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## **Creation· the end of ages (part 2)**

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The greatest ecological disaster described in the Scriptures is the flood during Noah's times; it took place because "the wickedness of man was great in the earth,

and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6, 5). Man rebelled absolutely against God and against anything which had to do with his spiritual existence. Because of the prevailing wickedness those days, which was the result of man abusing his freedom, the Lord is forced to say: "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh" (Genesis 6, 3).

By 'flesh' it is meant 'man's carnal attitude, his beastly and full of passions life'. Thus the flood was not imposed by the Lord as a punishment but was caused by the comprehensive rebellion of mankind. There is a similar situation in the case of Sodom and Gomorra. In the conversation between Abraham and God, it is revealed that not even ten righteous people could be found in these cities, which would have aborted their destruction (Genesis 18, 20-33). However, in the case of Nineveh, peoples' repentance annulled the city's destruction (Jonah 3, 10). That is, man's good intention cooperates with God's will to shape history. The Lord is not the Judge, the Critic. We must not view the Lord through the prism of legal justice.

In the Old Testament we have many passages regarding the end of ages, describing the signs of those times in the writings of the prophets: Amos, Joel, Nahum, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. However, Jesus, the only Savior of mankind, gives an account of the hardships and the destruction which will precede the end of ages. This has been handed over to us by Evangelist Matthew, the Lord's disciple and the Evangelists Marc and Luke. Similarly Peter and Paul, the Apostles, inform the faithful about the circumstances which will prevail during the end of ages and Christ's Second Coming.

If one studies the passages in the Old and the New Testament which we have mentioned, he will recognize that during those days there will be a general apostasy similar but greater than Noah's times, since the 'son of lawlessness', Antichrist, will reign for a short time. The last book of the New Testament, the Revelation, describes the events which will take place during the end of ages. However, because it is a prophetic book, it remains indecipherable to the many, sealed with 'seven seals' (Revelation, 5, 1). Only those who themselves possess the prophetic charisma are able to comprehend other prophets; therefore, the only authentic explanation of the Revelation is given by the Fathers of our Church.

We will not give an explanation of the Revelation, here; neither will we refer to the specific events mentioned, whether they have already taken place, or determine the time they will happen, since this does not have such significance for theology, neither affects our salvation. Because of its contents, this book attracts the interest of both the faithful and the heathen and intrigues them to examine it. For instance, from 1970 to 1987, 700 papers were presented on the issue. One can only imagine

how many more presentations were written after the Gulf war in 1991. We, however, will only focus on the main figure of the Revelation, Christ, 'the Alpha and the Omega' (Rev. 22. 11) and the main event which is the establishment of God's kingdom, namely the regeneration whereby 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev. 21, 1) will be established.

The forthcoming ecological disasters will be take place not because God will inflict them but because man is abusing his freedom. The human race will become perfectly irrational and there will be a general apostasy. The cause of such irrationality, partly seen today, is man's unclean mind. St Maximus, the Confessor, stresses that the misuse of thoughts causes the abuse of things (St Maximus, The Confessor: Chapters on Love 2, 78). Indeed, man during the end of ages will be constantly abusing things as well as the world itself.

God will not inflict punishment. We must abandon the notion of a vindictive God. "God is love" (A John 4, 8). "Word became flesh" (John 1, 14) so "that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2, 14). The purpose and the cause of the divine incarnation, as well as Christ's emptying Himself on the Cross, was to abolish death, corruption and the Devil, who is the father of deceit and of all sin. According to Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) Christ, through His sacrifice on the Cross, does not gratify divine justice but "saves the sheep that went astray" (Matthew 18, 11), reconciles man with God and grants him deification. St John Chrysostom says that the Lord was never vindictive but it is us, humans, who are spiteful. The Lord does not need anything. He does not offer salvation in order to gain something. He offers salvation because he loves man; and He loves him because He wants to. He saves man by the free and operative love of the body of Christ. In other words, He saves us through His Church.

In the Church one experiences the end of ages as time at hand. He experiences the Kingdom of God through the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Particularly during the Holy Eucharist, the entire creation participates and is being offered to the loving Lord for 'the unity of all' and not just the faithful, the saints or the angels. The Divine Liturgy is not only about the salvation of the soul. The priest or the congregation does not supplicate for the Lord's grace in order to sanctify his soul alone but he also prays for his material needs and for the rest of the creation. "For favorable weather, an abundance of the fruits of the earth and temperate seasons. ...For travelers by land, sea, and air, for the sick, the suffering, the captives, and for their salvation.... For peace of the whole world". By praying for the whole world during the Divine Liturgy and by giving thanks for the creation, it is demonstrated that the

world has never stopped being God's world. It also indicates that who we are, what we do, the natural environment in which we live in, can and must go through the hands of the priest as 'anaphora' to the Lord, so that it does not remain deformed by sin but is regenerated into 'being good always', as St Maximus the Confessor says.

Whoever has been initiated into the mystery of the Divine Liturgy experiences it with awareness and full consciousness and comprehends that the eternal life will be an incessant Divine Liturgy, a feast of the resurrection. After His Second Coming, Christ, 'the Lamb' according to the Revelation, will reign jointly with all the saints and all those saved. According to St Nicholas Kavalas: "He will be a God amongst gods; beautiful amongst the beautiful, leading the chorus" (St Nicholas Kavalas: On life with Christ). Man, as a person, can never become a non-being or be led into a non-existence. St Simon, the New Theologian, says that the Second Coming will take place primarily for the people who gratify their passions and live in sin and not for the saints who already experience the presence of Christ (St Simon the New Theologian: Moral issues).

Hell and Paradise do not exist because of God but because of man. Indeed, Hell and Paradise exist as two ways of living but God did not cause their creation. God Himself is paradise for the saints and those saved; the same God is hell for the sinners. That is, both the righteous and the sinners will perceive God and will have their nature regenerated as an eternal entity, but the sinners will not be able to participate in the bliss and glory of the Lord. In other words, human will and freedom will not be restored; the Lord will not infringe upon man's freedom. Righteousness indicates that the soul is healthy; sin is a sign of disease. Therefore, it is not God who punishes; rather, man has not been healed during his abode on earth.

In His Second Coming, Christ will not only restore human nature but the entire creation. Since the rest of the creation fell because of man, it will be regenerated by the sanctified man. When man attains sanctification, his surrounding environment is also sanctified. We find many such examples in the lives of the saints. A lion was attending the needs of St Gerasimos of Jordan; St Seraphim of Sarov was feeding a bear as if it was a tame lamb; elder Paisios, the Hagiorite, was known to be keeping company with snakes and other wild animals.

Along with the resurrection and regeneration of man, nature will also be absolved of corruption. According to St Simon the New Theologian, nature will become non-material and eternal. "During the regeneration, nature will become a non-material abode, beyond human perception" (St Simon, The New Theologian: Moral issues, 1, 5).

God has created time, space and substance "from what was not"; these will be regenerated into eternity "beyond perception" in the kingdom of God; they will be eternal, immaterial and incorruptible. All these gifts are granted to man by the love of the Lord. However, if man is to receive the Lord's love, his heart must be open to Him. And that which will open a person's heart is humility. The more humble one becomes, the closer he comes to the Lord. The more one comprehends the Lord, the more humble he becomes. At the same time, the more selfish one is the further away from God he turns. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4, 6). If man properly appreciates the love of the Lord, he will be enthused to fight "the good fight" (A. Timothy 6, 12) so that not only he will attain eternal life in the kingdom of God but he will also show his love for his brethren and his respect for the environment, while still alive.

The righteous always respect the environment. St Silouan, the Athonite, writes: "Our heart must sympathize and not only love our brethren but also ache for every being, for everything the Lord has created. Behold! This is a green leaf and you have cut it off for no reason. Even though it is not a sin, how can I say it, it causes an ache; the heart which has learnt to love, feels even for the leaf and for the entire creation" (Arch. Sofrony: St Silouan, the Athonite). Blessed Elder Joseph, the Hesychast, viewed nature as an instrument which gives thanks to the Lord. He wrote: "It is nice here, after spring-that is, from Easter up to the Feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Lady in August. The pretty rocks and the rest of the creation carry on theologizing, as theologians without voice- each with its own voice or its lack of it. If you touch a small twig, it immediately cries out very loudly with its natural fragrance: 'Ouch! You don't see me, but you've hurt me!' And so on...Everything has its own voice. As soon as there is a breeze, everything moves in harmony with each other and offer melodic praises to the Lord" (Elder Joseph: An expression of Monastic experience).

He who has been cleansed from passions through divine Grace and has attained illumination "is watchful and somber in every circumstance". He becomes a perfect person and is able to deal successfully with the issues of our times, especially with that of the environment. However reading from the Scriptures and the Holy Fathers, he recognizes that one day this world will end when Christ will regenerate

it during His Second Coming. According to the Revelation, He will regenerate it into the city of the Lord, where the temple and the light will be the Lamb Himself (Revelation, 21, 22-23).

Let us, therefore, be spiritually prepared at every moment of our lives; so that we are be able to cry along with St John, the Theologian and writer of the Revelation: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation, 22, 20).

*source: Translated by Olga Konari Kokkinou from the Greek edition: Αρχιμ. Εφραίμ Βατοπαιδινού Καθηγουμένου Ι. Μ. Μ. Βατοπαιδίου, Αθωνικός Λόγος, Ιερά Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου, Άγιον Όρος 2010.*