



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

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

The Responsibility of Christians

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 third lecture in this three-part series. It was delivered in Lucerne, Switzerland on March 12, 1989.

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§1 IT SEEMS QUITE CLEAR that it is the biblical revelation alone which has made possible modern science and technology. It is the Bible which postulates that the world exists, that it is a fundamentally good creation for which a personal God has made man personally responsible.

§2 A great twentieth century mathematician, physician and religious philosopher Paul Florensky has written, “Only in the light of this revelation did man no longer see in the created world the mere outer shell of a demonic power, a sort of emanation, a mirage of divinity, like a rainbow in a drop of water, but rather could conceive of the world as a creation of God, autonomous in its being, its *raison d’être*, and its internal integrity.”¹

§3 And even if men have subjected creation to death, God has stabilized it through His wisdom, and prepared and ripened it for the Incarnation. In Christ, under the breath of the Holy Spirit, the responsibility of man is restored. He rediscovers his vocation as “created creator” and collaborates in the work of God. At the threshold of the modern era, we hear [Martin] Luther affirming that “God is present even in the innermost parts of a louse,” and from [Johann] Kepler, one of the founders of scientific astronomy, “the works of God are worthy of contemplation.”

§4 In Syria and in Egypt the first monks were intoxicated with God. They uprooted the pagan magicians, the adoration of Baal, the indulgence in impersonal erotic ecstasy, the use of beasts and divinized stars, all practices which the Bible had already rejected. Plutarch writes that this launched a strange and reverberating cry across the sea of antiquity, “The great Pan is dead!” Thus the world was “disenchanted,” it was set free from a vague or ambiguous spell, so that man could embrace it with his intelligence, and perhaps one day, transfigure it. The idol could then become an icon!

¹ “La Colonne et le fondement de la verite,” tr. Fr. Lausanne, 1975, p. 288

§5 The paradoxical approach to the mysteries of being adopted by the Fathers and the Councils – with God simultaneously one and three and Christ simultaneously God and Man – created a conceptual tension which has remained to this day the source of all true research, in contrast to the *apories*² of classical antiquity or the monism of the oriental mystics. The first decisive break-throughs in technological innovation – even though this has not been sufficiently acknowledged – appeared with the Christianization of culture: the water wheels and windmills in the East, the harness yoke, the bellows for the forge, the navigational tiller in the West. It was the monks who fostered the epic poems of the European peasantry from the forests of Gaul across to the Russian *tiaga*.

The Cosmic Mission of Christianity

§6 CHRISTIANITY HAS THRUST MAN FORWARD with a mission to explore and assume the universe, from the atom to the galaxy. Since the calling of Abraham and through the life-giving Cross, the world can no longer close in on itself; a tension about its ultimate conclusion now penetrates and runs through it. Science and modern technologies have developed in this openness, in this adventure born of a departure toward we know not where, born of the fool-like love of a God who has made us free by dying like a slave on the Cross.

§7 Today the earth no longer encloses man in her stifling and fecund maternity. Man has broken the umbilical cord. He can separate himself from her, travel through the stratosphere, sojourn in space, even walk on the moon and send probes out to Mars. What then will the earth be for him? An object, a collection of things, or a reservoir of resources which was long thought to be inexhaustible but now appears threatened by limits, imbalances, and even death. In parts of Europe and even in places quite near here the forest is dying of acid rain. Why and how have we come to this? Christianity stripped the world of its ancient sacred character, but this was in order to make it holy. Has Christianity betrayed its cosmic mission? Has it given up, abdicated its mission and withdrawn?

§8 The separation of Western from Eastern Christianity in the latter half of the Middle Ages profoundly modified the spiritual context in which technology developed. The Age of Antioch, above all in its Syrian dimension, proclaimed a truly cosmic view of love, an immense and heart-felt compassion that included the animal world. St. Isaac the Syrian asked:

² Translator's note: This Greek term means *difficulty of passing*, from "*aporos*," impassable, a classical figure of speech in which the speaker expresses or purports to be in doubt about a question; an insoluble contradiction or paradox in a text's meanings.

What is a compassionate heart? It is a heart which is burning with a loving charity for the whole of creation, for men, for the birds, for the beasts of the earth, for all the creatures. So strong is this compassion that the person who has such a heart cannot see or call to mind a creature without his eyes being filled with tears by reason of the immense love which seizes his heart; a heart which is so softened and can no longer bear to hear or learn from others of any suffering, even the smallest pain, being inflicted upon any creature. This is why such a person never ceases to pray also for the animals, for the enemies of truth, and for those who do him evil, that they may be preserved and purified. He will pray even for the snakes and reptiles, moved by the infinite compassion which arises in the hearts of those who are becoming united with God.³

The Divine Energies of the Creator in Creation

§9 By the seventh century, the Age of Antioch had elaborated, with Saint John of Damascus, a theology of the divine energies springing from the Risen Christ and transforming matter. John of Damascus wrote:

I do not adore matter, but I adore the Creator of matter who in order to save me became matter.⁴

And also:

I venerate matter through which salvation has come to me, so as to be filled with divine energy and grace.⁵

§10 The theology and spirituality of the divine energies found their full development in Byzantium in the fourteenth century, thanks to Saint Gregory Palamas. Those who have admired the early frescoes at Mistra, or the “Descent of Christ into Hell” in the old church of Chora in Constantinople, have felt, in the tendency of that art, what a transfigured Renaissance might have been in which the human would have been affirmed while also affirming the cosmic, but without separating itself from the divine.

³ Oeuvres spirituelles, 81e traite.

⁴ Second discourse on the Holy Images, 14

⁵ First discourse, On the Holy Images, 16

§11 But Byzantium was assassinated, and although its humanism passed over to the West through the Greek scholars who came to enrich the Italian and French Renaissance, the theology and spirituality of the divine energies and the sense of the sacramental potential of matter were, if not forgotten, at least buried in a small number of monasteries, without any significant application to culture and history.

§12 Western Christianity, while it gave stimulus to science and technology, was not able to enlighten and orient the West and provide its citizens with their true direction. It is significant that the thought of Aristotle, which was transmitted to the West through Islam -- that is to say through a spiritual world view which did not know the Incarnation -- made it difficult to express in terms of participation the communion of man with God and the sanctification of the cosmos. If the constitution [or composition] of creation is no longer born out of its transparency, it finds itself isolated, objectified, and subjected to mere human reason and passion.

Threatened by Barbarism and the Suicide of Mankind

§13 THE OPENNESS TO THE COSMOS WHICH CHARACTERIZED the Renaissance was abandoned by Western Christianity. A more individualistic religion of "God and my soul" took over. There developed in Puritanism and its Roman Catholic equivalents a proselytizing, conquering morality which conceived the rule of man over nature as a hard and simplistic domination. This cosmic sense has become the prey of an occultism which has become more and more secularized in the will to power. One thinks of the occult origins of the Faustian theme when one witnesses the strange continuity between the pretensions of contemporary biology and the esoteric dreams of the *homunculus* and of the *golem*.

§14 If nature is not transfigured, she becomes disfigured. Today we are threatened by a barbarism and even by the suicide of all humanity. By barbarism I mean the sense which the French philosopher Michel Henry gives to this term, the transformation of technology into "destiny," which is the same sense that destiny had for the ancient Greeks, an inevitable, death-like fatality. The fatality lies in doing everything that we are capable of doing without first questioning the consequences.

§15 To take a particularly cruel example, we run the risk of bringing more and more children into the world who do not know their fathers and have several mothers. We are beginning to realize that the suicide of humanity is a possibility, what with Chernobyl and the determination of the great financial organizations to destroy the forests of the Amazon.

§16 At the same time Christianity, in spite of the collapse of the so-called Christian societies – or because of this collapse, is experiencing a purification and deepening, a meeting and a sharing of the mystical heritage of the East with the Western sense of historical responsibility. Thus the moment seems to have arrived for a truly Christian commitment concerning the safeguarding of creation.

Asceticism is Indispensable

§17 ONLY THE HIGHEST OF FORCES, that of the spirit united with the heart – to use the language of the Orthodox tradition – can face up to the challenge of technology. Asceticism is necessary in order to fight against the instinct of possession, of blind power and a flight into hedonism.

§18 Michel Sollogoub, a French economist and an Orthodox of Russian descent, wrote, “the frenetic pursuit of the goods of this world secured for us a life marked by anxiety in the face of illness and death; the multiplicity of sensations produced by music or television causes us to forget the horror of nothingness; our neighbor is a competitor on his way to becoming an enemy, while nature becomes merely a means to satisfy our desires and our thirst for domination.”⁶ Asceticism therefore is indispensable if we are to achieve that limitation of desires which will make it possible for us both to better respect the earth, its rhythm, and the life which belongs to it, and to bring into practice the necessary sharing on a planetary scale.

§19 This sharing has already begun through the formation and activity of small groups of Christians who are resisting the pressures of advertising, adopting simplicity and sobriety, and putting themselves in touch with various villages and sectors of the Third World. There they seek to encourage new and responsible forms of development, not designed on Western models, and they wish to give, but also to receive of the wisdom, skills, and beauty in the societies which they serve.

§20 Asceticism is also necessary as a basis for that profound sympathy with nature which is often experienced by today's youth, who have no other way toward the mysterious other than the beauty of the world. This sympathy may prove to be the last barrier remaining against barbarism and against the destruction of the animal and plant world.

⁶ L' économie: un reflet des valeurs sociales et spirituelles, in “L' actualité religieuse dans le monde,” 15-2-89, p. 28

§21 Whenever the animals which we raise for meat or milk are mutated, and perhaps even changed into monsters by genetic and hormonal manipulations, it will be necessary for our school children to learn by heart a hymn to the cow written by Gandhi, in which he calls her “a poem of humility.” The cow symbolizes not only the maternal fertility of the subhuman world, but also the peace and the gentleness of beasts who do not eat other beasts.

Creative Exorcism

§22 TO ASCETICISM THERE NEEDS TO BE JOINED what I call “creative exorcism.” We need to exorcize the undeclared but invasive totalitarianism of a limitless technology. This in no way means a discrediting or limiting of scientific research. On the contrary, it means fighting at the heart of this research to make it more open and attentive to a larger divine reality. It means to fight, in the name of the truth of all beings and things, against the Promethean temptation to construct the world as a closed totality in which man would be the little god.

§23 What should animate science is a desire to reduce the unknown by rational means and a respect for the mystery of things when contemplated vertically, that is to say, as penetrated and animated by the great divine Reason, by the *Logos*, the Word and Intelligence of God. Do not the infinitely subtle structures which scientific reasoning decodes today and which continually counteract disintegration and entropy to form a marvelously ordered complexity bear the imprint of that divine Reason?

§24 Ilya Prigogine, at the end of his book, *Nouvelle Alliance*, marks an important stage in the development of contemporary epistemology. He writes: “Scientific knowledge... can now reveal itself ... as a poetic listening to nature.” Reason as instrument has “disenchanted” the world – to paraphrase the famous dictum of Max Weber – and reason as contemplation now has to teach us to admire and to respect it.

§25 In this way exorcism becomes creative. It opens up another way of looking at reality through the most careful research. This is a way of looking which re-enchants! At the same time, in relation to technology, it turns us into adults by making us able to distinguish between the possible and the desirable. “All is possible,” said St. Paul, “but not everything is expedient.” If not everything, at least very much is technically possible, and so we might paraphrase, “but not everything is expedient.”

§26 Man will be an adult in relation to technology when he can freely say sometimes “yes” and sometimes “no.” The problem with technical civilization today is the problem of meaning. Meaning cannot come from technology itself; it can only come from man, and then only if he sees himself as being in the image of God, and if he approaches the world as the gift and word of God. Simone Weil once said, more or less, that we need a holiness which also partakes of genius!

A Christian Call to Humanity

§27 DRIVEN BY THIS ASCETICISM AND EXORCISM, Christians must call upon humanity to unite in a common effort for the safeguarding of the earth, and also for its revitalization. Even the most secularized of societies need to recognize that an understanding of transcendence amidst the materiality of the world is necessary, and that without this understanding, there can be no proper distinction between the realms of society and religion.

§28 This understanding of transcendence should be found, on the one hand, in the irreducible person who can have no definition other than that of being indefinable. This is not merely the *individual*, subject to a variety of impulses, fantasies, and anguishes, but the *person*, who is capable of transcendence and being in communion, and whose face is suggested to us by the icon. The reality of a human being is both mystery and love, which is to say that it is Trinitarian. What would a just world be if it were not also a place of friends?

§29 On the other hand, this understanding of transcendence must also be a respect for *things*, for beasts and plants and the earth. It must be a faithfulness toward the earth, not like that of a Nietzsche, but like that of an Alyosha Karamazov as he followed the guidance of Staretz Zosima [in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*]:

Brothers, Love all of God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light! Love the animals. love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will soon perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing, universal love.⁷

⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Fr. Ed., Plieades publ., p. 343

A Common Task: Revitalizing the Earth

§30 YES, LET US CALL HUMANITY TO A COMMON TASK, drawn by the love of man as the image of God and of the universe as the creation of God.

§31 It will be a common task if all Christians take part in it and share their experience and their hope, those of the West and those of the East, those of the North and those of the South. This is an immense and concrete task of a renewed ecumenism, in which, more and more, I hope, the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church will collaborate.

§32 Christians will act by giving a cosmic dimension to their prayer, their hearing of the Word, their sacramental life, and their asceticism. Christians will act by example, showing the cultural, social and ecological richness of traditional ascetic values when they open out onto history. Here, I repeat, I am thinking above all of the voluntary limitation of our desires and needs along with a profound sympathy for all life.

§33 Those who put emphasis on the Word of God in Scripture will need to recognize that the world is also a word of God, and to treat it as such. Those who stress the Eucharist will try to deepen it and extend it into their daily lives and their historical responsibilities. Word and sacrament, the spirit of the Liturgy, must bring the power of the Resurrection into the life of the world and the entire cosmos.

§34 This will be a common task if, on the initiative of Christians, the two “spiritual hemispheres” of humanity meet and collaborate: the Oriental hemisphere of the Far East, from India to Japan, for whom the divine energies water the world and make the earth sacred, but who do not know the personal source of these energies, and consequently tend not to understand the person and history; and the biblical, Semitic hemisphere which affirms the individual, but separates heaven and earth to the point where individuals want blindly to dominate the latter. The Christian understanding – and here the Orthodox have much to say regarding the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the diffusion of the Trinitarian energies through the Incarnation – should enable us to carry along with us in this work both those who place an accent on the divine and those who place an accent on the human; those who put it on history and those who locate it in the cosmos.

§35 This joint effort of revitalization will provoke a spiritual revolution, the repercussions of which will gradually be inscribed in social and economic life. We who belong to the end of the second millennium, who are so often orphans without hearth or home, shall find our dwelling place in Christ. For it is Christ Who unites heaven and earth, and it is the Church which in its depths is the world on its way to deification.

§36 Biblical and evangelical revelation has desacralized the earth, not in order to abandon it to the forces of nothingness, but to transfigure it. The earth today is no longer the all-powerful Mother. May she become the betrothed, whom we must protect from rape, and let us lead her to the wedding of the Lamb.



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Questions for Parish Reflection

- Q: Why does His Beatitude call for a renewed ecumenism in the task of the revitalization of the earth?
- Q: What does His Beatitude mean by a spiritual revolution? How could this come about? What is its value?
- Q: What is the cosmic mission of Christianity?
- Q: What is a compassionate heart? How do you acquire this?
- Q: What are the “Divine Energies” of God?
- Q: What does the phrase: “If nature is not transfigured, she becomes disfigured” mean? What is the transfiguration of nature? How does this happen?
- Q: Why does HB says that “Asceticism is Indispensable”? What is asceticism? How is it practiced? What are its values?
- Q: How would you summarize the responsibility of Christians for our ecological and cultural problems? How do you believe that we should be living?
- Q: How is our culture culpable in fomenting those problems that cause the degradation of God’s creation? Name some specific issues.

