

# PRAYER AND ECOLOGY

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THE TITLE MAY SEEM A STRANGE ONE. Ecology normally involves discussing the environment in economic, social and—above all—political terms. What has prayer got to do with it?

Before I respond in any greater detail, let me quote a few sentences from a letter I recently received from a young monk, a Cistercian and therefore a Roman Catholic, written the day before his final profession. He is describing the place where his monastery is located:

It's a place of great silence and quiet for my heart—quiet that I link not so much with the liturgy but to how nature surrounds the abbey so marvellously, so peacefully. The azure reflections from the pine forest, its sandy and dusty pathways, the pools and marshes with their mystical air—these biological realities form the setting for my life of intimacy with the Lord. This landscape, this territory is dear to me. In my own way I'm a 'lover of the place'—*amator loci*—as they used to call the first monks of Cîteaux. I feel like a new incarnation of Van Gogh in monastic life.

Van Gogh, the famous Dutch painter, made any landscape that his brush touched shimmer with colour and light. And the same goes for the monk—his contemplative gaze can light up a secret fire within which God is revealed.

In what follows, we will begin by looking at how for Scripture, from the very beginning, nature is a gift from the creator God. Moving then to the theme of prayer, we will look at how both Eastern and Western traditions, as they build on Scripture, connect one particular, relatively advanced stage in the spiritual life with a certain kind of experience of nature. In the final section, we will look at how this spiritual perception of nature incorporates itself into the movement of salvation history, and draws the prayerful person into what we might call an 'ecological priesthood'.

### ***Scripture, Creation and Gift***

Within the Bible, it is in the prayers that we find the most lyrical evocations of nature, particularly in the Psalms. There the beauty of nature is hymned into prayer, and thus the Creator is glorified: Psalm 104, for example, evokes the Creator's activity:

You make springs gush forth in the valleys ... giving drink to every wild animal ....

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use ....

May the glory of the Lord endure forever. (Psalm 104:10, 11, 14, 31)

The Psalmist has followed the Priestly writer's account of creation in seven days that we find in Genesis 1; indeed the two authors may have been contemporaries. In the Genesis narrative, the loving regard of the Creator sets a kind of seal on each day's activity: 'God saw that it was good'. The narrative culminates in the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God. Moreover, they are entrusted with a particular mission:

'... have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. ... See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.' (Genesis 1:28-29)

Such lyrical evocations of nature's beauty recur throughout the Old Testament. The Wisdom literature deserves a special mention here, notably the brilliant account of creation that we find in Sirach 43. Or take this passage, almost on the threshold of the New Testament, in which the author addresses God:

... the whole world before you is ... like a drop of morning dew that falls on the ground. But ... you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made .... For your immortal spirit is in all things. (Wisdom 11:22-12:1)

If it is indeed the case that a trace of the Creator, His incorruptible spirit, is present in all His works, then these become, each in its own way, mirrors reflecting Him. This idea is already implicit in the

discourses of Job and of his friends; it will be developed by St Paul, who will draw from it the conclusion that the pagans are to be reproached for not having recognised God in the splendours of His creation:

Ever since the creation of the world His eternal power and divine nature ... have been understood and seen through the things He has made. (Romans 1:20)

Within nature, then, there are 'signs' latent, just as in history. And not all can interpret them, as can be seen from Jesus' rebuke to his contemporaries:

'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.' (Matthew 16:2-3)

The 'signs and wonders' punctuating the earthly life of Jesus indicate that the pace of history is quickening, that a new stage is beginning. And Jesus is announcing further signs, signs that will likewise appear 'in the sun, the moon and the stars', signs heralding 'distress', a cataclysm that will shake the world and the powers of heaven (Luke 21:25). 2 Peter 3 is quite explicit:

... in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. (v.13)

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be consumed.<sup>1</sup>

The waiting referred to here is something characteristic of Christians; it shapes their particular way of life, even to the rhythm of their prayer. So the author can write:

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of

<sup>1</sup> v. 10; NRSV 'disclosed', following another manuscript tradition.

which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? (vv.11-12)

Within this kind of apocalyptic vision of creation, one may admire the beauty one finds now, but one is also aware of a secret force working through it, and pushing it towards a radical transformation that will take place after an apparent cataclysm. And this attitude is self-evidently Christian, representing a quite distinctive approach to nature and its resources. The disciple of Jesus may be enmeshed within nature, but at the same time is also looking beyond to a culmination that cannot yet be described, only evoked through the inspired Biblical images.

Two sayings of Jesus bring out this fundamental ambivalence in the Christian attitude towards the world. When the disciples invite him to admire the beautiful stones of the Temple, Jesus tells them that the day will come ‘when not one stone will be left upon another’; it will all be thrown down (Luke 21:6). But when the same disciples ask him to name when this destruction will happen, Jesus suggests that they take as their inspiration the beauty they can find in nature:

‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.’ (Luke 21:29-31)

All things are destined for destruction. Nevertheless, new life is already burgeoning through what seems to be simply the end; a new spring is promised. Even as nature is destined to disappear, it conceals within itself a mysterious force for renewal.

Not everyone can discern the signs of the approaching Kingdom—far from it. Discernment is the disciple’s prerogative, the fruit of a special and privileged gift:

‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand”.’ (Mark 4: 11-12)

Most of Jesus’ parables are borrowed from nature: the seed, the wheat, the darnel, the mustard seed, the harvest, the fig tree, the treasure hidden in the field. But the images both reveal and conceal: they



conceal the truth for those without understanding, and reveal it to those for whom it is given.

### ***Creation and the Experience of Prayer***

What do spiritual writers make of these biblical traditions as they try to indicate how believers can grow spiritually? Particularly after the fourth century, they distinguish several stages in the awareness of creation and the Creator. The words they use vary with their cultures and their languages, but one can easily see that they are talking about the same experience. Most of the time, they list three stages that I shall call—with a little oversimplification—exterior awareness, interior awareness and spiritual awareness.

The first, exterior awareness, is what we acquire through the natural use of reason. Within its scope falls the science that studies all created things, naming them, analyzing them, studying the relations between them. It produces people of learning, true scientists, people developing ever more refined forms of knowledge.

For its part, interior awareness consists in a deeper perception of beings, involving the link they have with God and God's providence by virtue of their carrying the image of God within themselves, and of

their charge to bear God's message to us. It is above all the Greek Fathers, following a line marked out by Evagrius of Pontus, who have analyzed this awareness that presupposes a more purified form of vision arising from a special gift of grace. For them, there was a contemplation or beholding, that revealed the true nature of things, the nature they had before the Fall, their *logos*, their internal rationale or message that secretly reflects the creative Word.

Most people lack this kind of penetrating awareness, and do not even realise it. Rather caustically, Symeon the New Theologian speaks of them as the 'living dead', who 'think as irrational animals':

It is possible to live without living;  
it is possible to see without seeing,  
to hear without hearing.<sup>2</sup>

Such people live only in their heads—heads which are cut off from their hearts. They get lost either in distraction or in abstraction—the awareness of the general scientific nature of things that is ultimately only on the surface. In comparison with the interior knowledge of things according to God, this is just, for the Fathers, 'delirium'—an illusion which only grace can heal.

How can it be that most people, indeed most Christians, lack this interior awareness? The answer is a simple one: the passions always present in the human heart, passions which the Fathers evoke through the images of a fog enveloping us, or a veil covering our eyes.<sup>3</sup> It is for this reason that we need to live in self-denial, in a certain asceticism—not in order to suppress the passions, but to contain them, and to turn them towards the spiritual purposes for which they were originally created in God's design. So Evagrius:

The spirit [*nous*] which has divested itself of the passions and which sees the spiritual aspect of things does not truly receive any

<sup>2</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, Hymn 44 (cited according to the translation of Symeon's Hymns by George A. Moloney [Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, n.d.], p. 229).

<sup>3</sup> So Maximus the Confessor, *Questions to Thalassios*, 49: 'the veil is the illusion produced by the senses, fixing the soul's attention on the surface appearance of sensory objects, and barring the passage to their spiritual realities'.

more the images which arrive by means of the senses; but it is as if another world has been created by its awareness ...<sup>4</sup>

This is the world of truth, the world of nature according to God, the world discovered by the purified eyes of the heart as if they were creating it. For Maximus the Confessor, people who see in this way are responding to the vocation entrusted to them by God at their own creation: the unification within themselves of the material creation and the spiritual creation. For through all that is merely material, they are perceiving God's profound intention, and through that awareness in turn unifying the whole world with God.

There is, then, a bold vision of creation and of its link with God, and one that does not exclude humanity—quite the contrary. It is through this 'interior knowledge' that humanity comes to true self-awareness, 'of what it is according to its spiritual nature'. We find this idea as early as Antony the Great, whose letters contain a summary of this vision.<sup>5</sup> If we know ourselves, then we know at the same time the other creatures whom God has called into being from nothingness; we are also made aware of the divine salvific design of all that God has done for His creatures. But, above all, self-awareness culminates in the knowledge of God. Gregory of Nyssa likens the soul to iron. If a whetstone is used to remove rust from iron, what was previously black 'will shine and glisten brightly in the sun'. Similarly, when human beings are purified, they behold themselves as the image of God, and thus by extension God's own self: 'the archetype in the image'.<sup>6</sup>

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However, this task to which God has destined the human person extends further: to a liturgical ministry. When we recognise God in God's creatures and in ourselves, our goal is the praise of God, the giving of thanks to God. We are coming now to the theme of prayer, because one of the fruits of this 'interior' knowledge is precisely that it shoots forth in praise and thanksgiving. Again it is Maximus who brings out the connection. When the saints look upon nature, they are not attached to matter in the way that we are—their concern is rather

<sup>4</sup> Evagrius, *Kephalaia gnostica*, 5:12. The translation has been adapted, in the light of Fr André's text, from <http://timiosprodromos2.blogspot.com/2006/01/kgn-va.html>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Letters of Saint Antony the Great*, translated by Derwas J. Chitty (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on the Beatitudes*, 6: 4 (*Ancient Christian Writers*, volume 18, p. 149).



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to find multiple ways of praising the God who appears everywhere and in all things.<sup>7</sup>

The Christian sensitive to ecology thus becomes a person of prayer and praise. So Maximus can add that ‘humanity gathers up the spiritual *logoi* of things as creation’s gifts to honour God’.<sup>8</sup> This same Christian also becomes committed to what I have dared to call *ecological priesthood*: the offering to God on creation’s behalf of the divine traces concealed in creation. Maximus indeed goes so far as to compare three different stages of interior awareness with the three degrees of sacramental priesthood:

He who anoints his intellect for spiritual contest and drives all impassioned thoughts out of it has the quality of a deacon. He who illuminates his intellect with the knowledge of created beings and

<sup>7</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Difficulty* 10. A scholarly English translation of the whole text can be found in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), 94-154.

<sup>8</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Questions to Thalassios*, 51.



utterly destroys false knowledge has the quality of a priest. And he who perfects his intellect with the holy myrrh of the knowledge and worship of the Holy Trinity has the quality of a bishop.<sup>9</sup>

Simeon of Taibouteh,<sup>10</sup> in the course of a commentary on Denys, gives an especially full account of this contemplative attitude which, as it focuses on creation, discovers realities within it that others do not perceive. For Symeon, this contemplative attitude is a 'spiritual contemplation which goes beyond nature':

Everything visible which others see in material fashion, this person sees from now on spiritually [gnostically] in their understanding, through spiritual contemplation. In the interior of their understanding, they walk, in and through their thoughts, across the whole creation: the worlds that once were and are no more, as well as those which are here, the years of the world and their events ... along with the changes that affect all creation. All these realities that others see materially, the spiritual person [the Gnostic] sees spiritually [gnostically] .... They do not look at plants as a farmer would; they do not think of roots as medicines. But everything they see with the eyes of their body they meditate on secretly, in the interior of their understanding, as an aid to spiritual contemplation. This contemplation ... activates and explores the force secretly hidden in all realities, working in them in incomprehensible fashion. The understanding ... is thus enlightened in such a way that it is no longer able to see a material reality without seeing immediately ... the providence of God that is hidden, secretly at work within.

Such people see still further. In and through bodily realities, they can divine the existence of incorporeal beings, in other words the angels:

They see in an immediate and secret way their order and their hierarchy, their motions and the modulations of their joyful 'Holy, holy, holy'. And the person imitates them in so far as their capacities permit, with the help of God.

<sup>9</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Love*, 2:21. Translation from *The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*, volume 2 (London: Faber, 1981), p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> This author is, unfortunately, largely unknown—he lived in the seventh century and was a contemporary of Isaac of Nineveh. I am grateful for help in his regard from Ysabel de Andia.

The vision of creation draws the person into the praise which the angels offer unceasingly to God:

Here grace comes to take them under its shadow ... and they sense the glorious mysteries which will never cease, flowing over the person by this Father who is the source of all lights, shining, attracting the person towards the hidden likeness of His secret goodness.

Symeon then breaks off from Denys' text to explain how it is that something of God is present in all creatures. This he calls 'the divinity which is in us':

It is divine providence which maintains everything, divinises everything, illuminates everything—by its perfect goodness it penetrates everything and sustains everything; it enflames everything with a fire of desire for unity with the divinity that is the source and origin; it draws one above all things, this providence which is more exalted and higher than everything that finds its delight in communion with it. For this divinity which is in us ... has been sown into the foundations of all that is created, and works there in a way that is not delimited. In fact it is written: 'In Him we live, we receive our movement, and we exist'.

It is also something of God in us which,

... mysteriously gives us the courage to recognise and grasp our divinisation. ... In fact, God has fixed in all natures of things, whether immaterial, material or inanimate, something which comes from the good which is beyond all good and beyond all being ... so that, thanks to this goodness which is implanted in all natures, we desire and aspire ardently to the love of the One who is good beyond all good .... For ... this good being which is beyond all goodness ... lives in all without delimitation, beyond word or ideas. All nature desires Him and aspires ardently after Him, thanks to the goodness which is at work in it so that we all aspire to Him.

This limpid text beautifully summarises the doctrine of the traces of God in creation, traces that the sensitised spiritual vision of the believer can discover. The discovery is so convulsive that Evagrius can describe it—as we have already seen—in terms of a new creation

brought about by the spiritual person's own self.<sup>11</sup> Such a person rediscovers the ministry of mediation between the material and spiritual universe that was Adam's before the Fall. By virtue of his double constitution, Adam linked matter and spirit, a ministry which Christ, the new mediator and the new High Priest, restored to humanity through his Incarnation. It follows that everyone who prays has become a minister of this new ecological liturgy, because, as Symeon of Taibouteh puts it, humanity is the link between the heaven and earth:

Person of discernment, know that you are the image of God and the knot that holds the whole of creation together: the realities of heaven and those of the earth. When you bow your head to adore and praise God, all creatures of heaven and earth do this along with you; but when you omit to adore and praise, all creatures reproach you and set themselves against you, and you fall from grace.

It is easy enough to glean from monastic tradition other examples of this respect for creation and for a certain attachment to it. Athanasius' *Life of Antony* tells us that the hermit,

... inspected the land around the mountain, and finding a small, suitable place he ploughed it; and having abundant water from the spring, he planted it.<sup>12</sup>

Bernard tells a postulant that he will discover much more,

... labouring amongst the woods that you ever will amongst books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master.<sup>13</sup>

Hildegard of Bingen, his contemporary, asserts that the first thing she will do when she arrives as Abbess in a monastery is to plant a tree beside the door of her cell that can be her consolation and her best

<sup>11</sup> Evagrius, *Kephalaia gnostica*, 5:2.

<sup>12</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, translated and edited by Robert C. Gregg (London: SPCK, 1980), n. 50.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard to Henry Murdac (Letter 107), in *The Letters of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*, translated by Bruno Scott James (London: Burns and Oates, 1953), 156.

friend. Bruno, in his letter to Raoul le Verd, speaks poetically of the landscape surrounding him in Calabria:

... the hills which gently rise above all around, the secrets of the shady valleys where the rivers flow in abundance, the streams and their sources ... the watered gardens, the trees with their abundant variety of fruits.

Then we have Francis of Assisi with his canticle of the Sun, not to speak of the countless consecrated ascetics who befriended animals: Jerome feeding his lion; Seraphim of Sarov with his bear; a contemporary North American hermit living in Norway feeding a snake that lives under the floor of his cell.

Ancient and modern sources converge here. But perhaps we can leave the last word to Symeon of Taibouteh, who tells us that the moment will come when the person seeing the Creator in the creation,

... will no longer be able to see the humble and limited realities of nature, because they are completely intoxicated with the beauty of God hidden within nature.

### **'Ecological Priesthood'**

As we have already seen, there is nothing naïve about this Spirit-led prayer of praise. Such prayer is well aware that the beauty through which God's splendour shines is destined one day to disappear, or to be transformed through a crisis which the Bible evokes through images of ultimate catastrophe. 'Interior knowledge' of the creation is thus provisional and limited. Even when it is possessed in the highest degree by virtue of a rare grace of the Holy Spirit, it is still knowledge 'through a glass, darkly' (1 Corinthians 13:12):

The knowledge of creatures, however sweet it may be, is only ever the shadow of true knowledge .... It nourishes the spirit while waiting until the spirit can receive a contemplation that is higher.<sup>14</sup>

The reference here is to 'spiritual contemplation' of God's own self, something which excludes any image, whether sensory or mental.

<sup>14</sup> Isaac the Syrian, *Letters*, 4.

When he speaks of it, Isaac the Syrian describes it as a stupor, 'taking the form of flashes within one's thought', with the immediate result that 'the heart explodes with joy'. Isaac expresses a confidence that we can suppose to reflect his own experience:

I know someone not far from here, someone who occasionally tastes something of these flashes. Even if this kind of intuition leaves him immediately, the upsurge of joy and its savour extend for a long time; when the flash is extinguished, the sweetness that comes to him from it remains for a long time diffused within him. Even his body relaxes ... and the sweet joy produced by the stupor at the culminating point leaves its trace in the palate of his understanding. It becomes easy for him thus to scorn the temporal world, since hope from this point on is consoling him in the face of the weariness caused by the present day world that has become so alien to him.<sup>15</sup>

Here, then, is our contemplative. At the beginning, he was in love with the creation. But now he has transcended it, and passed mysteriously into a Beyond where he is being given a gift of tasting God more directly, and of which he retains a very sweet aftertaste in the palate of his heart. There is thus a transition between the contemplation of God that takes place through creation and the one that moves beyond creation. It is here that, according to the ancient wisdom of the Church, one finds the prayer that today we might designate 'ecological'.

Moreover, the rhythm of this prayer seems akin to that of salvation history—a history which, as we have seen, begins with creation, but moves inevitably forward until we make the transition to 'new heavens and a new earth'—a transition marked by universal upheaval. Prayer is anything but a haven of peace and gentleness. It includes experiences of void and moments of temptation. Again, the ancient authors use images from nature to evoke these: the 'nights' of John of the Cross; the 'drougths' of Francis of Sales or Fénelon; the winters of Isaac the Syrian, 'that allow the seed hidden under the earth to rot and develop itself, through the changing, violently shaken winds':

The labours which people of God endure ... serve to illuminate what is hidden in the seeds. The ordinary appearance of a seed at

<sup>15</sup> Isaac the Syrian, *Discourse*, 20: 19-20.

the time of its sowing belies ... the splendour of the varied and glorious colours which will cause it to rise and be seen outside, the splendour that will make it the wonderful vesture and ornament of the very earth that earth has let it develop in its bosom.

Moreover, the experience of dryness in prayer can be likened to that of the seed that has to rot and die in the earth before it can bring forth its fruits.

Such an ordeal is a necessary part of the learning process, one that is always painful, towards the essential condition for prayer: humility. Drawing an entirely 'ecological' analogy, Bernard hymns the mystical benefits of what he calls 'the valley of humility', the humid valleys where the Cistercians love to settle. He sees in them 'the fertile place to which the waters flow as they descend down the craggy mountainsides'.<sup>16</sup> Ruusbroec copies the image, but adds another feature to what has been called the Cistercians' 'mystical geography', once again an ecological feature. He notes that the slopes of a valley reflect the light of the sun towards the bottom, and thus enhance its effect:

Now understand: when the sun shines its rays and its light into a deep valley between two high mountains, and the sun then stands in the zenith of the firmament so that it may shine on the bottom and on the ground of the valley, three things happen there. The valley becomes lighter with the reflection from the mountains, and it becomes more heated, and it becomes more fertile than flat level land.

Something similar happens, it is claimed, when the humble heart places its unfulfilled desires before Christ, because, says Ruusbroec, God's generosity cannot be contained—it has to open out almost in spite of itself:

Then this valley, the humble heart, receives three things: it becomes brighter and more illuminated by grace, and more heated in charity, and more fruitful in perfect virtues and in good works.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Sermon for the Feast of St Benedict, 4, cited in Jean-Baptiste Auberger, 'L'expérience cistercienne: la nature maîtrisée comme expression symbolique du combat spirituel', in *Religion et Écologie*, edited by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 73.

<sup>17</sup> Jan van Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, translated by Helen Rolfsen (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical Press, 1995), p. 45 (about halfway through 'The First Life').



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Whatever we make of these images—winter, night, valley—the person of prayer is in this way taking up not only the exterior rhythms of nature, the succession of the days and seasons, but also a spiritual dynamism that runs deeper: the movement from the creation as it is now towards the transition into the new creation. The movement is painful, and the pain has its effect on the prayer. It is marked both by ‘the sufferings of this present time’ and by a new life viewed only from afar, even when, as Paul puts it, these sufferings ‘are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us’. It is worth hearing the whole passage from Romans 8, because it is particularly enlightening for our subject here:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God .... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. (Romans 8: 19-24)

The groans run through the whole of creation. A few verses later, Paul will link these groanings to the sighs of the Holy Spirit that the Holy Spirit engenders in the hearts of those who pray:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit .... (Romans 8:26-27)

Prayer thus takes up the waiting and the groaning of all creation, and these groans are echoed by the sighs which the Spirit brings forth in the heart of our prayer. A few verses earlier, Paul has revealed something of the secret of one of these sighs, affirming that it is the same Spirit which makes us cry 'Abba, Father', bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.<sup>18</sup>

There is another biblical image which is worth underlining here. Speaking of creation and the end of time, Paul speaks of the tension here in terms of giving birth—something which is inevitably painful, but nevertheless surrounded with a very intense, though hidden, joy. Jesus himself had used this image in speaking of the catastrophes that would occur before the end of the world:

When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. (John 16:21)

The image applies as much to the trials that will come at the world's end as to the trials that come with serious prayer. They cannot be escaped, and one must not run away. Through them we will enter into a joy quite unlike anything else.

It is in these terms that we must understand the ministry or priesthood of prayer to which 2 Peter seems to be alluding. To readers becoming impatient because the Day of the Lord seems to be delayed, the author affirms once again that it will indeed most certainly come 'like a thief'. The heavens will break open; the elements will dissolve; the earth will be consumed. What the author recommends is 'leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God'. The formulation here is significant: the life of holiness and godliness, in other words of prayer, is not just a way of waiting for this transformation of the world; it can also be a means by which the transformation is hastened, a way of working along with the secret

<sup>18</sup> Romans 8:15-16; compare Galatians 4:6.



dynamism of salvation history as it progresses, slowly but surely, towards the 'new heavens and a new earth' (2 Peter 3: 9-13).

2 Peter here converges with another saying of Jesus, from his own discourse about the end of the world. The time of the end is unknown; Jesus tells us to stay awake and not to fall asleep. But he also makes it clear that the tribulations at the end of the world will be alleviated for those who have remained faithful to him:

And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. (Mark 13:20)

Prayer hastens on the end of the world—but it also makes the end more bearable, easier to cope with, and it enables us to come through the experience safe and sound. This is one final aspect of ecological priesthood: it is at the service of the creation's progress in this present time, and of its transfiguration in the new world.

This new world, so the Fathers tell us, is already present among us *in mysterio*—by that they mean a presence that is very active, but at the same time veiled in signs that only the prayer of a spiritual person can detect. It is in this sense that we can say that prayer 'transfigures' creation—secretly, but in very truth. Fr Lev Gillet, speaking of the prayer of Jesus, affirms that this prayer is an instrument or means of transfiguration. The prayer that we speak helps us to transfigure the whole world, even inanimate nature, in Christ:

The material universe murmurs Jesus' name in secret ... and it is part of each Christian's priestly ministry to express this aspiration, to pronounce the name of Jesus over the elements of nature: the stones and the trees, the flowers and the fruits, the mountain and the sea. This ministry enables the secret within things to be fulfilled, and to respond to this long, mute, unconscious waiting. We can transfigure the animal world as well. Jesus, who proclaimed that no sparrow is forgotten by the Father ... did not exclude the animals from his generosity and his gracious influence. Like Adam in Paradise, we are to give a name to all the animals. Whatever name science gives them, we will invoke over each of them the name of Jesus, rendering to each of them their original glory that so often we forget, and recalling that they are created and loved by the Father in Jesus and for Jesus. But it is above all in relationship to other human beings that Jesus' name enables us to exercise a ministry of transfiguration .... Our ministry is a specific, effective

means of transfiguring people in their deepest, divine reality. These men and women we come across in the street, in the factory or at the office, and especially those whom we find irritating or uncongenial—let us move towards them with the name of Jesus in our hearts and on our lips. Let us pronounce this name (which is their true name) over them ... by our silently recognising and adoring Jesus imprisoned in the sinner, the criminal, the prostitute, it is as if we release not only our Master but also his jailers. If we see Jesus in each human being, if we speak the name of Jesus over each human being, we will move through the world with a new vision .... And so, in so far as this lies within us, we will transform the world.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Writing under the pseudonym, 'A Monk of the Eastern Church', in *La prière de Jésus* (Monastery of Chevetogne, 1963), 79-81. An English translation has been made of this text (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).