

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

Reflections on the Annual Prayer for the Care of Creation

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Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, Glenview, Illinois
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I want to begin by saying how pleased I am to be with you tonight here at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. I also want to acknowledge the priests and people of Sts. Peter and Paul. Some years ago, I served as pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Wilmette, and I have many fond memories of meeting at Sts. Peter and Paul as part of the local Interfaith Clergy Group. In a special way, I want to acknowledge the presence of His Grace, Bishop Demetrios of Mokissos, and of the Very Rev. Thomas Baima, both of whom are the moving force behind the close relationship of the Archdiocese of Chicago to the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago. Thank you for your work over these many years on behalf of our two Churches.

Tonight's service originated out of that commitment and was formalized by Cardinal Cupich and Metropolitan Iakovos, of blessed memory, to mark the World Day of Prayer for Creation with an annual liturgical observance between our two sister churches. So it is fitting to thank both of them for the decades of service that they have given to the Catholic and Orthodox relationship.

I would certainly be remiss if I did not acknowledge the relationship between Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church and Saints Peter and Paul Greek Orthodox Church in Glenview. They are our hosts tonight and partners in a larger ecological project here in the northern suburbs. These two parishes are doing more than simply praying together for the care of creation. They are taking concrete steps toward making ecological awareness a part of the daily life here in Glenview. Finally, I want to say just a word of thanks to Michael Terrien and the Laudato si' Encyclical Working Group at the Archdiocesan Office of Human Dignity and Solidarity, for the support which they gave to the ecumenical program tonight.

For the Catholics present here tonight, it's important for us to understand the debt which we owe to the Greek Orthodox leadership on the question of the care of creation. While it's not so prominent in the secular news, those who work in religious matters know that His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, has been unique among world religious leaders because of his emphasis on ecology and his concern for the environment. His leadership has been distinguished by a truly theological approach. This concern for ecology is not a fad. It is an issue which he has preached about throughout his archpastoral ministry. Additionally, a significant number of Greek Orthodox theologians have engaged in reflections on the proper Christian understanding of creation for more than 20 years. An international group of Orthodox participated with the World Council of Churches in a major study called JPIC, which stands for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.

We have much to learn from Orthodoxy's engagement with JPIC. The first insight is Orthodoxy's Trinitarian emphasis in its theology. If you enter virtually any Orthodox church, walk to the center of the nave and look up, you will see an image of Jesus Christ. This image of Christ, however is distinctive to Orthodoxy. It is a depiction of Christ as the Pantocrator, "the creator of all." Scripture tells us "through him all things came to be, and nothing that was made came to be apart from him." This beautiful icon in the dome of most Orthodox churches provides a balance to our usual depiction of Christ as the teacher or Christ as the priest. The image of the Pantocrator reminds us that the Bible also tells us that Christ is the creator.

This icon gathers creation into our religious consciousness. The Orthodox tradition, therefore, offers a balance to our Western piety about Jesus, which focuses on his identification with us as human beings, "a man like us in all things but sin." Both teachings are true but, if we separate them, we lose something. This is one example of how our two traditions can mutually enrich each another.

But there's another aspect of Orthodox thought that can enrich Western Christians. It has to do with the Orthodox view of the human being. Humans, in Orthodox theology, are both creatures and the stewards of creation.¹ There is a Greek word that appears in the New Testament: *oikonomia*.² We get the English word, economy, from this root, but in the process, we lose most of the rich meaning that the original Greek term conveys. The original word speaks about the stewardship of a great house.³ It is interesting to note that the English words economy and ecology both derive from that same Greek root.⁴

Both the Trinitarian emphasis and the theological anthropology of Orthodoxy lead us to a third insight that, according to the Orthodox theologian, Rev. Dr. K. M. George, we can speak of a "eucharistic ecology." By this Fr. George means that when we connect the biblical teaching about the Body of Christ being many parts but one body with science's theories of how sub-atomic particles exist more as relationships than things, we recognize that the biblical image of life is that of an organism—which has been a favorite image of Orthodox theologians for the last 100 years.

For both of our Churches, the Eucharist is where Christ literally becomes part of each of us, and we are made part of one another. Although the Orthodox and Catholic churches do not, at present, celebrate the Eucharist together, to the extent that we are united with Christ, we are joined in a real, though imperfect, relationship with each other. Christ is Pantocrator, we are

¹ I am indebted to the work of the Rev. Dr. K. M. George of the staff of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, for the insights about Orthodoxy and ecology. See K. M. George, "Toward a Eucharistic Ecology" in *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation: Insights from Orthodoxy*, ed. Gennadios Limouris (Geneva: WCC Publications, 45-50).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

united with the whole of creation through our unity with its creator. We overcome division by identification with each other. This is what both Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew are calling us to.

For a number of years, I worked in the field of justice and peace. It taught me about the clear link between the care of creation and building a just and peaceful world. My work in peace and justice also taught me that we need clear ideas if we are going to change minds and hearts. One such clear idea needed today is that of the Integrity of Creation and how we must strive for it with just as much vigor and conviction as we strive for justice and peace. In his public audience yesterday, Pope Francis appealed for those with influence to “listen to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor who suffer most because of the unbalanced ecology.” Can we let the biblical view of Christ as Pantocrator change our minds and hearts? Can it help us to strive for justice and peace and overcome a competitive stance towards the natural world? Can the biblical notion of oikonomia, stewardship of the household of God, guide our decisions about how we will live as a member of creation? I invite you to pray about these questions in the coming week. Thank you for being here tonight. Thank you for your care and concern for the world in which we all live.