

Love God, Love thy Neighbor, Love the Trees: Orthodox Reflections on Ecology, Theology, and Human Dignity

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Your Excellency Bishop Mark, Reverend Fathers, dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

I. Introduction

It is an honor to be together today, as part of this promising and exemplary collaboration between the local Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communities. Congratulations to Fr. Nick, to Fr. Panayiotis & Fr. Rick, and to the leadership of the Our Lady of Perpetual Help and the Saints Peter and Paul parishes on this 5-year anniversary.

And thank you not only for the invitation to speak, but, more importantly, for the healing work you're doing. (This healing is happening on at least two levels, right?—it is a healing of our relationship with creation through prayer and through efforts being made to live more “carefully,” and it is also a healing of our relationship as sister churches, as Catholics and Orthodox.)

We'll get to the “triple love” part of my title toward the end of the presentation, but for now, I draw your attention to 3 terms in my subtitle—**Ecology**, **Theology**, and **Human Dignity**.

The central message I hope to communicate today is that *part of the promise that traditional Christianity holds for responding to some of our greatest challenges lies precisely in the way that ecology, human dignity, and theology are inseparably interrelated and integrated within our faith.*

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For far too long, much Christian theology was done without a significant connection to the natural world. While most theologians provided some account of the origin of the cosmos, and of God as the Creator, there was little discussion of the organic relationship between ecology and theology.¹ Thus, when the destruction of the environment became a matter of wide-spread concern in the 20th century, Christian theology was typically perceived as being either **irrelevant**

¹ For a helpful discussion of exceptions to this trend, see Panu Pihkala, “Rediscovery of Early Twentieth-Century Ecotheology,” *Open Theology* 2 (2016): 268-285.

or, even worse, as being **the culprit, or cause**, of environmental destruction. (I can say more about this during the Q & A if you're interested...)

Thankfully, especially over the past 50 years, good work has been done to correct this, and numerous scholars and organizations have advanced our understanding of the intimate relationship between **ecology** and Christian **theology**, a field referred to as “ecotheology.”

Similarly, for far too long, much Christian theology was done without a significant connection to liberating oppressed and marginalized persons. While ‘care for the poor’ has remained a central Christian activity, critiquing the laws and other social structures that sustain inequality, dehumanize and even enslave so many human beings was not a focus among many theologians.

Thankfully, again over the past 50 years, Christian theologians have refocused upon the central message of liberation. They have drawn especially from the Exodus story and from Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Luke, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Lk. 4:18-19). These Christian thinkers, sometimes referred to as “liberation theologians,” have emphasized the connection between **theology** and **human dignity**, between God’s love and the liberation of those who are marginalized and exploited because of their poverty, their race, their nationality, their gender, their disability, their refugee status, their youth, or some other characteristic beyond their control.

While connections are being rediscovered between theology and ecology, on the one hand, and between theology and human dignity on the other, *we rarely see the integration of all three areas of reflection*. Christian theologians who embrace ecology often do not pay attention to the ways that harming the natural world affects those who are poor and oppressed disproportionately more than it affects those who are wealthy and free. And theologians who proclaim the gospel’s message of liberation for human beings often do not pay attention to the ways that modern slavery—the horrifying reality of forced labor, sex trafficking, child soldiering, exploitation of migrants and refugees, and other violations of basic human dignity—are inescapably tied to the environmental crisis.

However, there are a few strong theological voices who, in recent decades, have been discerning and directing our attention to the mutuality between **ecology** and **human dignity**—between the abuse of the environment and the abuse of human beings. Two shining example are His Holiness Pope Francis and His-All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

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In his book, *Encountering the Mystery*, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew writes:

“Orthodox theology...recognizes the natural creation as inseparable from the identity and destiny of humanity, because every human action leaves a lasting imprint on the body of the earth. Human attitudes and behavior toward creation directly impact on and reflect human attitudes and behavior toward other people...Scientists estimate that those most hurt by global warming in years to come will be those who can least afford it. Therefore, the ecological problem of pollution is invariably connected to the social problem of poverty; and so all ecological activity is ultimately measured and properly judged by its impact and effect upon the poor (see Matt. 25).”²

Similarly, in his opening address at the 2017 Ecumenical forum on modern slavery, His All-Holiness stated:

“We are convinced that responding to the problem of modern slavery is directly and inseparably linked to creation care...The entire world is the body of Christ; just as human beings are the very body of Christ. The whole planet bears the traces of God, just as every person is created in the image of God. The way we respect creation reflects the way we respond to our fellow human beings. The scars we inflict on our environment reveal our willingness to exploit our brother and sister.”³

And in his magnificent 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si’* the Holy Father writes, “Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (§49)

In the time that remains, I will first offer two concrete examples that highlight the interconnectedness between ecology and human dignity. After this, I will discuss briefly two sources from the Orthodox theological tradition that highlight this integrated worldview and that can hopefully help us see this interconnected between God, neighbor, and creation and respond in a more faithful and loving way.

II. Two Examples: Environmental Racism and Modern Slavery

First, in the City of Chicago, ecologists recently published a study analyzing the distribution of environmental risks and benefits. The report included a map that showed all the various sections of the city, and color-coded the quality of environmental health in each section based upon

² His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 94-95.

³ His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Opening Address” for the Forum on Modern Slavery, “Sins Before Our Eyes” (Istanbul, February 7, 2017).

factors including: levels of air and water toxins, quantities of heavy metals in the soil, and proximity to industrial factories and waste treatment centers.

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Neighborhoods that were colored blue or blue-green on the map had the lowest levels of pollution and the healthiest overall environment. *None* of these “blue” neighborhoods included facilities that produced or processed large-scale industrial waste. In contrast, neighborhoods that were colored red or red-orange had the highest levels of pollution and the most dangerous overall environment. Often these “red” neighborhoods included *multiple* factories or waste disposal sites.

Can you guess who lives in the “blue” neighborhoods? Primarily wealthy Chicagoans who are almost exclusively white. And can you guess who lives in the “red” neighborhoods? Chicago’s economically poor, who are primarily racial minorities—African-Americans, Latinos, and recent immigrants.

The study also showed that public schools in the “red” zones are often located very close to major pollution sources, which puts children in these neighborhoods at even higher risk for exposure to neuro-toxins linked to learning disabilities.⁴

Let’s be honest: **This is a grim and offensive picture**: some human beings are breathing clean air, drinking safe water, enjoying easy access to healthy foods, and attending schools far from industrial sites, while other human beings—*living in the same city*—experience the opposite reality.

This is an example of what scholars call “**environmental racism**.” It provides us with a picture of the interconnection between polluting the environment and oppressing human beings; between abuse of the natural world and abuse of persons; between ecological harm and loss of human dignity.

Citizens of Chicago who live in “red zones” carry a disproportionate amount of the environmental risk because they are less wealthy, less educated, and less connected to the politicians who determine where high-polluting businesses can be located. In short, the marginalized are trapped, and—as we know—any effort to move elsewhere presents different obstacles and injustices.

⁴ For the color-coded map see: <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/meleah-geertsma/new-map-shows-chicago-needs-environmental-justice-reforms> For a study on the proximity of schools to sources of pollution, see S. Grineski and T. Collins, “Geographic and social disparities in exposure to air neurotoxicants at U.S. public schools” *Environmental Research* 161 (2018): 580-587.

Simultaneously, those of us living in “blue zones” confront minimal environmental risks yet gain maximum benefits—from better health, to increased property values, to excellent schools, to profits from investing in companies that dump their waste in red zones. **Ecology** and **human dignity** are inseparably connected, for good and for ill.

Let’s consider a second example, **modern slavery**. In his 2016 book, *Blood and Earth*, **Kevin Bales** details the vicious cycle of “ecocide” and “modern slavery.” One example Bales develops relates to massive “shrimp farms” along the coasts of Bangladesh, Southern India, and Indonesia.⁵

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The abusive cycle begins with increasing demand for inexpensive shrimp in countries like the United States. To meet this demand (and generate huge profits) miles of mangrove trees growing in shoreline swamps are cut down to give shrimp farmers clear access to the water. The destruction of the mangrove trees itself does significant ecological harm. Not only are the trees killed and the creatures living in them displaced, there are at least two additional consequences:

(1) mangrove trees are “carbon sinks;” like other trees, they pull CO₂ out of the air and generate fresh oxygen but, unlike other trees, mangroves are able to lock away carbon by depositing it into the ocean, a process called “sequestration,” which has an exponential benefit in reducing global warming. Their destruction, therefore, carries an exponential loss.

And (2), mangrove trees growing miles deep along the coast of countries like Bangladesh and Indonesia have provided a natural barrier during cyclones and tsunamis. Now that shrimp farmers have removed more than 80% of the mangroves in some regions, the scale of deaths and damage during such storms has skyrocketed, as witnessed with the tsunami that hit Palu, Indonesia less than a year ago.

Yet even worse than the ecological effects of shrimp farming is the assault on human dignity that the industry fuels. The demand for inexpensive seafood increases the need for laborers. So recruiters visit poor villages promising “good paying jobs” and offering small salary advances to families, only to then enslave children and adults in forced labor at the shrimp farms. Recruits often work for 24- or 48-hour shifts without rest, sufficient food, housing, or basic medical care, all the while surrounded by the heads and shells of shrimp. In addition, girls, boys, and female workers are frequently assaulted and sexually abused by their “bosses.”

⁵ Kevin Bales, *Blood and Earth: Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2016): 71-97.

Big profits provide the incentive for those in power to expand operations—to clear more mangrove forests and build larger farms...which further harms local and global ecologies... which accelerates climate change and increases natural disasters...which destroys towns and increases poverty...which provides willing ‘recruits’ for slave-based businesses. The cycle is complete.

While this example centers on shrimp, similar vicious cycles exist around diamonds, gold, beef, sugar, steel, and the minerals (like cobalt) necessary for lithium-ion batteries, cell phones, and flat-screen TVs. As Bayles puts it, “environmental change is part of the engine of slavery [and] the sharp end of environmental change...comes first to the poor.”⁶ **Ecology and human dignity** are inseparably connected, for good and for ill.

III. Two Teachings from the Theological-Ethical Tradition of Orthodox Christianity

Despite this heart-breaking reality, as Christians we worship the “God of Hope” and trust that, “by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may abound in hope” (Rom. 15:13). There is a relentless hopefulness within traditional Christianity (both Orthodox and Roman Catholic), which is grounded in Christ’s Incarnation, Life, Death, Resurrection, Ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit; this hope is cultivated by the beauty and mystery of liturgy and prayer, and it is confirmed by the reality of saints across history.

How, then, might traditional Christianity help us as we strive both to protect human dignity and care for creation? ***There are no quick, easy, or automatic solutions.*** The brokenness and corruption we find around us, **and within us**, stems from passions that trace all the way back to humanity’s most ancient act of rebellion against the God who created us, and the systems that reinforce and profit from environmental racism, modern slavery, and other injustices lie deep in our societies.

Nonetheless, I repeat my earlier claim, *part of the promise that traditional Christianity holds lies precisely in the way that ecology, human dignity, and theology are inseparably connected and integrated.* In other words, the more deeply we experience and are transformed by authentic Christianity, the more we will recognize this interconnectedness and bring about positive change. Let us consider just two of the many teachings from the Orthodox tradition that highlight this.

1) A Way of Seeing: Icons

Icons are perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of Orthodox Churches. People who enter an Orthodox Church for the first time are struck—and sometimes overwhelmed—by the ubiquitous presence of icons.

⁶ *Blood and Earth*, 8-9.

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One function of icons is to engage us visually, to capture and hold our attention, and, then, to lead us to a reality beyond what we usually see. Icons are surfaces that take us into a spiritual depth. They reveal to our eyes a world that we typically do not see.

The basis for icons is our Lord Jesus Christ. St. Paul writes in Colossians 1 that Christ “*is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation; for by him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible*” (Col. 1:15-16). Notice, first, that St. Paul describes Christ as “the image of the invisible God.” Christ, who is the “Word made *flesh*” (Jn. 1:14), is the *visible* presence that reveals the *invisible* God. Furthermore, in the original Greek text, the word that St. Paul uses for “image” is “eikon - icon” (εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου); thus, Christ is literally the ‘icon of the invisible God.’ Christ Himself is the *first* and the *ultimate* icon, in whom we encounter the face of God.

While the term icon applies to Jesus Christ Himself, it also applies to all that was created by Christ, “in heaven and on earth,” “visible and invisible,” as St. Paul stated. All of creation is “iconic,” because all of creation points beyond itself to a depth, to the God who brought all things into being. This is stated directly in the creation account “*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness*” (Gen. 1:26). In the ancient Greek (Septuagint) translation of this passage the word for “image” is, again, “eikon- icon” (“*Κατ' εικόνα και καθ' ὁμοίωσιν*”). Thus, every human being is an icon, a surface that takes us to a depth, a perceivable presence that reveals God. Christ’s words in Matthew 25 confirm this iconic quality, this connection between visible creation and invisible Creator, “*just as you did it (or did not do it) to one of the least of these, you did it (or did not do it) to me*” (Matt. 25:40, 45).

And the same is true of non-human creation. The 8th-century saint John of Damascus draws a connection between Christ as icon and the natural world as icon when he writes, “*Because of the Incarnation, I gaze upon all of material creation with reverence.*”

Much more can be said about icons, but I offer just one further comment. The icons that we see in Orthodox Churches themselves play a role in cultivating an iconic way of seeing and experiencing God, our neighbor, and the natural world. For as we gaze reverently upon a painted or mosaic icon, we are drawn into the depth; the depth works on us; it heals us; and we are reminded—given ‘another’ mind—by the icon. In other words, icons promote repentance (μετάνοια), a “change of mind”. The icon’s connection to the Incarnate God helps to heal us—to correct our vision so that we see God both in ‘the least of these,’ our fellow human beings, and in the most vulnerable of all God’s creatures, the voiceless animals, rocks, waters, winds, and trees.

2) *A Way of Acting: The Greatest Commandment – Expanded*

A second teaching from the Orthodox tradition shifts us from ‘a way of seeing’ to ‘a way of acting,’ from icons to commandments.

During the 18th century, when Greece was occupied by the Ottoman Turks, St. Kosmas the Aetolian (1714-1779) traveled around Greece teaching the Orthodox faith in villages. As he journeyed, his practice was to plant trees. So trees are symbols of hope and liberation. St. Kosmas famously said, “People will remain poor because they have no love for trees.”⁷ Notice here the direct connection St. Kosmas makes between neglecting the environment and poverty—between ecology and human dignity. He taught that in order to escape poverty—which, in his context, included slavery—the faithful must ‘love the trees.’ And seeing trees as icons leads to acting toward them with reverence and loving care.

Having “love for trees” is not merely a sentimental statement within Orthodoxy, it is an affirmation of the Church’s integrated worldview. This point becomes especially clear when we consider the example of one of Orthodoxy’s most recently canonized saints, St. Amphilochios of Patmos (1889-1970).

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For St. Amphilochios, caring for creation was not an option for Christians—it was a divine command. Along these lines, the saint once made a very bold claim: “Do you know that God gave us one more commandment,” he said, “which is not recorded in Scripture? It is the commandment ‘*love the trees.*’”⁸ In addition, when St. Amphilochios would hear the confessions of local faithful, he would frequently give them an unusual penance: he would tell them that they now needed to plant and take care of a tree.

In this example, we can note first that St. Amphilochios does not simply say, “we should love the trees;” instead, he says *God has commanded us* to do so! All Christians are familiar with the greatest commandment, ‘*Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, and mind,*’ and with the second greatest, ‘*Love thy neighbor as thyself*’ (Matt. 22:37-39), but St. Amphilochios expresses the deep spirit of Orthodoxy when he adds as a third, ‘*Love the trees.*’ Love God; love thy neighbor; love the trees—theology, philanthropy, and ecology are integrated into one iconic vision for love-centered action. We are called to a *triple* love—for God, neighbor, and all creation.

⁷ Markos A Gkiolas, *O Kosmas Aitolos kai I epochi tou* (Athens, 1972), 434 (para. 96), 93-94.

⁸ This teaching of St. Amphilochios appears in the essay by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, “Through Creation to the Creator,” in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*, ed. John Chryssavgis and Bruce Foltz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013): 86.

In addition, St. Amphilochios's practice of asking people to 'plant and care for a tree' after confession carries profound significance: it connects reconciliation between the person and God, and between the person and their neighbor, to reconciliation between the person and the environment. For example, if I confess that I hurt my family member, being instructed to plant a tree expands my vision—it teaches me that how I act toward my neighbor affects *all* of creation.

Similarly, the saint's practice communicates that the way we treat non-human creation affects the way we treat our fellow human beings. Planting and caring for a new tree is good in itself, but it is also good because it teaches us to be more caring in our relationships with others. Ecology, theology, and human dignity are connected in a single, Christian vision.

This is a worldview that goes beyond mere eco-theology, and beyond mere liberation theology. It is a worldview that speaks both to environmental racism and to modern slavery. It is a worldview that seeks justice here and now, without losing sight of the 'age to come.'

May God continue to bless our Church leaders, both at the global and the local levels; may we cultivate an iconic way of seeing the people and the world around us; and may we all embrace **triple love**—love of God, of neighbor, and of all creation—as the guiding principle in our lives.