

THE PAIN OF THE EARTH: A CRY FOR CHANGE¹

by Aidan Hart

I have been asked to speak today about a Christian theology of creation, or more specifically, the Orthodox Church's theology of creation, and with particular reference to the pain of the earth. The various workshops we have had and will have during this assembly deal with the practical details of our environmental crisis - an essential work. But if we are to be true to the Gospel, all our practical work needs to be in the context of the what has been called the "cosmic liturgy". Our ecological work needs to be part of what St Paul calls "the plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10), for "in Christ all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16,17).

Pain: a problem or a blessing?

When our body is in pain we know that there is something wrong.: we have either injured ourselves or we have a disease. So pain is a God-given alarm system; without it we would continue blissfully unaware of mortal danger, sipping cocktails in a sinking Titanic.

So it is in our present environmental crisis: the earth's pain is warning us that something is wrong, that we are spiritually diseased. It warns us that the earth is cracking under the strain which our demands are placing on it. Technological responses to the crisis might tranquillise some of this pain, might postpone the effects of our greed, but they will not heal the disease itself.

So what is the spiritual disorder behind our environmental predicament? I believe that it is a matter of forgetfulness: as a secular culture, we have forgotten God's ultimate purpose for us, and this leaves us confused about our relationship with each other, with the earth and with even our own bodies. This confusion affects all aspects of life: not just ecology, but also art, architecture, morality - all aspects.

What I want to do today is to outline the Orthodox Church's answer to this question of our ultimate purpose, highlighting the vital role which the material world has in this. As we shall see, this traditional Christian teaching gives a high value to the material world, as the stage and means of God's activity. In the light of this positive vision I will also discuss some of the ways in which its loss or distortion has led to our present environmental problems. In all this I will concentrate at first on giving an overview, the general vision, and then will discuss some practical implications.

Union with God

According to the Orthodox Church's teaching, God's intention for the human person is nothing less than union with Him. The Apostle Peter writes

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of us being “partakers in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) - not just imitators or followers, but partakers. This union with God has variously been called by the Church Fathers deification, theosis and transfiguration. The scriptures call it glorification.

Deification is a union without confusion of the divine and human natures. It has been effected by Christ in His incarnation when, as the second Person of the Holy Trinity, He became and remains forever fully human while remaining fully God. Christ’s divine nature deified the human nature which He assumed. Our personal deification is effected by participation in this His deified humanity. As St Basil said, “God became man so that by grace man might become god.”

Some saints have likened this theosis to iron in a fire: while it is in the fire, the iron glows red hot, possessing heat “by the grace” of the fire, which is of another nature. The iron does not possess this heat of itself, for if it is withdrawn from the fire it loses this quality. But as long as it remains in the fire it enjoys heat as if it were its own.

The incarnation of God and the deification of the human person lies at the heart of Christian ecology, for it shows the grace-bearing potential of the material world. When Christ assumed our flesh He assumed the whole material world. This is why there was an earthquake when He died, why the heavens and the earth were plunged into darkness. St Maximus the Confessor (7th century) wrote that the purpose of the incarnation was that:

...the whole of man might participate in God ... so that through the soul and body...man might be completely deified, deified by the grace of God incarnate, while yet remaining by nature wholly man both in body and soul, becoming god by grace, wholly, both in body and soul.

“Both in body and soul.” From these words it is clear that deification is not a matter of a trapped soul being delivered from its body to float forever in immaterial bliss. To the contrary, man’s deification is effected through union with Christ’s deified humanity, which includes His flesh. The Lord said: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life... he abides in me and I in him” (John 6:54, 56). This eternal life of which the Lord speaks is not a mere everlasting extension of created life, but is uncreated, divine life. Yet He says that we partake of it through His flesh and blood.

What is important for our theme is that the Lord’s body, and our bodies, are united to the whole material universe: God’s incarnation and our subsequent deification involves the whole cosmos. This is why St. Paul writes:

...the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:23)

“Groaning inwardly”: this yearning for union is most clearly felt by those who “have the first fruits of the Spirit”, but it is also felt in the depths of every human person, since each person is made in God’s image. This is a profound nostalgia for a state we have not known, a paradoxical memory of a state we could enjoy, that we were created to enjoy.

A desire misdirected

Whether or not he likes it, an atheist or a hedonist has this inner longing for deification implanted in him: we are all created with his inherent desire for union with our Maker, with our heavenly bridegroom. This desire can never be obliterated - it can be misdirected, it can be muffled, but it cannot be obliterated. And herein lies the essence of a secular culture's delusion: it tries to mis-direct this inherent desire toward created things rather than the Creator, promising its citizens that they will be satisfied through material things in and of themselves. This mis-direction is the ultimate source of our environmental crisis.

Because it is unnatural, outside God's intended order, such idolatry quite naturally places an inordinate pressure on the earth. This is especially so since the industrial revolution, when we have been developing ever more efficient technologies to pursue this delusion. The disruption between man and the earth has been preceded by a disruption within himself, between himself and God. Our ecological crisis is ultimately a spiritual crisis, not a technological one. The macrocosm reflects the state of the microcosm. As a great saint of the Church, St Isaac the Syrian, wrote:

Be at peace with your own soul; then heaven and earth will be at peace with you.

If modern man is not at peace with the earth it is because he is not at peace with himself and God.

Repentance: a change of vision

So only a deep change in us can be the source of healing for the earth. But what change is required? Just as our body follows our gaze, so our actions follow our desires. We all seek what we consider to be most beautiful, most desirable. If we are doing wrong things it is because we are desiring wrong things. Herein lies the deeper meaning of the word repentance. The Greek word for it is *metanoia*. This is usually explained as a change of mind. But really, *nous* - the root of *noia* - is better described as *the eye of the heart*. There is another Greek word - *dianoia* - which refers to what most of us today understand by mind, which is the rational, analytical faculty. So repentance really means a change of vision. I believe that unless Christians regain a clear vision of the beauty of the human person's high calling, which is union with God, then the world will continue to seek what is nearest to it - the physical earth and the pleasures it offers. It is quite easy to criticise environmentally destructive actions, but what the world needs above all is inspiration, hope, a clearer vision of paradise. If we are to draw ourselves and others away from the greed which lies at the heart of ecological pain, then as Christians we need to discover and live and manifest something more profound and attractive than materialism. This is why churches face east, towards the risen Christ

Mediators between heaven and earth

I would now like to look in more detail at how, according to the Orthodox Church's teaching, the human person is called to live as part the material world. This can be expressed through the three classical images of prophet, priest and king.

These three roles depend both on our two-fold nature as bodily and spiritual creatures, and that as created beings we are called to participate in uncreated life. We are certainly spiritual creatures, but we are equally made of material food eaten and assimilated, of water drunk, of air breathed, of the distant sun's rays soaked in. And we are certainly created beings, and yet, as we have seen, to be fully human we need also to be united to the Creator. It is precisely because of our two-fold nature and the union in Christ of creation and Creator that we can be prophets, priests and kings of the earth, that we can mediate between the material and the spiritual worlds and the creation and the Creator.

Let us now look at each of these three roles in turn, to discuss some of the ways which God intended us to fulfil them and some of the ways we have abused them.

Prophets of the earth

As prophets, our vocation is to seek out the words or *logoi* of God which are hidden within each thing, from stone to angel. By these divine words God brought each thing into existence and keeps it in existence. As the Psalmist says: "He spoke, and they came to be; he commanded and they were created" (Psalm 148:5). And the Apostle Peter: "The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides forever" (1 Peter 1:24). And from the letter to the Hebrews: "He upholds all things by the word (*rymati* - the spoken word) of his power" (Hebrews 1:3). These *logoi* or inner essences are unique to each created thing, giving each one their unique role in the cosmic symphony. They are the inner essence of each thing. They preserve the thing within which they dwell from collapsing back into the primal formless void.

Surely it is this objective but elusive reality of the *logoi* which artists search for. Taken together, all these words are also a poem of love written by the Divine Lover of humankind, in order to woo us, to reveal to us something of His beauty. They are notes in a symphony, and it is part of our task to hear them and to help others to hear them. Seeking them out makes life a treasure hunt.

But a prophet or seer is not only called to hear or see for himself - he needs to deliver the revelation to others. A good carpenter or a good architect, for example, will bring out the qualities of the particular materials they are working with and so help others to appreciate and love those materials more. For a good craftsman, the raw stuff of his trade is not neutral, but has its own life, whose limitations and strengths need to be discovered, respected and articulated. Likewise a good farmer will love the soil, respect his animals, even if they are to be killed for eating. Most so-called primitive cultures express this deep respect for the earth through ritual. The French author Pierre Pascal describes how before going to church to make her confession, a Russian peasant woman "makes her peace first with her family, and then addresses the whole of nature: the fair sun, the clear moon, the numberless stars, the dark nights, the soft showers, the raging wind, and then, at greater length, the earth. She recites these lines:

Moist mother earth, I shed my tears upon you,
Moist earth that nourishes me and gives me drink,
I am a worthless foolish sinner,

For my legs trample you down,
 And I have spat out sunflower seeds upon you...
 My arms in their vigour have tossed you away..."²

If such a confession can be uttered by one using the gentle farming techniques which she used, how much more should it be uttered by our culture which uses such violent technology!

Towards a sacred science

I think that it is in this context of reverential awe for the mystery of creation that scientific knowledge can be pursued to the glory of God rather than to the desecration of the earth. A profound respect for the sacredness of creation, a sense of creation as gift, can only lead to a deeper and more integral knowledge of creation simply because it is nearer the truth than a mechanistic, godless world view. Here I would like to quote at some length from Blessed Theodore in that collection of ascetic writings called "The Philokalia". It suggests a spiritually beneficial form of scientific knowledge:

To escape [allurements away from virtue] we need three means, of which the first and greatest is turning our eyes to God, putting all our trust in him... The second, which, I believe is the cause of the first, is constantly feeding the mind with knowledge. By this knowledge I mean the knowledge of all that is, both material and spiritual, as it is in itself and in its relationship with the First cause... and also contemplation, as far as it is accessible to us, of the Source of all that is, by induction from that which comes from It. For investigation of the nature of creatures purifies us from passionate attachment to them, gives freedom from their beguilement and leads to their origin, making one see, as in a mirror, in the beautiful, great and marvellous, the most beautiful, the greatest and the most marvellous, or rather, that which is above all beauty, greatness or marvel..."³

What is important for us here is that for Theodore true knowledge of creation must not only be scientific knowledge - knowing the world *as it is in itself* - but it must also be knowledge of creation's source and purpose - *as it is in relationship to the First cause* (to God). Such comprehensive knowledge, he tells us, frees us from attachment to creation and draws us to love its Creator more. This knowledge does not disperse the knower, but gathers him. The sacred scientist is not dispersed among the multitude of things he studies, because he sees the signature of God on everything he studies. To him, each scientific discovery reveals a new facet of the one Creator.

This explains why monasteries have played such a large role in forming Christian civilisations: so often in them spiritual and scientific knowledge have gone hand in hand. The Russian academician Fad'ay Ya. Shipunov wrote of old Russia:

[Monasteries in Russia] gave a new culture, a new philosophy, a new science, a new art, a new understanding of education. In its literal

² "The Religion of the Russian People" by Pierre Pascal (Oxford, 1976), p.12.

³ "Early fathers from the Philokalia", (Faber, 1954), page 391

translation, education (obrazovaniye) means bearing in one's soul the image (obraz) of God...And it was the monasteries which fulfilled this function...It was in the monasteries that the Russian soul came together and shaped itself.

I can think of two particularly shining examples of such monasteries existing today: the convent of the Annunciation at Ormilina in Greece, which is using and promoting organic farming, as well as using state-of-the-art techniques and equipment to analyse old icons, and the Coptic monastery of Matthew the Poor which is developing agricultural techniques to cultivate the surrounding Egyptian desert.

Knowledge pursued with humility feeds the soul of the scientist, for it leads him to knowledge and love of God. St Anthony the Great said that the nature of created things was his book. By contrast, a godless approach to science is like the Prodigal son's departure from home. The profane scientist takes his inheritance - the cosmos with all its riches - and turns his back on its giver, who is his heavenly Father. For a time he can take pleasure in studying the universe's beauty and order, but after a while he runs out of funds and is left eating husks - that is, he is left empty inside, dissipated, unsatisfied with a cerebral knowledge which does not feed an inexplicable inner longing. And he is left with the enigma of a profession based on the assumption of order in the universe, while rejecting the only possible source of such order - a divine Creator. His rationalism is a form of vivisection: it kills the life he is trying to understand.

Perhaps our secular culture's great emphasis on acquiring scientific knowledge is inordinate. It thinks that a greater quantity of knowledge will satisfy it, and does not realise that it is the *quality* of this knowledge which is lacking. It is opaque knowledge. A secular culture receives the gift of creation but forgets to read the card which expresses the divine Giver's love.

Having said this, there is much spiritual hope emerging from the scientific world. Physicists, for example, are realising that the *relationship* between entities is a reality as well as the things themselves: the whole is not simply a sum of its parts but is a pulsating organism, all parts being interdependent. At last we are moving away from Newton's mechanistic image of the universe towards a more communal one, which is surely closer to the truth. Also, many biologists are warning us of the ecological disaster which we are heading towards because we are not appreciating the complex web of relationships which sustain the earth. And so, the creation which modernity idolises may well be the thing to turn it back to its Creator. As an Orthodox hymn of Christmas says: "the Magi who worshipped a star were taught through a star to worship the Sun of Righteousness".

Asceticism

It is easy to talk about our prophetic role. But how, practically, can we perform this role? It requires of us humility, purity, peace. Without these virtues we cannot be quiet and attentive enough to hear the notes. So to be prophetic is not a passive task, but requires training, ever deeper repentance and purification. Blessed Theodore tells us that in order to see the heavenly blessings hidden within creation,

...[we need] *mortification of our companion, the flesh; for otherwise it is impossible to see, clearly and distinctly, such heavenly blessings when they come...becoming thus refined and purified, light and harmonious, [the flesh] follows the movements of the mind readily without opposition and ascends with it on high.*⁴

Clearly this mortification is not some hatred of the body, a masochism, since Theodore calls the flesh “our companion”. It is rather a matter of training, of bringing that which is lower into obedience to what is higher. Along with other practices, Theodore mentions fasting and vigil. The aim of this asceticism is to deify the flesh, to make it ascend with the mind on high. The only long term solution to environmental problems is then a change in life-style, a shift from consumerism to asceticism.

On a practical note, the Orthodox Church has many traditions which enable people of all walks of life to live ascetically and to respect the material world. There is for example the custom of fasting. Fasting consists mainly of being vegan. Most Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days. And there are also the seven weeks of Great Lent and the forty days of Advent before Christmas. This fasting begins to have a profound affect on one. For a start, the food one eats becomes part of one’s prayer life. This leads to a greater respect for the material world in general since it is so evidently part of one’s relationship with God. The feast days, particularly Pascha and Christmas, are times when the body rejoices with the spirit since it can again have such festive foods as cheese and eggs.

There is also the tradition of holy icons. They are really a microcosm of true ecology. I am an iconographer, and I have found that the very making of an icon, apart from its use, is an ecological act. Pigment is taken from the mineral kingdom, the wood on which the icon is painted comes from the vegetable kingdom, and the egg used to bind the pigment is from the animal kingdom. These good things representative of the whole earth are then fashioned into something very good, something which is even more beautiful and which bears God’s grace to the faithful: an image of Christ, or the Virgin Mary or a saint.

So the making of an icon can teach us a lot about a sacramental ecology: so also can their use. In the Orthodox Church icons are treated more than as just visual aids, although they are that too. They are treated as windows or doors between heaven and earth, as a sort of sacrament. They are venerated and kissed, not because they have value in themselves, but because of the holy people they represent. This naturally trains people to regard the whole world as an icon of God’s glory, not to be worshipped but to be venerated. St John of Damascus (8th century), basing his defence of icons on the incarnation, wrote:

I will worship God alone, but I will not cease to venerate the matter through which my salvation was effected.

As God is increasingly excluded from the modern man’s mind, this numinous quality of the world is forgotten. His secular culture takes the engagement ring - the earth - and forgets the lover who offered it as a pledge of His love. In doing this, secularism reduces the value of the ring to its gold

⁴ “Early fathers from the Philokalia”, (Faber, 1954), page 392

and so feels free to melt it down to make of it his own idols. A profane society thus ceases to view creation as a bearer of love, and regards it instead as a repository of raw materials, to manipulate as its now fragmented, confused spiritual life dictates.

This profaning of the earth in part explains the confusion of most modern art: its rejection of beauty, its adulation of novelty, its angst. Modern art is simply an icon of modern man's soul, just as is the environmental crisis. If we spent more time and energy learning to contemplate and to draw satisfaction from the beauty of creation - or rather, the beauty of the Creator revealed through His creation - we would not feel the need to expend so much energy trying to fashion nature into a utopia of our fantasy.

The more we learn to be and to contemplate, the less we seek to change and manipulate. Is it not possible that the inordinate development of industry has gone hand in hand with loss of faith in God? Love of God certainly inspires a person to be creative and to study creation, but what he makes and discovers will be to the glory of God and not himself, and will be used to help his fellow man live with more dignity.

Priests of God on earth

We are ordained to be prophets; we are also ordained to be priests of the earth. If our prophetic role is primarily receptive, our priestly role is primarily active. The whole of creation has its purpose beyond itself, in God, and so it needs a mediator who is united both to it and to God. This is why the Eucharist traditionally lies at the heart of Christian life. In it we offer ourselves and the fruits of the earth transformed by human labour - bread and wine. God in response makes these into His own body and blood. A Russian poet wrote:

*Every time the priest celebrates the Eucharist, he holds in his hands
the whole world, like an apple.⁵*

Our offering is not to simply return to God the raw materials of wheat and grapes, but to transform them by human skill into bread and wine, and then offer them with thanksgiving. In this way through us, its priests, creation becomes fully articulate in the praise of God.

Herein lies the essence of the story of the fall. According to St Ephraim the Syrian, the Tree of Life was God himself, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil was the created world. If we had first partaken of the tree of life - that is, embraced God as alone Life, Love, Joy - we could then have participated in the created world as sacrament, as something bearing to us this same divine Life, Love and Joy. If Adam and Eve had received the earth's fruits with thanksgiving, they would have acknowledged God as the source of all good things and therefore eaten God through eating matter. As St Ephraim wrote in his "Hymns on Paradise":

*God placed two crowns for Adam, for which he was to strive,
two trees to provide crowns if he were victorious.
If only he could have conquered just for a moment,
He would have eaten the one and lived, eaten the other and gained
knowledge...⁶*

⁵ Quoted by Alexander Schmemman in "Church, World, Mission" (New York, 1979), page 222

The whole material world is ordained to participate in our transfiguration as humans. This is effected through our priestly role. The Gospels tell us that when Christ was transfigured, His garments shone along with His body. They were made of raw linen which had been gathered, spun and woven. By association with Christ, these garments participated in His uncreated light, the glory of God. This can be taken as a model for all our scientific, technological, agricultural and industrial activities. When we live properly, all our involvement with the earth is part of a sacramental life of gathering, spinning and weaving a garment for the Church. True technology, agriculture, art and so on is a priestly act whereby the inanimate participates in the kingdom of God. The earth becomes cosmos or adornment for Christ's body.

At His transfiguration, grace passed from the divinity of the Lord to His human nature and thence to His garments. Likewise in the Church, grace passes from the head, who is Christ, and thence through the humanity which He shares with us to us His human members. Through us this grace then passes to the whole material world. St Maximus the Confessor writes that "always and in all his word God wills to effect the mystery of His embodiment."⁷ True ecology is therefore an extension of the incarnation. As the Russian thinker Epivanvich wrote in 1915, "the Church is ceaselessly continuing and broadening the incarnation of Christ."

So our bodies are the meeting point, the locus, of divinity and matter. The purpose of God uniting Himself forever to our flesh, to the material world, is fulfilled when we unite ourselves and our material world to God. St Maximus the Confessor said that through the Church, "God, having made gods of men through grace, makes all created things his own."⁸

A lost priesthood

In what ways has this priestly power been distorted in our profane modern culture? Instead of clothing the higher with the lower and thereby dignifying the earth with our divine inheritance, secularism drags man down to the level of matter. The pursuit of pleasure, comfort and material wealth make him a slave to matter, not its priest. Instead of lifting matter up towards divinity, secularism manipulates the earth into an image of his own fallenness. Instead of standing between heaven and earth, mediating, a godless culture leaves man feeling alone upon the earth, with nothing higher than himself. He considers himself not the tenant but the owner of his employer's farm.

And this disaster begins in the heart. Through following the commands of Christ, the saint brings his body into union with his heart, and his heart into union with God. By contrast, the profane person considers himself the highest reality and thereby treats the world as a factory to produce goods for his pleasure. Excluding God from the picture of things, he cannot mediate, cannot lift the world onto a higher plain.

If it is intellectual pride the secular man suffers from, then he rejects creation's mystery and awe and tries to squeeze it into a rationalistic system, a system which he can contain, manipulate, comprehend. Surely this

⁶ "Hymns on Paradise" XII:17

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⁸ "Ambigua" 7:1088C

approach to the world, which rids it of its mystery, lies in part behind our crisis? It is all the easier to abuse something which we consider inanimate, neutral and mechanical than something we believe to be sacred.

Kings of the earth

We are called to be the prophets and priests of creation. We are also called to be its rulers. It is probably this role which has most come under fire from non-Christian ecologists, in particular the words from Genesis: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the face of the earth" (Genesis 1:28). In a way these critics are right, but only inasmuch as this teaching on man's powers of dominion has been misinterpreted in order to justify abuse. Really, we are called to be princes and princesses, ruling under the king of Kings, rather than sole, autonomous rulers. When God is omitted from the picture, man becomes earth's tyrant.

A major philosophical impetus for our scientific age came from Francis Bacon, who in his book *New Atlantis* said that the advancement of "the whole of mankind" would be achieved through man's dominion over nature through mechanical means. Only scientific knowledge, founded on the empirical method of experiment, he said, could further the ambition "to endeavour to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race over the universe." Through such means humanity could "recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine behest." This is a clear example of misconstruing Biblical teaching.

So how are we to understand man's dominion correctly? It has to be set in the context of the other roles of prophet and priest, which, as we have seen, have transfiguration as their purpose. Transformation and deepened relationship are to be the motivating factors of kingship rather than domination.

From art to tyranny

It is helpful to liken the undeniable power which we do have as humans to the power which an artist has over his materials. The success of the work of art which he makes is in proportion to three things: the sublimity of the vision which inspires him; his skill in articulating this vision through his chosen material; and his love for the raw material itself. The artist's "dominion" over the medium thus exists that he might raise it to a higher plain, to help it to become itself, to transfigure it. If he has a low vision, or is clumsy, or despises the material, then naturally his dominion becomes a tyranny, and he produces ugly, depressing and inane work.

Applying these three artistic principles of vision, skill and love to the ecological crisis, we can say that our society certainly lacks a sublime vision. Its aim is to stimulate covetousness, without which consumerism would collapse. Advertising is the highly efficient means of sustaining this utopian vision. It deflects us from contentment through thankfulness with what we have, and promises satisfaction when we have acquired what we don't have. But because the promise fails and we are left discontent, we try buying more things. It is a crude vision of quantity rather than quality.

As to skill, we can say that modern technology has enabled us to get a lot out of the earth with remarkable efficiency - but only for the present and in a given place. Extend the borders beyond the present and the particular paddock, farm, factory or country where this technology is used, and it so often betrays itself as incredibly clumsy, short term and even violent. We can travel more quickly than before, but what use is this if global warming due to increased CO2 emissions causes vast floods? Today we can grow more crops with intensive irrigation and by piling on artificial fertilisers - but what about future farmers who inherit the resulting degraded and heavily salted soil? We generate more electricity from nuclear power stations, but what about the radioactive waste that we leave our children, not to speak of the tragic consequences of the failure of such plants as at Chernobyl? The foot and mouth crisis in Britain reached the scale it did largely because of the scope and rapidity of livestock transportation around the country, necessitated largely by the closure - in the name of efficiency - of the many small, local abattoirs, and the supermarkets' demand for centralised distribution.

Whenever and however we demand more from the earth than it was created to offer, there is a backlash. There is no way of avoiding it.

As to love of the raw stuff of life - soil, trees, fresh air, stream water - how many people today get close enough to know and really feel the earth so they can come to love it? My childhood in New Zealand was filled with tree climbing, playing with clay, building huts, picking apples, getting gloriously muddy. But now with most western people living in cities, how many children get such opportunities as part of everyday life? Alienation from the soil has not only environmental but also psychological and spiritual consequences. Being made of earth as well as the breath of God, a person who doesn't have a lively contact with the earth feels homeless, motherless, disoriented.

Some practical things to do

How can all this theory be worked out in practice? This is the main object of the working groups during the assembly so I need not say much now. I also think that once we have the right attitude and the right theology, then common sense and a bit of thinking will show what each person can do in their own particular situations. But what I will do by way of conclusion is to mention a few principles which arise from the theology we have been discussing, things which I have found helpful from personal experience.

On the principle that it is good to start at home, I think it is important that we each of us first try to live our own lives ascetically, training ourselves to orientate everything that we do towards love of God and love of our neighbour, to live lightly on the earth. It is of limited use if we go to conferences such as this when at home we live mindlessly.

And then we can extend home to the worship of our respective churches. What we do in our Sunday worship must be a model, a paradigm for our activities in the world. Because I am a member of the Orthodox Church, I will describe something of its liturgical practice as it relates to the material world.

I have already mentioned Orthodoxy's rhythm of liturgical fasting and feasting, which links our eating with our praying. But this fasting is set within a very rich liturgical cycle of liturgical events which also act powerfully on the faithful. At Theophany when the Lord's baptism is celebrated, for example,

there is a service in the church where water is blessed. The faithful take this holy water home and use it to bless, to heal, to drink. Later on in the feast day we go to a local stream, river or ocean, and another blessing of the waters occurs. Then over the coming weeks the priest visits and blesses the parishioners' houses. This shows that the fecund life of the church's worship cannot be contained within the walls of the building, but pours out blessing to everything around.

Apart from particular times like Theophany when the spirit-bearing potentiality of matter is affirmed, any Orthodox service is a sensual affair, what with the incense smelt, the icons seen and touched, Holy Communion tasted, the singing heard. Such worship is a little participation in paradise, and sets the tone for how the faithful should relate to the outside world. In this context, the command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" means to make the whole world a paradise, to extend the borders of Sunday worship so as to sanctify the whole world. Having holy icons at home, in shops, in cars, on road sides, is just one of the many ways traditional Orthodox countries declare that the whole world is God's and a temple for His worship.

But as we all know, modern life is becoming increasingly unnatural, materialistic and wasteful. And so, apart from the positive work of creating beauty and living liturgically, increasingly we need to avoid supporting institutionalised greed and destructive practices. There are the obvious things we can do like recycling and generally watching ourselves that we aren't buying needless things.

Increasingly we need to be aware of the history behind the produce we buy. We can get into the habit when shopping of asking ourselves such questions as : Is this made of timber from ecologically managed forests? Is there an organic alternative to this food? A more local alternative? A fair trading alternative? If you can't find what you are after, then don't be afraid to ask staff if they usually have it or can get it. After all, a business needs custom and so it wants to know what sort of things people want. Supermarkets register a product request by one person as representing a hundred other people who wanted that product but didn't ask for it.

We must not underestimate the power of changed consumer patterns: they can and do force multinational companies to change their policies. But we need to know something of what goes on behind the scenes if we are to buy with discernment. So, without becoming fanatic about it, it is good to educate ourselves about the wider, international picture, like what multinationals are up to. As a rule of thumb, I am all for the principle that small is beautiful. If you can, buy from small businesses and buy things produced nearer rather than further from you. I have seen even the humble and hardy onion imported all the way from New Zealand and put on sale in England, right next to onions grown a few miles away from the shop!

We can train ourselves to look for the beauty in the free things of life: landscapes, skyscapes, trees. So much of the consumerism which feeds destructive industry comes from our inability to appreciate with thanksgiving the beauty of God's creation. He who looks and appreciates is the richest person in the world.

We need to be creative, not presuming that the current practice is the wisest. I restored an old stone cottage some years ago, and instead of using

the gypsum plaster and plastic paint which most builders would have chosen from habit, I used old-fashioned lime plaster, and for paint, limewash mixed with ochres from the earth. It was much cheaper, much more beautiful, entirely natural, and, unlike gypsum plaster, it breathed.

If we wish to go further than an adjustment of our personal buying and working patterns, we can write letters to governments and multinationals about issues such as destruction of rain forests, genetic engineering or pollution. We can use petitions, work with ecology groups and so on. Personal sins have become institutionalised sins, and these need larger scale, more organised means of address. To love our neighbour is no longer just to love the family over the garden wall. If technology has extended our power, it has also extended the borders of our ethical responsibilities. A British factory spewing pollution into German air is tipping garbage into its neighbour's garden.

Conclusion

In the midst of the many practical things we can and should do, I believe that the greatest power lies in ideas, ways of thinking and seeing (the English word for "idea" comes from a Greek word meaning "to see"). As we have discussed, our environmental crisis is rooted in the search for an unobtainable utopia - the word itself means literally "a place that does not exist." A major task of us Christians must then be to help re-orientate our society towards a sacred world view, to re-direct its gaze. This means that we ourselves need to have a clearer vision of the deification to which we are called, to try to live this out through love of Christ and our neighbour, and then to share this teaching and its implications with our society. If, as says the writer of Proverbs, "without vision the people perish," (Proverbs 29:18) then surely with vision they and their earth can be saved.