



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

Proclaiming the Ecological Mission of the Orthodox Church as the Reconciliation of all Things in Christ

A Theology of Creation

by His Beatitude Patriarch IGNATIUS IV of Antioch

In response to an invitation from the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Switzerland together with the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV presented a series of lecture-sermons during Great Lent, 1989. As Primate of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East, Patriarch Ignatius presides from his patriarchal throne in Damascus, Syria over a community of one million Orthodox faithful throughout the Arab countries of the Middle East and Asia, Palestine excepted, with dioceses also in Europe, the Americas, and Australia. The following is the initial lecture in this three-part series. It was delivered in Zurich, Switzerland on March 10, 1989.

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§1 “Man is an animal called to become God,” said one of the Fathers of the Church. And that is why the Word became flesh: to open to us, through the holy flesh of the earth transformed into a eucharist, the path of deification.

§2 But there is another terrible path which man has wanted – and still wants: that is to make himself divine by means of his own powers. He wants to build a tower of Babel and not to welcome the New Jerusalem. He has wanted – and still wants – to make of the world his prey, to be its tyrant and not its king and priest. He has made for himself, out of the potential transparency of all things when restored in Christ, the mirror of Narcissus.

§3 Today that mirror is breaking up. The maternal sea is polluted, the heavens are rent, the forests are being destroyed and the deserts are increasing. We must protect creation. Better yet, we must embellish it, render it spiritual and transfigure it because Christianity has this responsibility. In the East especially Christianity has not loved the earth enough. Orthodoxy knows that the earth is sacred, but for too long our history has been plagued with hostility, even captivity, and this has prevented her from giving definition to this intuition, from bringing forth this knowledge into the culture and the course of current affairs. Today she ought to try to do it for the sake of participation. This will not happen without cost. The cost is the “small change” of revolution, the only revolution that counts, that is, a revolution of the spirit.

§4 But nothing will be done unless there is a general conversion of men’s minds and hearts. In the Bible men’s hearts and mind are the same thing. Nothing will happen unless our personal and liturgical prayer, our sacramental life, our asceticism regain their cosmic dimension.

Reuniting the Whole Universe Under One Master, Jesus Christ

§5 Cosmology is a form of knowledge which is given to us in Christ by the Holy Spirit. “The mystery of the Incarnation of the Word,” wrote St. Maximus the Confessor, “contains within itself the whole meaning of the created world. He who understands the mystery of the Cross and the Tomb knows the meaning of all things, and he who is initiated into the hidden meaning of the Resurrection understands the purpose for which God created everything from the very beginning.”

§6 If this is in fact so, it means that everything has been created by and for the Word, as the Apostle says in Colossians 1:16-17, and that the meaning of this creation is revealed to us in the re-creation effected by the same Word taking flesh, by the Son of God becoming the son of the earth. “He is before all things, and by Him all things are held in existence by living in him.” This text reinforces the beginning of the Gospel of Saint John: “All things were made by him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.”

§7 The Word is the archetype of all things, and all things find in him their consummation, their “recapitulation.” The Gospel ought to be preached “to all the creatures,” according to the Epistle to the Colossians, and the Church in this vision is nothing other than the creation reunified with God through Christ. Such is indeed the “mystery of the Father’s will” which the Apostle announces to the Ephesians: “*That he might unite all things in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth*” (Ephesians 1:10).

§8 Thus, it is that the Church, as eucharistic mystery, gives us knowledge of a universe which was created to become eucharist. The Eucharist as sacrament corresponds to the Eucharist as spirituality and as action. Make Eucharist, that is, “give thanks in all things,” as Paul says (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

§9 In this perspective the Fathers maintain that the historical Bible gives us the key to the cosmic Bible. In this they are faithful to the Hebrew notion of the Word, which not only speaks, but creates: God is “true” in the sense that his word is the source of all reality, not only historical, but also cosmic reality. In the priestly account of the creation [Genesis 2:4ff], things exist only through a divine word, which creates them and sustains them in their being. That is why, as St. Maximus the Confessor says, we discover, or rather the Gospel discovers for us, that on the one hand, the Word “hides himself mysteriously in the meaning of created things like so many letters,” and on the other hand, “he condescends to express himself in the letters, symbols and sounds of Scripture.” Precisely in the transfiguration of Jesus do the shining garments signify the words of the Bible and the body of the earth. Both are illumined by God’s grace. The relationship between Scripture and the world corresponds to that of the soul and the

body: he who has in Christ a spiritual understanding of the first will be given a profound understanding of the second.

A Dynamic Movement Towards Transparence

§10 What does this profound understanding which comes to us by way of the Fathers and the prophets of all the ages of the Church tell us?

§11 First, it makes two complimentary affirmations: It says that the creation has its own consistency, but it is animated by a dynamic movement toward transparence. Then it speaks to us of the part man has to play, and thus of creation in the history of salvation.

§12 The universe is not simply a manifestation of the Godhead, as in the Hindu concept of “maya,” or illusion. It does not arise from a demiurge putting in order some pre-existing material, as the ancient Greeks often thought. It is neither a degraded copy of the world of ideas, a Platonic conception, nor is it the evil work of a bad god, as the dualists teach. It was created radically new, from nothing as is clearly affirmed for the first time in the Second Book of Maccabees 7:28, and as is implied in the two creation narratives in Genesis. The notion of “nothing” here is a kind of “limit” and suggests that God, who has no “beyond,” makes the universe appear by a kind of “self-withdrawal”: the location of the world is thus within the love of God, a love which is supremely inventive while at the same time it is sacrificial. To indicate this creative act which is reserved for God alone, the [Hebrew] Scriptures use the word “*bara*” as opposed to the word for being made or constructed. The universe springs from the hands of the living God Who sees that it is “*tov*,” that is, “good and beautiful.” Thus it is willed by God, it is the joy of his wisdom, and it exults in that reverential joyfulness which is described in the Psalms and in the cosmic passages of the Book of Job. Here the universe is described as “a musical ordering,” as “a marvelously composed hymn.” A father of the Church has called it “hymn, music, rhythm and change.”

§13 The biblical and patristic conception of creation breaks down the cyclical obsession of the ancient religions. Creation, the perpetual passage from nothing into being, through the magnetic attraction of the infinite, is a movement in which we are given simultaneously time, space and matter.

§14 So, in the Christian vision, nature is a true reality, dynamic, in no way divine in itself. We know that Genesis, from this point of view, “desacralizes” both the stars and living things – yet these things are willed and wanted by God, and they find their place and their vocation in his love.

Nature is Inseparable from Grace

§15 At the same time the early Fathers, like the Orthodox religious philosophers of our century, when meditating on the great Pauline insights, have rejected the notion of any such thing as “pure nature.” Uncreated grace, the glory of God, the divine energies which shine forth from the risen Christ, are the same in their origin and at the very root of things. Nature is inseparable from grace, and the physical, in its very density, is spirit-bearing.

§16 Every thing in creation expresses the divine glory in its own way and in accordance with the living Word by which and in which God brings it into being. Prayer is at the heart of all things. Their very existence is ontological praise, and there is a hiddenness in the openness of their testimony. St. Paul says, in First Corinthians 15:41, “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for each star differs from another star in glory.” It is the word “*doxa*” that is here translated as “glory.”

§17 The world is a gift and word from God, and all the words that God sends us are contained in the Eternal Word, Who is himself inseparable from the breath which gives us life. “The Father has created everything by the Son in the Holy Spirit,” wrote St. Athanasius of Alexandria, “for what the Word makes takes on life in the Holy Spirit.”

§18 In the very existence of the Word, in its rationality and in its beauty, the Trinity reveals itself. The Church of the first centuries liked to comment in this sense on Ephesians 4:6: “*One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.*”

§19 God, “above all,” the Source of all existence – the Father; God “through all,” as structure and intelligence – the Logos, Word, Wisdom and Reason of the universe; God “in all” – the Spirit, the dynamism of fulfillment and of beauty.

How to Decipher the Universe in a Creative Way

§20 It falls to man to decipher in a creative way the “book of the world,” this immense “*logos alogos*,” or “speechless word,” as Origen defined the world.

§21 In Genesis God asks Adam to “name the animals,” a naming which includes all modes of knowledge and expression, from contemplation to art and science. Man is a microcosm, a synthesis of all creation, which he can therefore know from within; he is the interface between the visible and the invisible, between the carnal and the spiritual. But man is above all a *person*, in the image and likeness of God. As such he transcends the universe, not in order to leave it behind, but in order to contain it, to give expression

to its praise and thereby cause grace to shine forth within it.

§22 Nicholas Berdyaev, a great Orthodox religious philosopher of the first half of our [twentieth] century, wrote:

The person is not a part, and cannot be a part of any whole, even if this should be the entire universe. Only the person is capable of possessing a universal content; man is, in his unity, in potential, the universe.

§23 Man should listen to the cosmic words that God is speaking to him, and return them to him as an offering, after having marked the works of his creative genius. And when I say man, I mean of course “man in communion”; I mean humanity in its vocation as a “collective, cosmic Messiah.”

§24 Thus man, for the universe, is the hope of receiving grace and sanctification. But he brings with him the risk of failure and downfall as well, for, when turned away from God, we only see the appearances of things, the “shadow which passes,” as Paul says, what is available to our senses, what we can “sink our teeth into,” as popular language says. Blocking partially the radiance of the divine light, we condemn the world to death and let chaos arise within it.

A Vocation to Transparency

§25 Christian is inseparable from the history of salvation. The theology, spirituality and all the experience of Eastern Christianity stress that the Fall of man from his condition in paradise constitutes a truly cosmic catastrophe. But it is a catastrophe which is not accessible to science because it took place in another dimension of reality and because scientific observation belongs inevitably to the subsequent modalities of our fallen existence.

§26 God did not create death. But he has used it in the present stage of evolution so as to crush spiritual death and to give back to man his vocation as created creator and to restore to matter its sacramental character.

§27 Christ, through his Incarnation, his Resurrection, his Ascension and his sending of the Holy Spirit, has brought about the potential transfiguration of the universe. Liturgical and patristic texts, following the lead of St. Paul and St. John, out do one another in proclaiming the cosmic dimension of the Body of Christ. St. Maximos the Confessor says, “Christ has become ‘the sun of the world’ under whose rays the unity of the cosmos is ripening.

He is the great mystery, the joyous end for which all was created, the original end of all existence. This is the unwavering purpose for which God has called all things into existence. Christ constitutes the fullness by which all creatures accomplish their return to God. It is for the mystery of Christ that the universe and all that it contains exists.

§28 Absolute personal existence, the Lord as a divine Person, “One of the Holy Trinity,” as our Liturgy says, not only lets himself be contained by the universe at one particular point in space and time, but by realizing at last the vocation of the person, he contains the universe hidden in himself. He does not want, like us, to take possession of the world; he takes it up and offers it in an attitude which is constantly eucharistic. He makes of it a body of unity, the language and flesh of communion.

§29 In him fallen matter no longer imposes its limitations and determinisms; in him the world, frozen by our downfall, melts in the fire of the Spirit and rediscovers its vocation of transparency. And so we have the miracles of the Gospel. In no way are they “wonders” to impress us, but “signs,” anticipations of the ultimate re-creation of the world. A world without death comes into sight, where things are the presence of Christ and men, at last, His visage.

§30 According to early Christian thought, the Ascension in particular has clothed the cosmic mystery to the fullest extent. It is thus, says St. Paul, that Christ is established as the Lord of all. The King of Glory, chants the Byzantine liturgy, “ascends to the height of heaven after having fulfilled everything.”

§31 The Cross has become the new Tree of Life. “The wood of the cross,” wrote Hippolytus of Rome during the second century,

...climbs from earth to heaven. This immortal plant establishes salt in the center of heaven and earth, the first support of the universe, the bond between all things, a cosmic interlacing, fixed by the invisible clasp of the Spirit such that it never vacillates in its divine adjustment, touching heaven with the brow of its head, fortifying the earth with its feet, and in the space in between, embracing the entire cosmos with the immeasurable grasp of Christ. Christ is intimately and thoroughly everywhere, filling all things. Through his Ascension, he gave life and power to all things, as if this divine extension completely penetrated the agony on the cross. O you, who are all in all! The heavens held your spirit and Paradise your soul, but your blood belongs to the earth.

§32 The blood sprang from the pierced side of Jesus on Golgotha and sanctified the earth, which received it like an immense Grail. From that time on, all is marked with the sign of the cross.

The Metamorphosis of the Cosmos

§33 At the same time, this transfiguration remains a secret, hidden under the veil of the sacraments, out of respect for our freedom. Though illuminated in Christ, the world nevertheless remains darkened by us, fixed in its opacity by our own spiritual opacity, delivered over to the forces of chaos by our own inner chaos. “The desert is growing,” said Nietzsche a century ago, speaking of man’s heart. And today we can see it growing in nature.

§34 The metamorphosis of the cosmos requires not only that God should become man in Christ, but also that man should become God in the Holy Spirit, that is, should become fully man, capable of the gentleness of the strong and of the love which knows how to submit itself to all that lives, in order to make it grow. Christ has made men capable of receiving the Spirit – that is, of collaborating with the cosmic coming of the Kingdom.

§35 In Christ, in his divine-human body, in his divine-cosmic body where the Spirit blows, the ultimate stage of the “cosmogogenesis” has begun, with its upheavals and its promises. “The fire hidden and stifled under the cinders of this world will burst forth and divinely set alight the crust of death,” said St. Gregory of Nyssa. And no doubt this ultimate conflagration will be an irruption, a breaking-open, but it is for man to prepare for it by sweeping away the cinders, by bringing the secret incandescence to the surface of the world.

§36 Such is, such should be, the role of the Church. Between the first and second coming of the Lord, there is the Church, whose cosmic history is that of giving birth, the giving birth to the universe as the glorious body of a deified humanity. The Church is the womb in which is being woven the universal body of the new Man, of renewed men.

§37 This theme of giving birth runs through the whole of the Bible, from Genesis to the Apocalypse, from Eve to the land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8), from Mary at the foot of the Cross to the woman “clothed with the sun,” “who was with child and cried out in her pangs of birth in anguish for delivery” (Revelation 12:2).

§38 In the Epistle to the Romans Paul writes: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail... until the time of its regeneration... with the hope that it will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-22).



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Reflection Questions for Study Groups

- Q: What is creation? How does the account of creation in Genesis 1 differ from the account in Genesis 2? Why is there this difference?
- Q: What is our human role in the world? How is this fulfilled? What are the implications for our culture?
- Q: What is meant by the “Metamorphosis of the Cosmos”? (p. 7) How can you and those in your parish participate in this metamorphosis?
- Q: What is Christian cosmology? How does this shape a vision of creation? What are its implications for how we behave as Orthodox Christians? (p. 2, 5)
- Q: What does the word “eucharist” mean? What do you think Patriarch Ignatius means when he calls the eucharist “spirituality and action”? (pp 1,2 and 6)
- Q: What does HB mean when he says “the Fathers maintain that the historical Bible gives us the key to the cosmic Bible”? (p. 2)
- Q: Did you learn anything from this lecture by Patriarch Ignatius? What? How might you apply what you have learned?

