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The Theological Dignity of Creation/Matter: An ecumenical contribution to Ecotheology

*“God is the beginning, the centre and the end of creation. He is beginning as creator,
centre as providence and end as one who is bigger than the creation” (PG 90, 1088).*

(Editor’s Note: There are some imperfections in the Greek text of this copy which are not in the original.)

Maximus Confessor, one of the biggest teachers of the Christian spirituality and the real father of the Byzantine theology, hides in his cosmic theology a big and up to now still uninvestigated potential concerning the solution of contemporary problems as for example of the ecological crisis. His understanding of the *cosmic holiness of the world* leads to a genuine *orthodox ecological theology*.

In this lecture I would like to share with you some ideas about the orthodox spirituality which constitute the base of a “christian ecology”. Ecotheology has to do with an understanding of environment as God's creation, i.e. as a grace of God and as a material presence of the Creator.

The theology of matter is a component of creation theology. One cannot separate the theology of matter from the theology of mercy. The life in creation emerges from the Holy Spirit as a Spirit of life (Ps 104.29-30: When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground”).

In Maximus Confessor’s thinking the theology of matter is connected with the cosmic ecclesiology. The whole universe lives on the internal regulation to become an icon of God and therefore a *temple of the inhabitation of God*. Irenaeus understood the presence of the Holy Spirit as a realisation of the church: *“ubi Spiritus Dei, illic Ecclesia et omnis gratia. Spiritus autem veritas”*.¹

1. Creatio originalis

Creatio originalis is a main aspect of the Christian faith and encloses a certain view of the world and of the matter, which is neither the body of a divinity Thiamat, like in the Babylonian creation myth "Enuma Elisch"¹ or something else bad, like in Platonism or in Gnosticism. The matter is not preexistent, but God's free invention, God's free creation. The matter and the whole universe is the product of a *creative act of God* and is maintained in existence by God through in *act of conservation*. God conserves and leads the world towards its own trinitarian communion.¹

The first sentence of the Bible regards God as well as his creation. It is God who creates the sky and the earth, i.e. the whole universe:

Genesis 1:1
בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:
2 וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְּהוֹ וְנָהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת
עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:
3 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי אור וַיְהי-אור:

God is the creator of our world. In the New Testament we read in Gospel of John: „At the beginning was the word“. This word is mentioned also in the Old Testament in texts about so-called „creation through the word“: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי אור וַיְהי-אור - And God spoke ... and it became.

In the Christian theology and in particular in the Trinitarian theology one attributes to the Father the creation of the world, to the Son the redemption and to the Holy Spirit the perfection of it. This doesn't mean that one or two of the Trinitarian persons are not present in creation, redemption or completion. The trinitarian formula: „God the Father creates in the Son through the Holy Spirit“ underlines that *“opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt”*.

Maximus Confessor „a great figure in Orthodox theology of creation“¹ is the “cosmic theologian”² of divine rationality. According to him the entire creation is based on God's thinking and wisdom. Without God's thoughts there would be neither creation nor diversity in the world. Creation means an ontological becoming of God's ideas. God thinks and wishes a creation which has its model in the person of the divine Logos, who is the hypostatic, absolute reason. God is present in his creation through his Logos, i.e. through the *divine logoi of creation* who are coming into existence through the Logos and exist towards the Logos. The divine logoi are a radiance of the divine Reason, “mirrors” of the divine Logos.³ That's why

¹ E. Theotrikoff, *Living in God's Creation. Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology*, New York 2009, 31.

² P. M. Blowers, R. L. Wilken, *Introduction*, in: idem. (ed.), *On the cosmic mystery of Jesus Christ. St. Maximus the Confessor*, New York 2003, 17.

³ D. Staniloae, *Viata si scrierile Sfintului Maxim Marturisitorul*, in: *Filocalia*, II, Sfintul Maxim Marturisitorul, Bucuresti 2004, 21.

“the heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 18, 2).

This spiritual vision of the universe as existing on account of the divine architectural logoi is centred on the triune God as source and transcendental destiny (telos) of creation. “Creation is brought forth into existence so that it might reveal God and participate in the richness of his being”.⁴

The *movement of the world* as the beginning of creation means a diversification of the rationality of the Logos in many rationalities. „If the cosmos was created through the Logos and Logos means rationality, than the entire cosmos is based upon an immanent rationality.”⁵ The inner structure of the universe is *the rationality of the trinitarian God*. „*The immanent structure of the cosmos is a reflection of the innertrinitarian structure*”⁶ and in intimate communion with the Trinity. The One Rationality of God is the *interior matrix of the entire creation* in its diversity, because also in the Trinity there is a unity in diversity. The entire creation is in its divine logoi a reflection of the Holy Trinity. This theology of the divine logoi overcomes deism and pantheism at the same time.

God’s grace endwells in material things and beings, so that everything is participating in God. The divine logoi have a natural movement which cannot be separated from the providential energies of God. The movement of the world is an expression of an inner aspiration to fulfillment. The divine logoi expresses also the efficient power of God who is working in the world from inside. From outside he is acting as the ultimate scope and the attractive aim of creation.⁷ The creation as product of the trinitarian God is called to an *eternal life* in communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This communion has to be free, i.e. a perfect *communion of love*. This is the reason why Maximus Confessor’s Theology is **anthropocentric**. For him there is no love without freedom. The freedom of the entire universe is connected with the freedom of the human being. As a free being, as “συνδεσμοσ τις φυσικος” and “μυχροχοσμοσ” the human being has the vocation to ascend with the entire world to the creator, i.e. to an interpersonal communion. The main aim of matter is to become vehicle of love, to be a transparent presence of God’s grace. God loves the world, his creation and takes in his eternal communion a matter which is transformed by the mystery of love.

In the orthodox tradition the inner rationality of the creation is also a sign of God’s immanence. Divine rationality of the world means at the same time presence of the uncreated

⁴ D. Staniloae, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, Volume Two: The World: Creation and Deification*, Massathusets 2000, 113.

⁵ D. Popescu, *Esenta sintezei dogmatice a Pr. Prof. D. Staniloae*, in: ST 35, 7-8, 1983, 584.

⁶ D. Popescu, *Esenta sintezei dogmatice a Pr. Prof. D. Staniloae*, in: ST 35, 7-8, 1983, 584.

⁷ D. Staniloae, *Viata si scrierile Sfantului Maxim Mart*

energies of God.⁸ The creation can become more rational, more vivid, more transparent, if it is transformed through God's uncreated energies. Divine rationality does not mean something exclusively intellectual, because it is an expression of God's absolute love. The presence of the uncreated energies of God in creation is the source of life, of the eternal life. That means, that if someone or something becomes an *oikos tou Theou*, a "Temple of the Holy Spirit", it reflects the beauty and experiences the light of the eternal divine life. Maximus Confessor speaks about different "incarnations" or embodiments of the Logos: in the logoi of the world, in the spiritual meanings (logoi) of Scripture, in Jesus Christ and in the faithful.⁹

Dumitru Staniloae, one of the most important translators and interprets of Maximus Confessor's Theology, describes the creation in its very beginning as a transparent matter, which irradiated the divine life and divine beauty. The sin of man was the reason, why the creation lost its transparency and became more and more opaque. Opacity means rejection of communion, rejection of love and at least rejection of life. If a biological system becomes more and more isolated from the others it dies. Life is and remains „communication in communion“. Eternal life is participation in the „supreme structure of love“, i.e. in the innertrinitarian communion. Authentic communion can be experienced as an energetical field of the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit and is an anticipation of the eschatological life.

The material creation has a spiritual dimension because is the work of God, who wants to endwell in it. "God is restless in his Spirit until he finds rest in us and in his world".¹⁰ The Orthodox Church cultivates a sentiment of sacred, of holy matter especially in the sacraments. The sacramental life is a restoration of creation, the medium for the experience of God. To see the creation in its relation with the creator means to rediscover the deepness of the world and its real sense.

The created world has its aim and fulfillment not in itself: "Nothing that comes into being is its own end, since it is not self-caused. (...) Nothing that came into being is perfect in itself and complete".¹¹ God is the τῆλο of the entire existence and movement. The trinitarian God is the origine and the goal of creation. In his divine wisdom he creates all things visible and invisible ex nihilo out of nothing.¹² The creatures are „parts (moira) of God, because they have the hypostatic Rationality of God as principle and cause. The existence, the movement is for Maximus Confessor a proof of participation (metousia) in God.¹³ To be created by God

⁸ D. Staniloae, *Introducerea traducatorului*, in: Sf. Maxim Marturisorul, Ambigua, Bucuresti 1983, 29.

⁹ P. M. Blowers, R. L. Wilken, *Introduction*, 21.

¹⁰ J. Moltmann, *The Source of Life. The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, London 1997, 41.

¹¹ *The cosmic mystery of Jesus Christ*, 48f.

¹² Maximus Confessor, PG 90, 1048A; PG 91, 1080A.

¹³ Maxim Marturisorul, *Ambigua*, Bucuresti 1983, 81.

means according to him to participate in God, in his rationality, in his will (Acts 17, 28). God made all things „by his Word and by his Wisdom“. ¹⁴ At the beginning was the Logos so that “a logos precede the creation of each of the beings (...) a logos preceded the creation of human beings, a logos preceded everything that receives its becoming from God”. ¹⁵

The logoi of the world are thoughts of God which become existent with the creation. God’s logoi of beings manifest the creating will of God as well as the meaning and the purpose of the existence: “Nothing that came into being is perfect in itself nor has it purpose in itself”. ¹⁶

The divine 8 $\bar{\cong}4$ (reasons) are a presence of the divine 7 $\bar{\cong}H$ as sign that the being has a divine purpose, finality and foundation. The 8 $\bar{\cong}4$ are at the one hand responsible for the individuality of beings and things at the other hand are ontologically connected with the 7 $\bar{\cong}H$ of God: “The one Logos is many logoi and the many logoi are one. Because the One goes forth out of goodness into individual being creating and preserving them, the One is many. Moreover the many are directed toward the One and are providentially guided in that direction”. ¹⁷

The entire creation is penetrated by the energies of God, so that “the Holy Spirit is not absent in any creature especially those which have logos”. ¹⁸ “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17, 28). Thanks to this *christological* and *pneumatological* understanding of the presence of God in creation Maximus Confessor underlines the divine dignity, the positive value of physical and material world. The *creation* as mysterious presence of the Logos and of the Holy Spirit can be understood as a *revelation of God*. God is to the soul what the soul is to the body. The material world is God’s intention, God’s will and God’s gift made by the creative Logos and the wisdom that transcends all wisdom. God “permeates all things and gives at the same time independent existence to all things in himself”. ¹⁹

2. Creatio continua, creation nova: basic aspects of Holiness

Maximus Confessor links the *holiness* with the *presence of Jesus Christ*. H. Urs von Balthasar pointed to the fact that for him “*ontology and cosmology is extensive Christology*”, so that the hypostatic synthesis is to be understood as God's first thought about the world. Jesus Christ who lives in cosmos irradiates everywhere his light because he integrates all logoi of the universe.

¹⁴ Maximus Confessor, *Ambiguorum Liber*, PG 91, 1080A.

¹⁵ Maximus Confessor, *Ambiguorum Liber*, PG 91, 1080A.

¹⁶ PG 91, 1072C.

¹⁷ PG 91, 1068AB.

¹⁸ Maxim Marturisorul, *Raspunsuri catre Talasie*, Bucuresti 2004, 65.

¹⁹ P. M. Blowers, R. L. Wilken (ed.), *The cosmic mystery of Jesus Christ*, 66.

This Christological dimension of the holiness is complemented by Maximus Confessor with the *pneumatological dimension*. Christ carries the Holy Spirit through the unity of the essence, so that he can give him to the world. The sanctification of the human beings and of the whole creation occurs by the architectural work of the Holy Spirit: “διὰ τῆς ἐργατικῆς...αὐτοῦ τοῦ πνεύματος”.

By the baptism grows the mysterious body of Christ and spreads out the mystery of the incarnation of the logos: “Then the word of God and God would always like to work and in all the mystery of his incarnation”. Christ united the nature of the world to himself in a single hypostasis without division and without confusion (mixing). His incarnation, death and resurrection are the beginning of the new creation. *We can speak about a protological, a soteriological and an eschatological dignity of matter*. The entire cosmos has got a *trinitarian dignity* by its creation, redemption and completion. The matter exists only “by the original and vital inbreathing” of God (Gen 2,7) and as potential house of the Trinitarian God. Life is an infusion of God’s grace. The matter has not only a christological dignity due to the enfleshment of the Logos but also a primordial dignity of God’s vital inbreathing and eschatological dignity as house of God. Maximus Confessor understood the eschatological destiny of creation as ineffably communion with God, a life-giving infusion with God’s divine presence.

Not only the soul but also the matter is inbreathed with the vital breath of the Holy Spirit. The matter has “the divine and ineffable honor of dwelling with God”.²⁰ In the eschatological life “God might be through all and in all things” (Eph 4,6) “just as the soul naturally indwells both the whole of the body and each individual part without diminishing itself”.²¹

The baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is in this sense the access to the divine life: “divinum regenerationis lavacrum illuminati, adoptionem in Spiritu a deodorant consequi meruistis”.

According to Maximus the human being was created from the beginning in God's image namely in order to attain the godlikeness. This positive and existential dynamism of the mankind was perverted by the sin as an unreasonable movement - ἐλαγιστος κ... γνησις - and was restored in Christ. God foreknew the fall – that’s why we cannot speak about a *felix culpa*! “He who, by the sheer inclination of his will, established the beginning of all creation, seen and unseen, before all the ages and before that beginning of created beings, had an ineffably good plan for those creatures”.²²

²⁰ P. M. Blowers, R. L. Wilken (ed.), *The cosmic mystery*, 94.

²¹ *Idem*, 101.

²² *Idem*, 115.

Creatio continua - Incarnation as a restoration of the creation

“The incarnation of God is the centre, the sense and the aim of the world“.¹ Not the sin Adams, but the state of the world as it has originated from the thinking and creative act of God leads to Christ. Everybody was created towards Christ and was founded on him. The incarnation of Christ would have taken place also without the sin of Adam. Maximus Confessor describes the mystery of God's incarnation as foolishness and as weakness of God. It is the foolishness and the weakness of an absolute love. Besides this he underlines that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Cor 1.25).

Maximus Confessor connects the baptism with the restoration of the dynamism which were from beginning God's purposes for his creation. It concerns the dynamism of *being* (εἶναι) to *well-being* (εἰ => εἶναι) and *eternal well-being* (ἐκ εἰ εἶναι). The baptism lends the person towards a movement in the rationality of the everlasting existence, i.e. towards tie participation in the life of the resurrection. That's why Maximus Confessor describes the baptism as an essential achievement of the soteriological work of Christ, namely as a *restoration of God's image - imago Dei*. By his incarnation Christ has not only transformed his human nature, but allowed at the same time to the entire humanity a new *way of being* – *tropos hyparxeos*, a new origin of her existence, namely the *second birth from the Holy Spirit*. Through the baptism the person receives the grace of God, the adoption by the Holy Spirit, the pure “dress of the immortality“, “incorruptionis tunica“, “χιτώνα της φθοαρσίας”. This holiness which becomes accessible to the person with the baptism is not exterior, but internal. This appears when Maximus Confessor calls the baptised person “ἡ οἰκος Θεου”.

Maximus makes a distinction between three births of man: biological or bodily birth (εἶναι), birth through baptism (πνευματικ' γέννησις¹ - εἰ εἶναι) and birth through resurrection (αἰ εἰ εἶναι; PG 91, 1316A).

He puts the *holiness of the church* in connection with its role in the *restoration of the dynamism of the creation by Christ in the Holy Spirit* as integration of the creation in the God's community. It concerns *the new life of the community with God* which begins with the rebirth from the Holy Spirit. This life is a God-formed life (θεοειδοῦς ζωῆς) – “vitae nobis Dei aemulae rationem ostendit”, because as members of the church the human beings become one with the body of Christ (1 Chor 12.27). Outgoing from this unity of the body of Christ Maximus Confessor affirms the *realized eschatology*. “The kingdom of God is among them”

(Joh 14, 2) because the Holy Spirit himself embodies the empire of God: “καὶ βασιλεια τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ Πατριζὸς οὐσιωδῶς ἴσῳσιν ἐφῆστωσα, τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον”.²³

There is no resurrection without Pentecost and the secret of Pentecost consists according to Maximus Confessor in the “immediate union” between God and his creation. Maximus Confessor understands God as a beginning (ἔρχη) and an end or aim (τέλος/σκοπος) of every movement.

Eucharistic holiness and eucharistic ethos

The *participating in the divine, everlasting life* occurs according to Maximus Confessor mainly within the Eucharist which fulfils everything with a divine strength and leads the whole nature “to the resurrection of life“. The Eucharist is the “bread of the life and strength“, “divine food“ to the immortality of nature, “profusion of divine goods“. The life of the church is holy and divine, because in Christ “habitat plenitudo divinitatis corporaliter“, so that “in nobis vere per gratiam habitat plenitudo divinitatis”.

How does this *inhabitation of the divine fullness* take place in the person exactly?

Maximus Confessor explains this by using the concept *περιχόρεσις* – reciprocal inhabitation that became central in his theology. According to the degree of faith a person is a carrier of Christ. This inhabitation means at the same time the fulfilment of the longing of the person and the return to the community with the origin of the existence. The person thereby finds his dynamic rest in God as *anticipation of the completion of his existence*. The Perichoresis as a way to the Theosis is described by Maximus Confessor mainly in his theological endeavours for authentic hermeneutics of baptism and Communion, those two sacraments which he treats thematically.

The church as a community with Christ meant Participating in the “spring of the life“, i.e. Participating in the last aim of the existence. It is the way to the apotheosis of the person and the whole creation and opens the knowledge by the participation in the internal life of the Trinity, a sort of experienced knowledge – “κατ’ ἐνέργειαν γινώσκω”.

The holiness of the church as a completion of the creation

The church has an eschatological dimension according to Maximus Confessor. This leads to the resurrection and to the everlasting life and contributes therefore to the restoration of the universe. Maximus Confessor understands the redemption work of Christ not as a bare return to the paradise, but as a perfection of the state in paradise. The resurrection exceeds the

²³ S. Maximi Confessoris, Orationis Dominicae brevis expositio, PG 90, 884.

heavenly joy because it encloses the inexpressible *apotheosis* of the nature by the mercy, i.e. the real participating in the trinitarian life of God. The mercy of the Holy Spirit raises the nature to the participation in the divine life, i.e. in order to understand the divine rationality and to see God face to face.

The focus of Maximus' Ecclesiology lies not in the analysis of the hierarchical structure of the church, but rather in the *cosmic dimension of the sacrality*. The holiness depends on the presence of the Holy Spirit. The intensity of this presence determines the degree of the holiness of the church. Typically for Maximus Confessor is the connection between holiness and rationality. Where deliberate use of rationality takes place, there is also the Holy Spirit: **“Spirit Sanctus a nullo abest eorum que in rerum natura sunt: idque maxima from iis, quae ratione praedita sunt”**. The Holy Spirit gives us the light of knowledge which is rooted in divine love. The true knowledge of God which is possible in the space of the church means an *ecstatic union with God*. The love purify the reason, so that this irradiates the divine light. If the reason unites by love and prayer with God, she becomes philanthropic and gentle. Consequently the church is holy because she irradiates the light of God's love and God's peace.

If Maximus Confessor shows the church as an icon of the universe, he underlines the fact that the holiness of the church cannot be separated from the creation. The *relational ontology* of the church encloses that the church fulfils no end in itself, but is there for the welfare of the person and the world, so that she has as a way to *γνωσις φανχυτος*²⁴ a cosmic dimension. Maximus Confessor sees the ontology in connection with the *cosmic ecclesiology*. His *theology of the movement* of existence to the well-existence and, finally, to the eternal well-existence presumes that the whole existence should reach to the community with God, so that this cosmic community has an ecclesiale dimension. The person and the whole universe disposes of the internal appeal *to become a church*, i.e. to lead an *ecclesial existence*. This reborn existence anticipates the everlasting life of the resurrection and the rest in the fullness of the divine, trinitarian life.

On account of his logos cosmology Maximus Confessor understands the world in correspondence to the structure of the church with the sky as a Hieratikon and the earth as a Naos. This approach includes in my opinion an ecological meaning because the *cosmic ecclesiology* has a direct *ecological dimension*. If one considers the world as church of God, the universe wins a transcendental, untouchable dignity. One who destroys the world makes himself guilty of the sin against the inherent divine rationality of creation. The theological

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, 122.

dignity of the world and all creatures is based on the presence of the Logos in the logoi of the created beings (λογoi την οντων). The incarnation of the Logos begins, so to speak, already with his inexpressible presence in λογoi of things. "Contemplation of the logoi in creation (θεωρ...α φυσικ») belongs to the work of the Spirit in man sanctification and deification". A christian sees consequently the world with the eyes of God and respects the other creatures who are escorted by the same longing for eternal well-being. The person reaches to the truth of his existence if he irradiates the love of God. The theology of λογoi of the creation encloses a positive perception of the world, as long as the aim of the creation exists in their γνωσις ἐσυχυτος²⁵ with God. Every reasonable creature disposes of the Immanence of the divine logoi and can be described therefore as a part of God. The Λογοι of creation are "bearers of the divine intentionality" to the union between God and creation. This dynamism provided in the creation act was realised in the incarnation of the Logos.

The sacramentale structure of the universe

"The world has a sense if it is understood as a gift of God for the people. The universe is *the vineyard*, that God gives to the people (...) everything is a God's gift, the sign of his love".¹ By the created world God invites us to the dialogue of love and divides to us at the same time to the stream of his divine love, goodness, mercy and mercy. To hold the fluent of love alive means to answer to God's love in a eucharistic manner. The world is not an object of possession for the *dominium terrae*, but already an invitation to a dialogue of love, i.e. to an interpersonal communion with God and with each other. The material world is a field of dialogue between creator and creature as well as between creatures. The matter is not looked therefore more than a wall, but rather as a bridge to love and communication. The *eucharistic world view* contributes to overcoming the ecological crisis and promotes a culture of love, of reconciliation and healing communication.

This cosmic ecclesiology and Eucharistic spirituality emphasise the meaning of an *ecological world view* as well as a *culture of the reconciliation and the difference*. In the centre of this *theology of the cosmic holiness of creation* stands a liturgical world view which promotes a *culture of dialogue*, of acceptance of the other as an expression of God's rationality.

²⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, 122.

¹ In the Babylonian creation myth "Enuma Elish" Thiamat is murdered by Marduk and is created from her body of the skies and the earth.

² D. Staniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology. The Experience of God*, vol. 1 *Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, Massachusetts in 1998.

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The "gnostic" Centurien of Maximus Confessor*, 135.

⁴ D. Staniloae, *Cateva trasaturi caracteristice ale Ortodoxiei*, in: *MO* 7-8, in 1970, 740.