The God-Man, Mankind and Creation:

*Applying an Orthodox understanding of the relationship between God,*

*mankind and the natural world to today’s sustainability efforts*

The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God. I shall not cease reverencing matter, by which my salvation has been achieved. *– St. John of Damascus (675-749)*

I cannot help but speak these words with a sense of wonder and trepidation. We can only imagine how profoundly moved, how aware of God’s presence St John of Damascus was when he spoke them some 1,300 years ago. What does it mean for us, as Orthodox Christians living in the twenty-first century to reverence matter, to reverence God’s creation, particularly the earth, as a living icon of Him? For us, it should come naturally, as our faith rests entirely on the extraordinary premise that God Himself became Incarnate 2,000 years ago, fully taking on our humanity while retaining His divinity, unconfused and undiminished. Because ours is an *embodied* God, our Faith must above all else be an embodied one, in which we hold all created matter to be sacred, formed, as it was, by the Lord of Lords (cf. 1 Tim. 6:15) and King of Kings (cf. Rev. 17:4).

Since God Himself condescended to participate fully in His Creation by joining Himself into the race of Man at a set time and place, what does this say about our view of all creation? Particularly, what does this say about our understanding of how mankind fits into the ongoing story of life on this earth, and beyond, into the very cosmos? It is telling that we worship a Triune God in Whom there is dynamic, yet constant life. We call the Second Person by one of the most powerful, beautiful names: Christ is the *Theanthropos*, the God-Man. Alone of all monotheistic faiths, we believe our God walked this earth as a man for a finite time, during which He gazed at the trees and mountains and streams He created out of nothing, during which He ate, thirsted, and tired. Yet He remained fully God. Think on the simplicity, yet also the profound wonder, of belief in such a God.

It has always been self-evident to me, and I know, to all of you here, that we have an innate, natural responsibility to this earth as stewards and caretakers of God’s creation. Yet how are we to apply and live out this vocation in our day-to-day lives, in our parish communities, and in our corporate life as members of the Body of Christ? True to our Orthodox understanding of the relationship between God and man, between husbands and wives, parents and children, and *all* people, we are called to view our responsibility to this earth as a sacramental undertaking, marked by gratitude to God for His bounty, and a sincere desire to conserve His creation unto the ages. As His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch has stated so beautifully,

Everything that lives and breathes is sacred and beautiful in the eyes of God. The whole world is a sacrament. The entire created cosmos is a burning bush of God’s created energies. And humankind stands as a priest before the altar of creation, as microcosm and mediator. Such is the true nature of things; or, as an Orthodox hymn describes it, “the truth of things”, if only we have the eyes of faith to see it.

I am a student of History, which is itself a science in some ways, and while I have taken several courses on environmental sustainability, I cannot and do not claim to be any kind of expert on the subject. Speaking, then, as a novice in this field, I would touch *briefly* on a scientific subject of decidedly amateur interest, but one which I think serves as a relevant example for how our emerging understanding of much of the natural world reflects – even without being aware of it – that profoundly sacramental worldview to which Orthodoxy calls us.

My example is an August interview conducted by Aviva Hope Rutkin, a Boston-based science reporter who writes for the MIT Technology Review. She talked with Dr Lori Marino, a Research Associate with The Smithsonian Institution and Senior Lecturer in Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology at Emory University’s Center for Ethics, about her groundbreaking research on orcas, popularly known as killer whales. In her interview, Dr Marino elaborated on some of her work, which has shed extraordinary new light on the sophistication of orcas’ brains. Her research revealed that orcas have a profound capacity for self-awareness, social cohesiveness, emotional intelligence, trauma processing and tool-making skills, understanding of symbolic language, and depth of memory. Given our worldview, what can we learn as we continue to discern more about the unexpected brilliance of this particular species in God’s creation?

I hope that this brief example illustrates my point; that the more we continue to learn about other created life, especially fellow mammals, the more aware of God’s presence, dynamic life and glory we become, even without consciously realizing it. In discussing how we as Orthodox Christians are to care for God's creation, what we continue to learn about such extraordinary creatures seems profoundly relevant, on a scientific, societal and *theological* level.

So much laudable work has been done, and so much continues to be done at inter-jurisdictional levels to integrate sustainable development and ecological stewardship into Orthodox parish and diocesan life. As a student, what I see as the principal obstacle to greater student participation is a lack of awareness among many young people that these initiatives are even taking place. Among my Orthodox friends, there is a deep sense of love and affection for the person of His All Holiness, and most are aware and proud of the title he has affectionately earned for his efforts, that of “the Green Patriarch”. But how many young Orthodox in parishes across the country are aware of the finer details, or the years of planning and vision that have gone into so many international symposia, high-level hierarchical conferences, and bilateral meetings with heads of state?

In this increasingly “plugged-in” age of instant communication, in which my entire generation communicates by Facebook, Twitter and e-mail, one thing that strikes me as having a fundamental importance is finding a way to archive and communicate the history of Orthodoxy’s leading engagement in environmental stewardship, as well as all ongoing efforts and the latest relevant developments. Unless we develop a means of engaging young people in a way that is easily accessible to them, the impact and perceived relevance of these efforts on the lives of Orthodox youth will not be as high as it ought to be. Social media outreach will be crucial to all future efforts, from the parish level up to inter-jurisdictional summits.

I would humbly suggest the creation of a common online resource where all of the important developments, and the history, of Orthodox environmental engagement are publicly accessible in one place. From the addresses and initiatives of His All Holiness, to important multilateral agreements and inter-jurisdictional Church statements, to collaborative local and state partnerships between parishes and businesses, all of these valuable resources should be accessible from one common website. The easier it is for young people to have online access to this extraordinary wealth of materials, the easier it will be for more of us to educate ourselves and then begin to get involved on a local and diocesan level.

I would also suggest the identification in every jurisdiction on a diocesan level of student leaders who can meet with hierarchs and lay leaders to discuss plans for a greater integration of sustainability efforts into all dioceses nationwide, beginning locally by reaching out to parishes, Orthodox business owners and community leaders, and local university chapters of the nationwide Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF). The eventual establishment of an inter-jurisdictional Orthodox student leaders' sustainability conference or committee under the Assembly of Canonical Bishops would be something to possibly consider in the future as needed.

The most crucial factor which would facilitate the success of any collaborative efforts by local parishes, business leaders, and OCF chapters to integrate sustainable practices into Orthodox community life across the nation is also the most variable: the existence of close cooperation between all parties involved. Here in Washington, university students are blessed with supportive campus faculty and programming, interested businesses, and the freedom to visit and worship in three beautiful cathedrals, and numerous parishes in the greater Metropolitan area. We are fortunate to have access to many highly influential professionals whom we regard first and foremost as fellow parishioners, mentors and friends. It is my hope that future collaborative efforts in the greater Metropolitan area based on close cooperation between Washington students, parishioners, and businesses could serve as a kind of springboard for further nation-wide sustainability initiatives.