

Two Bishops, Two Encyclicals, Two Local Churches

Remarks at the 6th Annual Orthodox/Roman Catholic Vespers for the Care of Creation by the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago

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Saints Peter and Paul Greek Orthodox Church, Glenview, Illinois
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On behalf of His Eminence, Cardinal Blase Cupich allow me to thank Your Eminence, Metropolitan Nathanael for the gracious invitation to the Cardinal to be here tonight. Cardinal Cupich regrets that he is not able to be present. He has asked me to represent the Archdiocese of Chicago and bring his greetings to Your Eminence and this ecumenical gathering.

This event has a unique history. On August 6, 2015, His Holiness, Pope Francis sent a letter to the two cardinals responsible for promoting Justice and Peace, and Christian Unity. Such letters are usually a formal way of announcing a new initiative and to indicate that the idea came from the Holy Father. The August letter was unusual in that it credited the idea of instituting a World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation to another bishop and indeed to another apostolic church. The letter begins:

Sharing the concern of my beloved brother, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, for the future of creation ... and at the suggestion of his representative, Metropolitan John of Pergamum, who took part in the presentation of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* on care for our common home, I wish to inform you that I

have decided to institute in the Catholic Church the “World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation” which, beginning this year, is to be celebrated on September 1st as has been the custom in the Orthodox Church for some time.¹

Metropolitan John of Pergamum, also known as John Zizioulas, is among the best-known theologians of the Orthodox Church. It was a rare thing for an Orthodox theologian to offer theological commentary on a papal encyclical at the official Vatican press conference. Metropolitan John offered a rich reflection on the theology, spirituality, and ecumenism of Pope Francis’ encyclical.

The Church exists to conserve and transmit the faith received from the apostles to successive generations. As Metropolitan Nathanael knows, each time a bishop stands before the baptized, he has a unique opportunity of confirming his brethren in the faith. Tonight, I want to offer you one insight I learned from Orthodox theology which relates to conserving and transmitting the faith. It is the idea of reception.

This Orthodox idea is simple, yet at the same time profound. It says that the expression of the faith grows and develops as we live in union with Christ. The way we know that a new expression is authentic is when a bishop begins to teach it, and the expression is repeated by other bishops, who “receive” it as a genuine expression of what the Holy Spirit is speaking to the churches. We can study how the expression of the two natures of Christ developed from Nicaea to Chalcedon. Usually the term

¹ Francis, “Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Establishment of the ‘World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation’” (August 6, 2015).
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150806_lettera-giornata-cura-creato.html (accessed August 20, 2020)

“reception” refers to an ecumenical council affirming and clarifying the teaching of the previous council. But reception can also apply to individual bishops affirming the ordinary teaching of other bishops.

Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios formally taught about the care of creation in his groundbreaking encyclical in 1989. This was repeated in the teaching of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Other bishops and religious leaders echoed this teaching. Then, in 2015, the Bishop of Rome and Pope of the Catholic Church, repeated the Patriarch’s teaching and applied it to the Catholic Church. The Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago began this annual service to foster the mutual reception of the teaching of the Patriarch and the Pope.

The ecumenical movement is first about spiritual ecumenism. An early prayer warned Christians to “lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions” which lead to hatred and prejudice and stand in the way of the witness of the Gospel.² Listening to Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew I would propose that tonight’s spiritual challenge is to realize the great danger all of humanity is in due to our abuse of God’s creation.

The care of creation is now common teaching between our two churches. Let me conclude by quoting Metropolitan John’s clear description of this common teaching. He said:

² “Prayer for the Unity of the Church” in *The Proposed Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 818.

The threat posed to us by the ecological crisis similarly bypasses or transcends our traditional divisions. The danger facing our common home, the planet in which we live, is described in the Encyclical in a way leaving no doubt about the existential risk we are confronted with. This risk is common to all of us regardless of our ecclesiastical or confessional identities. Equally common must be our effort to prevent the catastrophic consequences of the present situation. Pope Francis' Encyclical is a call to unity – unity in prayer for the environment, in the same Gospel of creation, in the conversion of our hearts and our lifestyles to respect and love everyone and everything given to us by God.³

These words clearly describe the ecumenical and spiritual reasons we are here tonight.

Let us pray that this service of vespers and the lecture following it might lead us to such a conversion of heart and lifestyle.

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³ John Zizioulas, A Comment on Pope Francis' Encyclical Laudato Si' (Rome: August 6, 2015) <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/a-comment-on-pope-francis-encyclical-laudato-si-> Accessed August 20, 2020