

A CHARITABLE HEART: ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL WARMING

Dr Lawrence Osborn
Independent researcher

<https://doi.org/10.47433/tv.xcixn1-4.61>

Abstract

The title of the paper recalls a well-known statement by Saint Isaac the Syrian about charity. It is widely assumed that charity and compassion are properly directed towards our fellow human beings. This paper explores their extension to all of creation by St Isaac and other Fathers and saints (both ancient and modern) and outlines a theological rationale for this extension.

Contemporary Orthodox accounts of our responsibility towards the non-human creation often focus upon our role as priests of creation. In this paper, I argue that such a sacramental approach is necessary but not sufficient. Without careful qualification, the priesthood metaphor (like the dominion and stewardship metaphors) is too anthropocentric to offer a viable basis for genuinely compassionate care for creation.

For Saint Isaac, compassion for all creatures was expressed primarily through prayerful concern. I argue that such prayerful concern entails righteous action. Finally, I briefly explore the practical meaning of righteous action in relation to an environment compromised by anthropogenic climate change.

Keywords: spirituality and the environment; dominion; stewardship; priesthood of creation; kinship with creation; righteous action and the environment

Introduction

Father Dumitru Stăniloae points out that the goal of Orthodox spirituality is a life of union with God, but he adds that this goal cannot be separated from the path by which it is attained¹. That path is one of embodied existence in a physical environment. So, learning to live appropriately in this world – the world that God

¹Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, trans. Archimandrite Jerome (Newville) and Otilia Kloos, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA, 2002, Chapter 1.