

Creation: Being Good Stewards

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I have been asked to write about how, as Orthodox Christians, we may be able to strive to be good stewards of God's creation whether as members of our parish or our households. It would be impossible in a short article like this to cover everything but I hope that by offering a few pointers, we can better live up to our responsibilities on this important issue.

Firstly, however, let us look at this task from a liturgical perspective. Before they fell from grace, Adam and Eve were called by God to care for His garden by naming the plants, tilling the soil, caring for the animals and offering all their efforts back to Him. God loved walking and talking with them in the Garden of Eden. In the Orthodox Church, we continue that task of offering back at every Divine Liturgy all our efforts, including creation, to God. It happens right after the Consecration. We also often begin our prayers by calling upon the Holy Spirit "who art everywhere and fillest all things" to continue the work of creation. Further, through our baptism, we intercede in a priestly way for all of creation. Many of the Church's liturgical prayers reflect these sacred tasks. In the same way, its calendar of the saints and seasons are full of references to creation. The Orthodox Church also calls us to maintain a proper balance between our relationship with God and His creation through prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

In the season of Great Lent coming up, the Orthodox Church calls us to be prepared for the great event of Pascha. While, like the virgins of the Bridegroom Service, we should reflect on how our souls may have fallen short in their preparedness to be ready for Christ, we should also not forget to do so in practical ways. One way is to give to those who may be facing hunger because of the pandemic. A third way is to strive to be responsible stewards of all of God's creation because that is no less sacred than the other tasks.

We may ask: what can I do as single person to improve the environment? Every little step helps! Remember that the population of this country is 330 million. If the great majority of people were to change wasteful and polluting practices, it would help a lot. Here, therefore are some practical pointers.

1. Strive to keep the Orthodox Fasts as best as possible. The reduction in meat consumption does a lot to reduce our carbon footprint because it takes 11 times more energy to produce the same amount of meat as it does for produce and recent global surveys have shown that the demand for beef has caused 60% of deforestation to make way for pastureland!
2. Be careful in making choices about purchasing such items as fuel efficient cars, heating systems etc. but also soybean, coffee and palm oil products. Huge tracts of forests are being destroyed to make way for their production.

3. Stop using Styrofoam cups because they take centuries to decompose, whereas paper ones take only weeks. Parishes should have stopped using them by now.
4. Make the effort to get reusable bags for shopping instead of single-use plastic bags and try to minimize using plastics in general. Ask your parish to use water filters instead of plastic bottles. You should be aware these days of how much they damage sea life. There are many short videos about this. Here is one:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA9O9YUbQew>.
5. Has an energy audit been done on your parish building? They are relatively inexpensive and both New York and New Jersey will put any savings gained from improving your building to their costs. Here are the links for each state. <https://www.nyserda.ny.gov/All-Programs/Programs/Energy-Audit-Programs>. <https://njcleanenergy.com/main/rebates-and-promotions/rebates-and-promotions>.
6. Reduce the heat in your church or house building from 72 degrees to 68 or 66 degrees. The reduction can be compensated by wearing an extra layer of clothing. At night, when going to bed, lower it further. When church buildings are not used during the week, lower them to 55 degrees. Stay on top of managing the temperature when people are away from the building or house. Such steps will save a lot of money. The same holds true for A/C control in the summer. Keep the temperature no lower than 72.
7. For those who like gardening, have you thought about a compost unit (<https://www.epa.gov/recycle/composting-home>.) ? There are many ideas out there today about how to do so without unnecessary smells and the attraction of animals. Also, be diligent about recycling.
8. Stop using herbicides and pesticides on your lawns unless you have grubs that eat up the grass. Their chemicals leech into the soil and ultimately into local river systems.
9. I mentioned about preparedness and planning. Parish Councils, have you discussed setting up a fund to either get a more efficient boiler system or install solar panels? You may have the income to currently pay for your energy but to be good stewards, this is not enough. Planning is needed to improve energy usage. A huge inefficient boiler using fossil fuels is not satisfactory these days. What is the alternative plan if it breaks down?
10. Resist the Western practice of cremation! The Orthodox Church is against this practice of desecrating the body by burning it up. Plan to save up for the extra cost of burial and instead, give the person a dignified burial. Imagine the carbon footprint if 330 million people in this country were cremated.

If we strive to do our best to manage our homes and churches, we can offer those efforts back to our heavenly Father as our first fruits. Unlike Cain, who chose to only offer God the leftovers.