of worship and thanksgiving to the creator. With Christ the Saviour, we have a co-responsibility for the sanctification of all of creation, to bring creation to its fulfillment in God.

Saint Paul writes, “The earnest expectation of the creation eagerly awaits for the revealing of the sons of God... because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Ro 8:19-21).

All creation is called to a form of union with God, to theosis, when God will be “all in all,” in Saint Paul’s words (cf. 1 Co 15:28).

Humans are “liturgical beings,” homo liturgicus. Our vocation is to praise God and to offer creation to God, to restore creation to a rightful relationship with humanity and with the Creator. We cannot offer, like Cain, an imperfect or despoiled and polluted gift to God. Like Abel, we must offer the first-fruits of ourselves and of creation to God.

Wilful pollution of the environment is not only a human error, it is a moral evil – the needless destruction of what does not belong to us of what God has entrusted to us as his custodians.

To reinforce Orthodox concern for the environment, in 1989 Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios proclaimed September 1st, the first day of the new ecclesiastical calendar, a day for Orthodox Christians to offer prayers for the preservation of the natural creation.

And since his enthronement, Patriarch Bartholomew I has emerged as a world leader on the environment. He is called the “Green Patriarch” for his constant calls upon the Orthodox and all Christians to be mindful of the environment.

In the past Orthodox faithful prayed to be delivered from natural calamities, but now we are called to pray that the planet may be delivered from the abusive and destructive acts of human beings. A service for the environment may be celebrated in Orthodox churches on September 1st or the first Sunday in September.

Let us pray from this service:

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. Now and ever and to the ages of ages. **Amen.**

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.

Let us offer glory and thanksgiving to God, with words from the Akathist in Praise of God's Creation composed by Metropolitan Tryphon (Turkestanov):

Glory to you for calling me into being,
Glory to you for spreading out before me the beauty of the universe,
Glory to you for revealing to me through heaven and earth the eternal book of wisdom,
Glory to your eternity within this fleeting world,
Glory to you for your mercies, seen and unseen,
Glory to you for the feast-day of life,
Glory to you for the perfume of lilies and roses,
Glory to you for each different taste of berry and fruit,
Glory to you for the sparkling silver of early morning dew,
Glory to you for each smiling, peaceful awakening,
Glory to you for the warmth and tenderness of the world of nature,
Glory to you for surrounding us with thousands of your works,
Glory to you for the depth of your wisdom: the whole world is a living sign of it,
Glory to you: on my knees, I kiss the traces of your unseen hand,
Glory to you, O God, from age to age.



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