

## **The Great Warming: Comments from Fr. Jon-Stephen Hedges Priest, St. Athanasius Orthodox Church, Los Angeles**

On the streets of New Orleans early last September I saw and smelled and tasted catastrophe. As we have seen and heard in the commendable movie, “The Great Warming,” trustworthy science suggests that Katrina was part of an alarming pattern.

We eastern orthodox, in our stick-in-the-mud traditionalist kind of way, would first frame the question of a response theologically. As my friend Fr. Deacon John Chryssavgis of the Greek Patriarchate observed, “If we are going to reverse the environmental crisis, we must first of all transform the way we perceive our world and ourselves; we must change our “icon” of the world.” (*We aren't talking about Bill Gates kind of icons.*)

For us Orthodox the world, like the paintings of saints that cover the walls of our churches, the world is an icon infused with the grace of God. We call icons “windows from earth to heaven.” We do not despise material creation: earth, water, oil, bread, wine... rather we see in all things the potential of sacramental encounter. And even if the icon of the world is defaced by the graffiti of sin, it still sings the Glory of God.

Dostoevsky exhorted “...love all creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love... and you will perceive the divine mystery in things.” So every January at Epiphany my parish processes from Isla Vista through UCSB to Goleta Beach and we bless the waters. In the icon of the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River that we carry in that procession, you see the fish in the river looking as if they are laughing and dancing around Him.

We say His creation is happy because He has come to it. We Christians must confess that we have not lived up to the promise of that sort of relationship with creation. Our response must therefore begin with repentance.

In 1989 Patriarch Ignatius the IV of Antioch observed that the icon of the world is breaking up, “...the maternal sea is polluted, the heavens are rent, the forests are being destroyed and the desert areas are increasing.” He went on to direct us, “We must protect creation; better yet we must embellish it, render it spiritual, transfigure it...”

While the Patriarch's prescription to accomplish this might be that you all would first become Orthodox Christians, my translation of the message, my prayer is that, whatever our faith, we each would first reflect and repent of how we each have treated creation in the past.

With Patriarch Ignatius I would remind my evangelical brethren (with fraternal affection) that the world is, as it were, a Word of God, spoken into being by Him and therefore worthy of respect similar to that with which we hold the Bible. All people of the Book are charged with this stewardship to hold dear what God has entrusted.

To those neighbors of secularist inclination, I would say we must chance to extend our hands (we traditional religionists toward the non-religious and they toward us). We must meet in the town square on this one for, I do fear, that what I saw hinted at in New Orleans may be just off all our shores.

Granted, there have been catastrophes from the beginning of time and though I witnessed in New Orleans that "... in the valley of the shadow of death the Lord is with us," we ought not to bring the catastrophe down on ourselves if good science and the stewardship of faith our can work hand in hand to show us how to keep it off our shore. Perhaps the discipline of fasting (that voluntary limitation of consumption for the sake of a greater good) perhaps in the discipline of fasting that is common to so many of our faith traditions, there may be a model we can offer together.

I pray with you all for wisdom and direction to act.