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The World as Field of God's Presence and Man's Work

Abstract

Environment of man's life, nature, as the most auspicious and unique setting of the human being's life, has a sacred character because it is a work of the divine creation, of the One Who is the Only One truly saint, because He is the source, the promoter and the supporter of holiness. The world was created by God as gift and environment of the relation between Him and man, as man's and God's means of manifestation, communication and discovery, in mutual relationship.

As a gift, it conveys God's love and mercy for man, who, by receiving and accepting it [the world] consciously, as gift, retains the divine love and mercy and gives it back again, as offering, to God, its Supreme Giver and Benefactor.

Keywords

Creation, Holy Trinity, Deification, Human Being, image of God, Salvation

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Introduction

As field of God's presence and of man's work, the world is a Theophany that reveals the magnificent work of *the Lord's hands* and its admirable continuation *through the acts of man's hands*. Environment of man's life, nature, as the most auspicious and unique setting of the human being's life, has a sacred character because it is a work of the divine creation, of the One Who is the Only One truly saint, because He is the source, the promoter and the supporter of holiness.

The world was created by God as gift and environment of the relation between Him and man, as man's and God's means of manifestation, communication and discovery, in mutual relationship. As a gift, it conveys God's love and mercy for man, who, by receiving and accepting it [the world] consciously, as gift, retains the divine love and mercy and gives it back again, as offering, to God, its Supreme Giver and Benefactor. In fact, this is the trajectory of each gift. It conveys a meaning and a message from the one who offers it, and needs to carry love, gratitude, from the one who receives and offers the gift back again. From this perspective, the creation is a Eucharist, and man is a priest of God in respect to the world.

So, the world is a means of support for communion, for the exchange of gifts and for deepening the relation between persons. It shows itself to man as an area of God's presence, a way for the Creator to reveal himself, because it simultaneously reveals and conceals the divine presence. In other words, though different from God's being, the world is somehow ontologically filled with His uncreated energies, which imbue with His presence everything that has been created, supporting everything into existence and leading everything to perfection.

Nature is a space of encounter, an interval of communion and a means of knowledge. Through it, God communicates with us; He conceals and at the same time reveals Himself, turning everything into a sign and a way towards Him, announcing and proclaiming His love, mercy and power (Rom. 1:19-20). From this perspective, the world has a totally different connotation, as it really is an extension of the human way of manifestation and a reflection of the divine way of manifestation or a Theophany and an anthropophany, non-separated and non-mixed. On the way man relates to the world and valorizes it, finally depend his type of relationship with God, with his own self and with his fellows.

I. The World as Field of Man's Deification

The world is the most important divine help for man's salvation, is the flight of steps towards God as, when we try to understand it deeper, it is the very Creator that reveals Himself to us: "*the entire world should be seen as visible part of a universal and continuous sacrament, and man's entire activity as a sacramental divine communion. The conception of the world as gift or as vehicle of His love, as well as the conception of the world as visible part of a sacrament of God's grace is one and the same thing.*"¹

Due to the fact that the world was created for man, serving and mediating man's actions, it has an inter-relational and anthropocentric character; this truth has been expressed by numerous Church fathers, such as Saint Gregory of Nyssa or Saint Maximus the Confessor, or by newer theologians, such as D. Stăniloae or J. Zizioulas. In this vision, the way man eliminates nature's opacity, the way he sets light on it and transfigures himself and at the same time nature as well, becomes a measure of his spiritualization, a testimony of his relationship with God and his fellow, speaking about the fact that: "*[man] has increased through the life that the persons communicate to one another through the love manifested in the gift they give to one another... and, through this... they increase spiritually.*"²

The world is, certainly, a work of the Holy Trinity's love and not a reflex of the divine power, and this is the very reason why the world is full of meaning, of reason, being a testimony of love and a catalyst of love³. It is a revelation of God, without involving Him ontologically, that is why we talk about the *iconic* or *epiphanic* character of the creation, for does not the psalmist exclaim: "*the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world.*" (Ps. 18:1-4).

The world leads us to God only if we try to have a deeper understanding of its role and if we advance on the way of purification or perfection, being like the star of yore that led the three magi to Bethlehem. From this perspective, the creation reveals itself to us as a big sign, announcing God, confessing His presence and work and guiding man towards the discovery of God. So, nature has a role of image and revelation, being a predecessor

¹ D. Stăniloae, "The world as a gift of God's love", Sobornst 9, 1969, P. 667.

² Idem, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* (Orthodox Dogmatic Theology), vol. I, EIBMBOR, București, 1978, P. 1341.

³ T. Baconsky, B. Tătaru-Cazaban (eds.), *Dumitru Stăniloae sau Paradoxul teologiei* (Dumitru Stăniloae or the Paradox of Theology), Anastasia, București, 2003, P. 212.

of the supernatural Revelation. It is not by chance that Saint Athanasius the Great affirms that the world: “reveals and announces its Master and Creator, through its order and harmony, just like letters.”⁴

II. The World as Field of God’s Presence

Just like an open book, nature announces God’s presence with force,⁵ it shows us that He is an Almighty Creator, who made it out of nothing, because, though He manifests Himself in the world, yet He is not identified with it; we see the world’s beauty, we understand it, amplifying to the maximum the Creator’s beauty while the Creator Himself escapes to the human sensibility, for the very reason that He is present here in a different way from that of His being.

The complex and deep cosmic processes reveal that the One who created the world has not left us, but continues to manifest His care towards it, and this reality can be noticed in the good advancement of the world. The collaboration between the diverse kingdoms of nature or within the same kingdom, the complex and diversified organization of the world, the need for collaboration and communion, actually confess the fact that the world bears, in a secret way, the Creator’s imprint, containing the reflection of the Holy Trinity’s love⁶; it is impregnated with the Holy Trinity, it is full of the Holy Trinity, which it reflects, from its smallest particle to its whole⁷ (Ps. 138:7-10).

And, behold, the psalmist grasps here the universal dimension of the sacred, as expression of the presence and personal work of the Holy Spirit in the world, promoting the truth that the world *is the main original miracle and wonder*.⁷ This is actually another reason why the world’s integrity and dignity is transcendental, having to do with the participation of the divine energies into supporting it in existence; that is why any aggression against it would be a way of disrespecting the Creator.

⁴ Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Cuvânt împotriva elinilor* (Saint Athanasius the Great, *Discourse against the world*) 34, in *Colecția Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* (PSB), EIBMBOR, București, 1987, P. 15.

⁵ Cf. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* (Orthodox Dogmatic Theology), P. 24.

⁶ Cf. Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua* 28; *Răspunsuri către Talasie* (Saint Maximus the Confessor *Ambigua, Answers to Thalasia*), in *Filocalia* (Philocalia), vol. III, Harisma, București, 1994, P. 13.

⁷ I. Buga, *Ierarhiile Ființei* (The Hierarchies of the Being), Sf. Gheorghe Vechi, București, 1997, P. 89.

III. An Eucharistic Perspective on the World

The world as gift supposes as well a Eucharistic perspective on it; we received it as a gift from Life itself, we give it back as a gift to Life itself, through all that we do and through the way we relate to our fellows and to creation in general. The perspective on the world as divine gift has as a consequence the idea that the world is valuable, especially as the Son of God became incarnated in it, so He, the Creator, appreciated this created being, man, to the maximum.⁸

In this sense, to see the world as a gift means to be in an attitude of perpetual gratitude towards the Giver of life, to try to cultivate this gift according to the Parable of the talents, where not to make perfect, not to keep, while developing, is to willingly submit to destruction, to bury your talent, as anything that does not develop and stays unmoved is meant to decay. From here comes as well, as we can see, man's responsibility towards the creation, which is based on the fact that when we respect nature, we respect the Creator, and when we depreciate it, we disrespect God. Nature deserves our care, our respect and our attention, as it is the only environment where we can live, adore God and perfect ourselves. Without it, man cannot survive.⁹

IV. The World as Field of Man's Work

Ruling over the creation means transforming it, adapting it to man's needs (while respecting its integrity), perfecting it, so, in a way, it means continuing the divine work of creation or its extension. As, since God created reasonable beings, endowed with creative powers, he did it to have not just a partner of dialogue, but also a collaborator to the perfection of the creation, so that the creation's transformation is the main title by means of which man takes hold of things and acquires the right to possess.

This thing is proved by the fact that, after the moment of man's creation, follows that of the blessing, when the Creator entrusted to man a mission, a calling or a purpose: *Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it* (Gen. 1:28). The modern science proclaims that fact that between man and creation there are mysterious and innumerable connections of communication and communion. The communion between man and nature is obvious, easily noticeable, especially as nature provides us with the food

⁸ T. Baconsky, *Iacob și îngerul. 45 de ipostaze ale faptului religios* (Jacob and the Angel. 45 Hypostases of the Religious Act), Editura Anastasia, București, 1996, P. 59.

⁹ Ioan Paul al II-lea, *Planul lui Dumnezeu. Decalog pentru mileniul III* (Pope John-Paul II, *God's Plan. A Decalogue for the Third Millennium*, Romanian translation), Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1999, P. 156.

we consume, and then the remains (and even our bodies) return to nature, in a perpetual cycle. If we add here as well the fact that man's deification, his perfection is achieved in matter and using matter (we will remind here only the Eucharistic elements: the bread and the wine, which are the most natural fruits of nature), we can understand why we can talk about the creation as Eucharist.¹⁰

Man is the creation's manager and according to the patristic principle, the more man becomes deified, the more nature becomes humanized and sanctified (without promoting by this affirmation any form of pantheism, because the Christian teaching strongly promotes the distinctions between person, nature, Creation).¹¹

As mediator between the visible and the invisible world, as priest of God's creation, man has to protect the creation as if it were his own body or an extension of his body. The recent developments in the Orthodox theology strongly highlight the need for the creation to be saved from man's harmful actions, which finally means saving the environment we live in and, ultimately, saving our earthly life.¹²

That is why, the contemporary Christian theology highlights the inclusion of the creation in the vision of redemption, as indispensable help for the fulfillment of our goal, and the fact that the destruction of creation means the destruction of man and so, it means being against the plan of the creation, against the world and man's divine goal.¹³ So, in this case too, respect for nature is part of the respect for our own life and for the Creator, for the One who is the author of the world.

Man's falling into sin affected the condition of the world, of nature as well, which suffers because of sin, because man, who was supposed to transfigure it, to humanize it, because of sin neglected his purpose, and the creation began to master him, the man fallen into sin. That is why, on the celebration of the Epiphany, the priests exorcise the cosmos, whose basic element is water, considered as a natural refuge for the devil. So, the demonic in nature means its fall from the original purpose and orientation.

Nature, created very good and beautiful by God in the beginning, has turned into a prison and a permanent temptation for man, by which "*the*

¹⁰ J. Zizioulas, *La vision eucharistique du monde et l'homme contemporain*, in « Contacts », vol. XIX, nr. 57, 1967, P. 83.

¹¹ Ch. Yannaras, *Persoană și eros (Person and Eros, Romanian translation)*, Editura Anastasia, București, 2000, P. 31.

¹² Cf. G. Florovsky, "Christianity and Culture", in *Collected Works*, Belmont, Massachusetts, 1972-1987.

¹³ V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă (Introduction to the Orthodox Theology) (Romanian translation)*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, P. 86.

prince of this world introduces his own kingdom of death."¹⁴ So, the sanctification of nature implies its demystification, its re-settlement in its true relation with God and with man, and also the proclamation of God's rule over the Cosmos. Man's presence in the creation is qualified as well by his quality of image of God, having the purpose to attain God's likeness, so to become a dynamic microcosm.

Man can fulfill his role to master and to guide the creation towards its purpose, after the fall, because Christ restored him, freed him from the bondage of the devil and of the natural mechanic determinism, through His redeeming work, namely through His Incarnation, through His Passions, Death, Resurrection, Ascension, and Sitting at the right hand of the Father. He, the New Adam, showed us that the accident of sin can be overcome. Through His deified humanity, Jesus Christ sends us supplies of grace, to help us in our mission to reach our deification and the humanization of nature.

Man reunites in himself all the intelligible and sensible aspects of creation; he has the role to make this unity as perfect as possible, especially now after this accident of man's falling into sin, when the forces of division and of disintegration are active in the creation. That is why man has to go over all the separations: God and creation, intelligible and sensory, heaven and earth, paradise and hell, man and woman.

Objectively, these divisions have been overcome by Christ, the One in Whom the creation finds once again the communion with the Creator and its internal harmony. Man preserves his dignity of master of the entire creation, to the extent to which he participates to the Creator's life and greatness, because in the Creation shines God's image, through man who is the "*spiritual eye of the creation.*"¹⁵

Conclusion

Created creator by God, man can have an active participation to the continuation of the creation, to the fulfillment of his mission, by knowing and having a deeper understanding of his values, by actualizing these values for his perfection, through everything he does for the sanctification of nature, and also through his works of art, through the edification of peace in the world, through the fight for the Christians' unity or through his descendents, through everything that participates to spiritual progress, to

¹⁴ J. Meyendorff, *Teologia Bizantină* (Byzantine Theology), EIBMBOR, București, 1996, P. 181.

¹⁵ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă* (Dogmatic Orthodox Theology). Vol.II, P. 351.

human perfection by means of closeness and life in God, through the Holy Spirit. With the creation of the world, in the potential plenitude, the Holy Spirit planted His divine uncreated energies, like active reasons, moving towards future unlimited realizations; man must enter into a relationship with these uncreated energies and continually change the creation.

The world is a field or space of God's and man's presence and work; it is a place for communication, communion and collaboration. It is impregnated with God's grace and bears as well the signs of man's work. In the creation, man is called to be a collaborator of the Holy Spirit, as he was awoken to the divine life, as being, through the spirit given by God to the little clod of earth. So the act by which him, the one created a creator, transforms, humanizes and spiritualizes nature, is an act of union of the spirit with nature, or rather of activation of the spiritual possibilities of matter, of awakening of the spirit in matter.

A solution to the erroneous positioning of man in relation to nature would be for man to rediscover nature's character of divine creation, with an inalienable dignity and purpose that make any depreciation and devalorization affect the very act of worship to God. The creation also testifies to the fact that nature is in a mysterious and deep solidarity and substantiality with man; it aspires to perfection, to the fulfillment of its purpose through man, while man aspires to the communion with God and his own salvation, with the help of nature. This is the reason why man is seen as a microcosm, a bearer of and in relationship with the macrocosm (the world), in the world and, yet, with the vocation of transcending it.

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