

The Holy Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church

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The position of the Russian Orthodox Church on the current problems of ecology

All humanity is responsible for the state of nature that is creation of God. Depletion of natural resources and environmental pollution together with the increasing of world population arise a question of solidarity of all nations in preserving life diversity, cautious using of natural resources and preventing environmental catastrophes provoked by human activities.

The original fall caused the corruption of primordial nature. The Holy Scripture testifies about this: "For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope" (Romans 8:20). Pollution and destruction of natural environment is a direct result of human fall, its visible embodiment. Various manifestations of sinful attitude towards nature are typical for modern "consumer society" which aim is making profit. The only opportunity to restore the nature includes spiritual rebirth of person and society, truly Christian ascetic attitude to human needs, passions curbing and self-restricting.

The main position of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning problems of wildlife and environment preserving are given in the Fundamentals of the Social Conception (par. XIII. The Church and ecological problems) and in Basic Teaching on Human Dignity and Rights (par. III.5).

Being guided by the God's commandment to preserve creation (Gen. 2:15), taking care of spiritual and physical health of man, the Russian Orthodox Church considers its duty in further discussing of ecological issues and co-working with all who are concerned with the state of the environment for the sake of human life and health preserving.

1. Theological reflection on ecological issues

Professing the biblical doctrine about relationship between man and creation, the Russian Orthodox Church is ready to contribute to consideration of worldview foundations on which environmental studies and activities are based.

The Church testifies the unity of God-created world and gives a holistic image of human existence. This vision underlines the difference between theocentric worldview and position of humanistic anthropocentrism which considers environment a repository of "selfish and irresponsible consumption" (The Fundamentals of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church, XIII, 4). Theocentric worldview also differs from pagan deification of nature often combined with efforts to raise it above man and declare it self-sufficient with human transformation of nature unnecessary.

The word of God teaches us that environment is a house created by God where He settled man (Genesis 1:28). Therefore, man is a housekeeper of the created world. He is called to worship not the nature, but the Creator (Romans 1:25). Kind and reverent attitude of man towards nature is based on deep understanding that God created the world and every living creature in it as good (Genesis 1:8-25). Every man can exclaim together with saint prophet David: "For thou, Lord, hast made me glad through thy work: I will triumph in the works of thy hands" (Psalms 92:4).

According to the Holy Scripture, ecological activity is seen as Lord commanded handling of man with created world. God blessed man to have the use of material goods to support his physical life (Genesis 1:29). The book of Genesis also testifies that God gave man an opportunity to learn and explore creation, because owning and having dominion on it as God planned is impossible without knowing laws of nature. The biblical doctrine about man's dominion over God's created world is particularly important for a proper understanding of the man's place in the Universe. This dominion should correspond to All-Goodness of Creator of the Universe, because man is created in the image of God. The Reverend Abba Dorotheus writes:

“Let us all keep our conscience towards everything: towards God, neighbor and things”. People are aimed to participate ingeniously in life of creation, to protect and preserve it: And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it (Genesis 2:15).

One of the consequences of the fall was violation of God established relations between people and nature. Man placed first egoistic and consuming motives. Therefore, environmental activity will not achieve positive effects if people do not seek to overcome their alienation from God and keep His commandments.

Given the importance of ecological issues, it is necessary to develop theological research in church schools in the sphere of correlation between human being and created world, as well as to handle ecological theme during theoretical and practical church forums. There is need to discuss environmental issues with Local Orthodox churches, as well as to share experience in this area in within interconfessional and interreligious dialogues. Regarding environmental problems, Church compare theological doctrines with contemporary scientific facts about the world, considers both scientific approaches of ecological disciplines and public opinion.

2. Liturgical life of the Church and ecology

The Church wishes the grace of the Holy Spirit to be not only in man, but also in the whole world. The Divine Eucharist consecrates created universe. The “fruits of the fields” and human hands creation - bread and wine- through the power of the Holy Spirit become the Precious Blood and Body of Christ consecrating the faithful in Christ. The consecration of the waters during the Epiphany day offers new perspective for the material life: blessed water becomes holy water, which “leads to eternal life”. Church has always been responsive through prayer and deeds to the events that expected cooperation of man and nature, as well as to the situations when man is threatened by natural calamities. The Church prays daily “for good weather and abundant crops”, about people who work on land, for delivering from natural disasters, and from harmful animals.

In contemporary environmental crises and catastrophes, people require support of prayer. It is important to publish existing, adapted and work out services of intercession, summoning God’s assistance in farming, and in different activities, aimed to preserve environment. In addition, there could be made services and specific prayers that can be used during natural disasters and technogenic catastrophes.

3. Ecological education

Russian Orthodox Church asserts that any human being tends to change the world around him in accordance with his own inner world, therefore the transformation of nature should begin with overcoming of human spiritual crisis.

A Christian way of life is a real alternative to consumerism. Orthodox Christianity develops in people moderation and restraint meeting the vital needs. Responsibility for their own deeds, refusal from glut including unreasonable use of foodstuff, respect for needs of other people, understanding of the importance of spiritual values for every person – to all these calls Orthodox Christianity.

An illustration of cautious and modest attitude to the environment often was orthodox monastery. That is where the fruitful interaction of man’s good will and scarifying power of God took place, including the agricultural sphere.

Stimulation should be given to involving priests into studying basics of ecology and rules of biosphere. In order to educate children and youth in the spirit of responsibility for the state of nature, it seems essential to add persistently several topics of Christian ecological ethics in church and, possibly, in secular educational programs. Promotion of environmental issues not only in the sphere of scientific research and education of higher theological educational institutions, Sunday schools, orthodox children’s camps, but also in additional religious education and training courses is also required. It is advisable also to organize special church courses and educational programs for students and scientists, which analyze environmental problems

from a Christian Orthodox point of view, as well as regular theoretical and practical ecological activities for children and grown-ups.

4. Church participation in environmental activity

Priests and lay people are expected to participate in activities aimed to protect environment. First of all, these activities should be focused on the evidence that only modesty, respect for others and responsibility of every person based on voluntary keeping of God's commandments will allow humanity to cope with ecological problems.

Orthodox Christians are encouraged to help in elaboration and implantation of technologies and methods in economy aimed at more respectful attitude to the environment.

Environmental agenda can be marked out as a particular issue in functioning of diocese and parish. Ecological issues can be placed as a part of pastoral, missionary, social and youth ministry. Monasteries and parishes which put concern for nature on their agenda have great opportunities for practical realization of orthodox approach to ecology. The development of ecological-friendly manufacture, put into practice in monasteries and village parishes, should be an example of rational use of natural resources for other economies.

5. Cooperation with public, state and international organizations in ecological sphere

In nature protection activities the Russian Orthodox Church is open to a dialogue and cooperation with civil, state and international organizations. At the same time the Church emphasizes that one may not manipulate questions of ecology and use this theme as an instrument in political race and economic competition or as a method to satisfy self-serving interests of individuals and social groups. In that case the Church reserves the right to hold back from cooperation in environmental and related projects. The Church also reserves the right to criticize the government, international organizations, social and academic institutions which could have negative impact on nature and through this on human health and life.

The dialogue of Church with specialists and managers responsible for decision-making of urban, agricultural, industrial and extractive development strategies is particularly relevant in that regard. The promotion and encourage of research in resource conservation, engineering and implementing environmental friendly technologies, search for the alternative energy sources, conservation of environment-forming functions of natural ecosystems – all of these are also particularly important for the Church.

Dioceses, deaneries and parishes can sign agreements with regional and local authorities, focused on the environment protection.

In cooperation with government and society on environmental issues the Church is open:

- to participate in environment-related forums, conferences, summits, and to share church understanding and experience in dealing with ecological problems with all interested;
- to assess the social and economic projects affecting environment and nature;
- to undertake joint projects with public, state and international organizations;
- to expand Church presence in public and academic environment work on international, national and regional levels;
- to participate in the development, discussion and implementation of information campaigns and educational programs containing ecological components, as well as laws and regulations related to environmental issues;

In the dialogue with representatives of society, government and international organizations the Russian Orthodox Church considers it's duty to contribute to enhancing the sense of joint responsibility for reservation of God's creation in people belonged to different social, ethnocultural, age and professional communities and to support their activity in that direction.