

EASTERN ORTHODOX THEOLOGY AND PRACTICES RELATED TO ECOLOGICAL ISSUES¹

Pr.Lect.Dr. Dan Sandu

One of the best known miracles performed by Christ, mentioned in the Sunday readings of the Eucharist, is the multiplication of the loaves of bread. The account is closely related to the act of creation, yet it brings a further element into light: after multiplying the loaves of bread and the fish, satisfying the hunger of 5,000 men, besides women and children, Jesus asked His disciples to „gather the pieces that were left over” (John 6, 12). He teaches that no part of His gifts should be wasted. Here we can find the basic elements of the required approach of the human community to the life environment granted by God to humanity:

1. What we have is from God, a gift of His bounty;
2. We cultivate, yet it is God who multiplies;
3. We must take from nature only as much as we need, and when we need, only (the crowds were hungry);
4. The human persons must bring their own contribution (five loaves of bread and two fish, infinitely small in comparison with God’s gift, which satisfies more than 10,000 people). Christ does not create from nothing again;
5. The gift of God has to be received with due care and in due order (Mark 6, 40; Luke 9, 14));
6. After receiving the gift, we must care for what is in excess.

The ecological principle is therefore present in the Holy Scripture and represents the art of administering what we have and what is left over. This has a double connotation:

1. On the one hand, there is the economical concern, that is, discard as little of what remains as possible, so that the technological processes should be advantageous from an economical point of view;
2. On the other hand, there is the human persons’ concern not to destroy the habitat by their abuse of it.

¹ The text of the study was delivered by its author at the International Symposium *Cristianity in our Life: Past, Present Future*, Tbilisi, Georgia, 26 November 2005.

This concern should not be confined to certain countries, but should cover the whole *oikoumene*, because the political borders are not established according to the climatic zones.

In the Byzantine theology, the house was both the home where each person fulfilled his or her vocation as social being, and the larger home, the inhabited world, or God's home. Technically speaking, the object of the study and knowledge of ecology is the interaction between ecosystems, the practical wisdom of exploiting, maintaining and passing on to the future generations the ecosystem that constitutes the living and redemptive environment for all beings.

This study has a theological part and a practical approach with concrete references to local environmental issues.

The Creator's rationality – the source of human rationality

The human person is seen in theological treatises as a crowning of creation, due to both the manner in which he comes into being and the responsibility he is assigned in the created environment, in solidarity with it. In his theology, St Basil states „*creation must find its origin in a personal and reasonable cause not in the idea that the humans have about creation*”², meaning that the humans, who were created „*in God's image*” (cf. Genesis 1, 26), are themselves rational. Being rational means being receptive and willing to communicate, a view confirmed by the Holy Scripture which presents the integrity of the human person as a dual entity, the man and the woman, who consciously and freely cultivate a relationship of communion and solidarity. Communion means shared worship of the Creator, the recognition of His authority as well as concrete examples of co-participation in His work.

The rationality of the human persons, owing to their created nature, is apparent in the fact that, from the very beginning, they were called to make a rational and earnest choice between pursuing their own welfare and that of the environment they were granted to live in. The biblical account of creation reveals several different levels of representation, ascending from very simple to highly complex ones, in order to make

² Pr. Gheorghe Popa, *Teologie și ecologie. Câteva repere hermeneutice pentru o eco-teo-logie creștină*, in vol. *Al XVI-lea Simpozion: Ecologie umană*, by Dr. Vlad Bejan et al, Editura Fundației „Axis”, Iași, 1999, p. 18.

human beings understand that God is not only the Creator of the inert existence but especially of the rational one, be it human or celestial, through whom He communicates with the creation that lacks rationality. This is why St Gregory of Nyssa affirmed that „*wisdom is contemplated in creation, which is the word, albeit not formulated*”. The main rationale of the care for the creation lies in the very fact that it is the fruit of the *personal, loving* work of God, Who saw that „*it was very good*” (Genesis 1, 31)³. Creation is therefore the result of the work of a rational being, having a definite role and purpose, God’s partner being the created rational human person who was meant to become like God, by divine grace.

Linguistically, the biblical account of creation is unadorned, straightforward, without any scientific pretence, because it renders an elementary reality that does not need to be wrapped in a complex literary form, which may give rise to interpretations. The text is even said to have a „ritualistic pace”, conveying a sense of majesty and a certain rhythm and visual dynamism, especially when the text is listened to⁴. The text itself is proof that it was not intended as a scientific representation of the process of creation, but as a lively image of God’s generous work, which we experience again in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation (Revelation 22, 1-5).

The creation itself contains God’s rational and relational covenant with humanity as a cosmic reality, the whole created universe, through the mediation of humanity to which the created things were entrusted. From the very beginning God wanted His creation to be eternal, for „*God’s gifts and His call are irrevocable*” (Romans 11, 29). The human persons were to lead the creation to eternity, because both humanity, and the surrounding world were created and destined for eternity.

Creation and human misconduct

The human persons were created in harmony with the universe, having the mandate to remain in harmony with the Creator, by their own free will. The account of creation reveals a glorious image of the universe

³ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Hexaemeron* P.G. 44, 73C.

⁴ Séan McDonagh, *Green Spirituality and the Bible*, in „Spirituality”, vol. I/1995, no. 2, p. 92.

acting upon God's will: the waters separate, the sky appears, the seas calm down and everything falls into a logical and harmonious process of organisation.

The human beings were there „*to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air... and over all the creatures*” (Genesis 1, 26), or to „serve” and „preserve”, as Ghillean Prance stated, in a recent interview; yet the human persons were the first to refuse to obey God’s reason and love, by a basic act of defiance: using matter irrationally for a supposedly good purpose: being „*like God, knowing good and evil*” (Genesis 3, 5). More precisely, the visible sin consisted in taking, by their own will, more than they needed, which caused a rift with the universe they lived in and a constant conflict with it (Genesis 2, 16). The invisible part of the sin was the human persons' arrogance towards creation and its Creator. The human first compte have turned use into abuse, by self-sufficiency and greed. By this, they have become self-centred and isolated due to their own irrational desires. As such, the ecological problem is not a recent issue, and has to do not only with water, air and soil, but with the health of soul understood as reason, sentiment and will. The Son of God calls attention to the primacy of spiritual health whenever He heals any medical deficiencies and physical disabilities. The health of the soul and the ways in which God communicates with us cannot be separated from the health of the body and of the life environment, which have theological connotations. One can support this statement by the numerous healings performed by Jesus Christ proving His care for the human dignity and life as a holistic reality. Yet He always linked bodily healing to the spiritual health. This must be applied to the environment, too: deprived of any spiritual value, creation seems to be justified only by the material exploitation of its resources.

The original sin was *inter alii* a revolt against moderation. The responsibility of the human being is not confined to the human dimension only; it has to do with the community and nature in its entirety⁵. The result of sin is conspicuous in suffering, pain, and death (Genesis 3, 16). The Garden of Eden ceases to be beautiful and welcoming, and sin does not affect the first people alone.

⁵ Emmanuel Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation. Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2000, p. 210.

In keeping with the precepts of the Scriptures, the human persons had the right to „govern” the land, or to make it „comply with” higher principles, yet later theologies interpreted them as a „right to exploit”, considering that the environment was given to the human beings so that they should satisfy their needs and procure their happiness independently from divine will at any cost. However, the deliberate destruction of the environment is a sin, not only as a matter of earthly life and death, but also as one concerning the eternal life. The loss is infinite and eternal⁶. The modern human beings are not different from the first couple, as they consume more than they need, and turn feelings into passions and necessity into greed.

The human being has always been one with nature in fall since, as said by the Apostle Paul: the whole creation „groans under the burden of sin” (Romans 8, 22). Accordingly, it should be one with nature in redemption, too. Redemption is a process that has to do both with the human person and with the creation, as both have to restore the harmony with God, in a process that is called *theosis* or deification, becoming like God, through the grace of God. True Christians are not preoccupied with conquering nature and dominating it, they do not see their own personal initiative as a means of achievement, do not claim the right to initiative, but are keenly aware that the universe is the macro-*anthropos* while the human person is a micro-*cosmos*. The Church is the milieu where this view has originated, as it is the sacramental body of Christ, extended into the world, which is „the icon of the universe, made of visible and invisible essences, because like the world, the cosmos contains unity and diversity, thus the created world is divided into a spiritual world, full of essence, and a corporeal world, ingeniously created out of various and numerous forms and essences”⁷.

⁶ M. Polany, *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p. 118.

⁷ Vincent Rossi, *La cosmologie sacrée: l'exemple orthodoxe*, in „l'Ecologiste”, vol. 3, no. 9/2003, p. 59.

Love – the reason to live

The most burning issue facing the Churches today, both in a moral and material form is poverty, its most dramatic form being famine. It is true that securing food for an increasing population is the main preoccupation of technology and science nowadays. The error lies in the fact that during the last decades this concern was unilaterally directed towards expanding the means of production and multiplication and less towards the preservation of the created nature as a gift given to all people. Thus, some still take more than they need, while others starve. In Emmaus, Jesus blessed and shared the resources with Lucas and Cleopas. This might have inspired Nicholas Berdiaev to write: „*When I do not have bread it is an economical matter; when the neighbour does not have bread, it turns into a moral matter.*” In the secularised, individualistic society, a discrepancy arises when the notion of „*natural contemplation*”⁸ disappears from theology and the practice of Christian faith, since it excludes the notion of *sharing*. It is after all a matter of love or more exactly the lack of it.

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae wrote extensively about love, as the main reason to come into existence: love of God for the coming world, love for the redemption of the world, love for every human being who enters into the intimate relationship with Christ by Baptism and the other Holy Sacraments.⁹ When one loves somebody this creates the inner necessity of eternal life. As long as we love the nature, we want it to live for ever. One cannot point to anything that God made without love. „In so far as I am not loved by the others, I am unintelligible to myself”, the theologian would say.

Before starting to speak about „ways” we may use to safeguard the creation, we must check our feelings towards what we want to save. In a recent conference, in Basel, in May 2005, on the theme *The Contribution of Churches towards a Sustainable Europe*, the protestant theologians spoke about the human beings’ need to apologise to the creation for previous maltreatment and become a *steward* of it. Repentance is a

⁸ Anestis G. Keselopoulos, *Man and the Environment*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, p. 103.

⁹ See especially *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia ortodoxă*, EIBMBOR, București, 2004.

natural status of humankind in relation with God, but one should not miss that He gave it also a *kingly* dignity over the creation. Being a good king means love for the subjects otherwise they may rebel against the king. A king should not subdue nature in order to satisfy his own passions, but to get to know the territory as a mandate from God and not to claim it from himself, but for God Himself. Multiplication of the human race should lead the Earth to that special relationship with God which is in full harmony with His will. In the biblical understanding of the kingdom of God, we may discern what a kingdom on the earth should mean. Psalm 74, 13 reads: „*But you, O God, are my king from of old; you bring salvation upon the earth*”. If God ensures the salvation of those in His Kingdom, He becomes an example for human „kings” to be masters who seek the salvation of the subjects whom they serve. God is not only Lord and master of the creation, because as long as its salvation is possible only through His death, He does not abandon His royal duty. The model of people as masters of nature should not emphasise their dominion over the material world, but their responsibility towards the creation in love. In this sense, the human person becomes an incomparably better model of human authority over creation in line with God’s commandments. Moreover, it implies a transformation in ethics and morals, as people will not obey moral laws without changing their hearts and without a deliberate improvement of their inner self.

The human being is also called to be a *priest* of the creation, which means to make offerings to God in the name of the creation and to lead it to sanctification in love. This is especially embodied in the Orthodox tradition making the human beings theocentrically oriented. It emphasises their freedom as well as their need of repentance, a transformation of mind and heart without which they would choose again the path of the old Adam. One knows that during the ceremony of every sacrament in the Orthodox liturgical life, the celebrating priest reads a secret prayer of his own forgiveness, before asking the Holy Spirit to come down and transform the gifts. Only in this state can the human person be a receptacle of the divine work within creation and this is possible only because the Son of God became man. He restored the relationship between God and creation, which creation itself could not achieve. He

restored the „image of God” and took the humanity of his body within the life of the Holy Trinity out of His infinite love.

Asceticism – an elaborated practical form of eco-theology

Besides being the science of administering the environment, ecology is a matter of practical theology. While Western theology has often tended to differentiate between the academic theology, that is the one of universities, and practical theology, the one experienced in Christian communities, Orthodoxy has formulated a complementary expression of theology and spirituality. For instance, an ordinary day for a Christian living in a traditional community begins with a morning prayer, followed by work on the land that provides sustenance, the thanksgiving prayer before and after each meal, the practice of communal life in the family, in the parish and in the surrounding nature that is seen as a gift from God; the day ends with a prayer expressing one's gratitude for the day that has passed and asking for peace in the night to come.

Genuine Orthodoxy recommends temperance, as it does not regard the acquisition of goods to be the calling of the modern man. It seeks to preserve the boundary between nature as an object of human exploitation and nature as an illusion, affirming that nature is the means by which the human can achieve eternal life. It follows in the line of the Patristic teachings according to which nature is not a „thing” but another being which co-operates with the other nature that is the human being¹⁰.

Ascetism represents the harsh form of care for the environment and of attention devoted to God, since its main message is that it is not the human persons but God who dominates the earth and that the human persons should willingly obey God because this would be to their own advantage. The „image of God” in the human persons does concern their bodies, which should be treated with moderation. *Askesis* - asceticism has been practised in Orthodoxy from early Christianity until the present day and has a double dimension: abstaining from giving the body what it desires through the concupiscence of sin and strengthening the will by refusing what is desirable for oneself and gladly accepting what is pleasing to God (the daily practice of an ascetical monk who obeys his spiritual father is a struggle to do what he may not want to, for the sake of

¹⁰ Emmanuel Clapsis, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-215.

higher ideals). The aim is to dominate sinful passions, to have ascendancy over the material world by abstaining from what can be negative and to restore the status that the human person had in Paradise.

In parallel with refraining from anything that can be spiritually damaging, the ascetic person intensifies the spiritual practise of liturgical life and the permanent thanksgiving for what God has offered as His gift to the world. This is why the ascetic spends much of his time praying and contemplating. The moderation he exercises is the state of normality that Adam was not able to observe in the Garden of Eden. For this reason the ascetics are also said to bear „*the angelic image*”.

Besides the instruction it provides, abstinence promotes respect for creation, as the ascetic does not damage it or exploit it excessively, because he only takes what nature has to offer. His attitude should not be seen as opposition to or hatred of anything material, but rather as a different understanding of our divine gifts. In many cases, ascetic monks live in perfect harmony not only with lifeless nature but also with the wild beasts that seem to understand their spiritual message and work for the welfare of the human person.

By relying on reason and will, the monk or the hermit submits the material world to spiritual ideals, such as the restraining of primitive passions and desires related to possession, reproduction, and pride. What actually matters is not the personal existence, but the relationship with God and the fellow human persons, the constant state of thanksgiving to the Creator, which has caused certain theologians to call the Christian a „*homo eucharisticus*” (the thanksgiving being).

The ascetic denounces the world dominated by human beings without hating it or one’s human fellows, but showing that the right path is totally different. Such an attitude was termed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios with the formula „ascetic spirit”. He understands asceticism as every form of voluntary self-restraint, a greater simplicity at each and every level of our daily life. The ecological crisis can only be resolved – if, indeed, a resolution is still possible – through our willingness to practise self-limitation in our consumption of all natural resources. It can be resolved only if we make a distinction between what we *want* and what we *need*, between my selfish desires and my natural requirement. Only through self-denial, through the decision to forgo and

sometimes say „no” to ourselves, shall we rediscover our theological place in the universe.

The theology of pilgrimage - education for ecology

The tradition of pilgrimage plays an equally important role in the Orthodox life. One could regard the first couple and every other living people as pilgrims on the earth. It is important to stress that the world was made good, and even fallen, a holy person can only see it as beautiful. This fact is vividly emphasised by the anonymous author of the Russian 19th century classic *The Way of a Pilgrim*. As he journeys through an endless forest reciting the Jesus Prayer, the Pilgrim finds that his heart is filled with an all-embracing love for all mankind and also for all created things. „When ... I prayed with all my heart, everything around me seemed delightful and marvellous. The trees, the grass, the birds, the earth, the air, the light seemed to be telling me that ... all things prayed to God and sang His praise. Thus it was that I came to understand what the Philokalia calls „the knowledge of the speech of all creatures”¹¹.

Pilgrimage involves struggle and renunciation. Thus, the pilgrims visit and worship holy sites, monasteries, icons or burial grounds of great Church personalities without expecting top-class board and lodging facilities. Quite often pilgrimage is seen as an exclusively spiritual endeavour during which one has to eat sparingly, walk a lot, sleep less and in modest conditions, and make offerings to the poor and to the respective holy sites.

The pilgrimage centres can and should provide specific services and promote ecological education. The pilgrim is required to have a decent and modest behaviour the surrounding area and towards the whole monastic community that abides by different laws from those of the lay world.

The pilgrim seeks spiritual meanings in creation, is fully aware of the need to respect life as a gift of God, and aims to achieve communion with Him, with himself, with his or her fellows, and with nature. Pilgrim guides or tour leaders must promote the awareness of Church membership

¹¹ *The Way of a Pilgrim*, translated by R.M. French, London, SPCK, 1954, pp. 31-32.

and the significance of the Christian identity and of the responsibility towards God's creation. The Church must initiate educational pilgrimage programmes for young people as well as spiritual ones for the elderly.

For all faithful pilgrims, the encounter with the sacred milieu of a holy site is a personal experience that makes them aware of the harmony between man and nature in those distant places, in the mountains and forests, where ascetics respect the waters and the crops and practise intense fasting and contemplation. The education through pilgrimages is an alternative to the „temptations” of the modern world that foster violence, indifference and inhumanity through selfish exploitation.

Church prayers and practices

The focal point of the Church's attitude and practices related to the environment is the belief in God as a Trinity of Persons, i.e. the image of sharing. It justifies the continuous discovery of His mysteries by the human persons and of the human persons among them. One can even speak about a „mutual revelation” occurring when people talk or pray together in a kind of human perichoresis. God as source of communion constantly communicates His love to the creation. This means that the human beings, in return, have the daunting task of ensuring the survival of God's creation.

This perspective is best reflected in the liturgical experience of the Church, in which the world is dynamically represented. We begin every liturgical day at the sunset with the reading of Psalm 104 (103), in which the relationship between God the Creator and His creation is praised. God is clothed in light, He has laid the beams of His chambers on the waters, makes the clouds His chariot, the wind His messenger, He sets the earth on its foundation, raises mountains and sinks the valleys, He makes springs gush forth in the valleys, gives water to every beast, provides birds with nests, makes grass grow for the cattle and brings everything forth from the earth, marks the seasons, separates the darkness and the daylight. The psalm goes on giving an account of God's work within the depths of waters, with all creatures of the sea, culminating in the wonder: *„how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all”* (Psalm 104, 24). For all these, we should „Bless the Lord”. We come now to acknowledge what is the right attitude of the human being when taking

note of the beauty of creation. As His Eminence Kallistos puts it, „*The Church takes us, as it were, to that first evening on which man, called by God to life, opened his eyes and saw what God in His love was giving to him, saw all the beauty, all the glory of the temple in which he was standing, and rendered thanks to God. And in this thanksgiving he became himself*”¹²

In each Holy Liturgy (Gr. *leitourgia* = „work of the people”), also called the Eucharist (Gr. *Eucharisto* = „to thank”) not only the human person is present, but also God, who sanctifies everything, the invisible beings, the heavenly powers and the human beings, all united in serving the Creator and respecting the creation, which is consecrated by the priest and symbolically offered to God. The priest offers the gifts of bread and wine before their transformation into the Body and Blood of Christ, in the Holy Liturgy of John Chrisostom and Basil the Great that have been celebrated in the Orthodox Church ever since fourth century, using the following pronouncement: „*Your own of Your own we offer to You all things, for all creation!*” The human being takes a piece of nature, which belongs to God, lays his or her own mark on it, reshaping it in a personal manner, and returns it to God in the form of bread and wine, and God, in turn, communicates sacredness to the human being, who is restored in communion with the Creator, through the sanctified gifts.

The Liturgy is essentially the transfiguration of nature by the sacramental acts that unite all people, at all times and in all places, the earth and the heaven, the visible and the invisible world, the created and the un-created. It involves sacrifice, because it is the bloodless re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. From the liturgical sacramental space, sacrifice as renunciation of personal desires and passions must enter into the living space of everyday life, as the Romanian theologian Ion Bria said¹³.

The Orthodox Church also has further ways of expressing involvement in nature and in human life: prayers for the blessing of the land before sowing, blessing of the harvests and the first crops,

¹² Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988) p. 60, cited by Kallistos Ware in a conference delivered in Iasi, Romania, 23 October 2005.

¹³ Ion Bria, *Liturghia după Liturghie*, Editura Athena, București, 1996, pp. 153 f.

consecration of the waters at the Epiphany and of the gifts brought to the Church for the Liturgy, of household animals, prayers for the restoration of health and for the sharing of God's grace with people and their living environment in moments of crisis. The image of the human beings living outside the rest of creation is false. The current situation of the environment shows them being almost terrified and wholly dependent on nature.

The Orthodox worship honours the human senses such as sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. It makes use of and appreciates material things, giving them a spiritual destination. It is significant that when the human person gives back as offering the material things, they must always give them pure and reshaped by the human person's hands.

An overview of a local situation

One could not speak of „ecological awareness” during communism in Romania, although depriving the people of access to material goods somehow protected nature. A Swiss theologian visiting Romania in 1990 confessed: *„nature in Romania is of a special kind. The trees are healthier and nature has a genuine wilderness which can no longer be seen in the West, where every plant is inventoried”*. The communist agriculture damaged the soil through the excessive use of chemical fertilisers aiming at ever increasing record crops. This practice stopped after 1990 so that one can say that the Romanian village is not seriously contaminated nowadays and genetically modified products are not yet widely produced in Romania. There are certain laws regulating environmental protection yet their implementation largely depends on time and a change of mentality, such as: the Government's Ordinance 34/2000 concerning ecological products; Law no. 166/2002 regarding forest exploitation; Government Decision no. 917/2001 containing methodological norms for the implementation of ecological legislation. Romania has also completed the negotiations with the EU on ecological issues, in view of the imminent integration and will also adopt the specific EU legislation.

Still, the environment has a low profile in Romania. One of the chief causes of this situation is the ambiguous land ownership and redistribution law, which has caused excessive delays. Arable land and

forests are not considered private property so that land exploitation has been unsystematic.

Pollution brought along by the need of a „civilised” society meant in the last 15 years a remarkable increase in the number of private cars, most of which are highly pollutant, and the deforestation of mountains to produce raw timber. Other sources of pollution are the industrial units using outdated equipment that lack proper filters, often releasing highly pollutant substances in rivers, which has led to several ecological disasters.

The Church is highly aware of the ecological imperatives and the need for intensified cooperation to achieve them. But because the world must realise that the issue at stake is not how we live, but life itself, she adds the spiritual dimension to the general environmental concerns such as less contaminated air and water, biodiversity, wholesome fertile soil, reducing the loss of nutrients through levigation, fighting soil erosion, economical use of water, nutritive quality of ecological products, reduced use of non-renewable resources, protecting the environment for the future generations, work and sustenance alternatives for families in rural areas. However, her voice is silent or silenced by the social, economic, and political factors that see „development” as a more important priority than the ecological issues.

Initiatives and facts

The sustainability of the environment is, from a religious point of view, first and foremost, a question of divine decision: „*when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust*” (Psalm 103, 30). This is what the modern human being ignores, while acting as God’s substitute who owns the environment. This must be part of the eco-theological education developed by the Church in cooperation with educational bodies, restoring in the mind of the modern man the role of God in creation.

In a recent article, a Romanian journalist was asking rhetorically: will Romania stay as an oasis of natural fertile land in the sea of chemically modified Europe, or will it spoil its land for the sake of greater production? Romanians are at present more concerned with reshaping the map of land property, meaning that the land which was abusively taken

by the communist state from the owners must be given back and this issue will not have a quick resolution. The process takes a long time, although it is now on the right track.

The future integration in Europe contributes to the Church's understanding that resources need to be used efficiently; its guiding principle is that the presence of the parish or monastic community does not have any damaging influence on the environment. From the very beginning, those who established monasteries made sure that the monastic settlements would not be conflict with the surroundings and would not exploit its resources unwisely.

They own a small part of the arable land and of the forests, being able to constitute a model of care for sustainable eco-management and agriculture. There is a concern to promote ecological production on Church lands. To achieve this goal the Church needs the input and collaboration of professional and specialised institutions, which can offer the necessary training and information regarding this type of agriculture. Romanian monastic lands are known everywhere for such natural products as: therapeutic herbals, wild berries, and medicinal teas. Even the monastic diet allows a gentle, considerate approach of nature, in view of the fact that about half of the ecclesial year consists of periods of fasting (abstaining from any type of products of animal origin), the monks thus taking only what nature offers them.

The Church carries out its activities in the rural areas of Romania against a background of poverty. On the one hand people need at least some land and nourishment, on the other their education is limited. The overemphasis on industry during communist years caused many Romanians to migrate to the urban areas. Now, with the closing down of the inefficient industrial plants, people return to villages where they have to start a new life. This is a new environment where the education for ecologically aware agriculture should be promoted. In this field, the Church has been developing some small-scale partnerships with specialised EU and US organisations and foundations.

The priest plays an important role, as he is traditionally the person with the greatest authority in the rural community. In the long run, the Church could be involved in educating people through the media it owns, by establishing protected areas, especially around the monasteries, now

exploited by tourism, and setting up information and support centres for ecological farming.

In lieu of a conclusion

The world-famous exterior frescoes of Moldavian monasteries exhibit a variety of instances in which nature appears to be one with the human existence. The most striking among them is the representation of the genealogy of our Saviour, in which every important character in the history of salvation that preceded the Lord is depicted in a flower cup. As a matter of fact, the whole church building is an image of cosmic creation, an idea developed as early as the 7th century by Maxim the Confesor¹⁴. The representations point to the interpenetration of nature and the human person, starting with the Creation and ending with the final Judgment which is attended by all beings, from either the plant and the animal kingdom. This shows that, if the world in general has a beginning, it should have an ending too, yet this should not occur prematurely and should not be caused by the human beings but be enacted by God. As stated by St John Chrysostomos, nothing in the world is evil except for sin, and because of sin nature suffers and brings God's punishment upon itself. Therefore, he writes, „*God is good and loves all people not only when he bestows His blessings but also when he punishes them. For his penalties and reprimands are a great benefaction and show His care. So when you see that there is famine, plague, drought, floods and turbulence in the air or anything else of this kind, which punishes the human world, do not be distressed, do not lose hope, but pray to the One who works and admire His power. For all these happen to make your soul wiser*”.

In other words, the end is in God's hands and therefore the human persons alone, independently, can establish neither the end nor the salvation of the planet, but can only turn back to God and understand His rationality, His benevolence and love of people, seeking to make out His plan for the whole creation and respect their own vocation as priests, stewards and kings of creation.

The Church, isolated from the decision process of the enlargement of the European Union, is required to bring an important contribution to

¹⁴ *Mystagogia*, PG 91, 657-717, apud Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *op. cit.*, pp. 21 ff.

the education for the care of the environment, in line with its millenary tradition. The well-known notion of *symphony* in the Byzantine tradition should not be limited to State – Church relations, it should also extend to the Church's relation with the world. Therefore the Church's voice must be set aloud through:

1. Assuming and acknowledging her own role as divine-human institution called to educate and sanctify life. She must play a triple role:

- *Prophetic*: to voice the realities of the faith and clearly describe the divine message as the most relevant instrument modelling our attitude towards the creation and revealing its vocation;

- *Educational*: to instruct the faithful to apply in their everyday life the care for what is given us as a gift, with consideration for our descendants who are equally entitled to a healthy life;

- *Communicative*: to create connections between the school, family, parish, NGOs, foundations and generally between people who share common interests;

2. Extending the model of moderation, a feature of Orthodoxy, which upholds the fast as a method of strengthening the will of the person, the care for the soul and the limitation of consumption in favour of generosity and communion;

3. Integrating the theology of creation in the liturgical space of other Churches, who have lost this dimension and have even ended up promoting a theology that claims prosperity, free initiative, rights of possession to prevail over the law of God, that justify hedonism and eliminate the matter from the Church's vocation to bring God's blessing over the waters, the lands, the animals, the harvests, the crops.

4. Encouraging European bodies to support monastic communities in their effort to develop sustainable agriculture and organic products: animal and plant products, wild berries, medicinal plants, jams, honey, ecological soap, etc.

5. Promoting education through pilgrimage and changing mentalities in tourism by more careful attention to the religious and natural sites, which can be achieved by the pilgrimage centres. The Church's vocation is to turn tourists into pilgrims.

6. Advocating the more extensive study of the theology of creation, as part of the curricula of the schools of theology, not exclusively in the

curricula sense of affirming the divine origin of life, but also in stressing the human responsibility towards the created world, in an eschatological perspective.

7. Providing training programmes for priests and pastors, who are educators of religious communities and have the authority and the instruments to convince people of the need for a responsible approach of the Earth's natural resources.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ball, Ian et. al., *The Earth Beneath. A Critical Guide to Green Theology*, SPCK, London, 1992.
- Bejan, Dr. Vlad et. al., *Al XVI-lea Simpozion de Ecologie umană*, Fundația Axis, Iași, 1999.
- Bria, Pr. Prof. Dr. Ion, *Liturghia după Liturghie. O tipologie a misiunii apostolice și mărturiei creștine azi*, Ed. Athena, București, 1996.
- Clapsis Emmanuel, *Orthodoxy in Conversation. Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2000.
- Duchrow, Ulrich and Gerhard Liedke, *Shalom. Biblical Perspectives on Creation, Justice and Peace*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1987.
- Gouvalis, Arhim. Daniil, *Minunile creatiei*, trad. de Cristina Băcanu, Bunavestire, Bacău, 2001.
- Hallman, David, *Ecotheology. Voices from South and North*, WCC Publications, Geneva 1994.
- Hobson, Sarah and Mee, Laurence David (eds), *Revelation and the Environment AD 95-1995*, World Scientific, London, 1995.
- Hobson, Sarah and Mee, Laurence David (eds), *The Black Sea in Crisis*, World Scientific, London, 1998.
- Keselopoulos, Anestis G., *Man and the Environment*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001.
- McDonagh, Séan, *Green Spirituality and the Bible*, in „Spirituality”, vol. I/1995, no. 2.
- Nollman, Jim, *Écologie spirituelle*, traduction Yves Lambert, Editions Jouvence, Geneve, 1990.
- Pleșu, Andrei, *Despre ingeri*, Humanitas, București, 2003.
- Polany, M., *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978.
- Popa, Gheorghe, *Teologie și ecologie. Câteva repere hermeneutice pentru o eco-teologie creștină*, in vol. *Al XVI-lea Simpozion: Ecologie umană*, by Dr. Vlad Bejan et al, Editura Fundației „Axis”, Iași, 1999.

- Rossi, Vincent, *La cosmologie sacrée: l'exemple orthodoxe*, in „l'Ecologiste”, vol. 3, no. 9/2003.
- Sieger, Thomas Derr, *Ecology and Human Liberation*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1973.
- Spretnak, Charlene, *Les dimensions spirituelles de la politique écologique*, traduit par Sophie Marnat, Editions Jouvence, Geneve, 1993.
- Stăniloae, Pr. Prof. Dumitru, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia ortodoxă*, EIBMBOR, București, 2004.

Eastern Orthodox Theology and practices Related to Ecological Issues

Abstract : *The author examines some key aspects of ecology, evaluated from a biblical and theological perspective, and advocates for the care for the creation, which must become a concern for the whole Christian world and not only. The research is not exclusively theological, as it seeks to link theology with practice and to show what the role of man, as the crowning of the creation, ought to be: king, priest, and servant. The Holy Scriptures, reason and the current state of the environment intrinsically justify a responsible attitude towards the creation. The original sin, besides the issue of the disobedience to the Creator, also connotes the revolt against moderation. Returning to the Creator means moderation and love for that which must be redeemed. The early practice of the Church incorporates the whole creation in its liturgical prayers and rites, approaching it in a doxological manner.*