

An abridged version of this article was published in the June 2017 edition of *Liturgy News*

### **World Day of Prayer for Creation**

Last year's September edition of *Liturgy News* (2016) featured a little article entitled "Creationtide" that briefly explained the origins of the World Day of Prayer for Creation and outlined the debate around the issues involved in introducing into the Catholic Church a season of creation. Some of that story bears repetition and even further explanation.

On 6<sup>th</sup> August 2015, Feast of the Transfiguration, Pope Francis wrote to Cardinal Peter Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, announcing that he had decided to establish in the Catholic Church the "World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation", to be celebrated each year on 1<sup>st</sup> September. In the first paragraph of his letter, he acknowledged that this decision was prompted by a suggestion of the Metropolitan Ioannis of Pergamum, representative of Bartholemew, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

For Orthodox Christians, 1<sup>st</sup> September has long been a significant date, traditionally the first day of the church year and the occasion for a special celebration of God's creation. In 1989, the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I of Constantinople instituted a Season of Creation that was to extend from 1<sup>st</sup> September to 4<sup>th</sup> October, the feast of St Francis of Assisi. Six years earlier, in 1983, the World Council of Churches had issued a call for member churches to begin a "conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant)" for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. This call provided the inspiration for the European Council of Churches to establish, also in 1989, the European Christian Environmental Network or ECEN. For almost two decades now, ECEN has set aside the month of September as the Time of Creation.

Closer to home, Dr. Norman Habel, renowned Lutheran biblical scholar from Adelaide and initiator of the *Earth Bible* project, was instrumental in introducing the Season of Creation into the liturgical calendar first of the Lutheran church (2000) and then of the Uniting Church (2003). Dr Habel has worked with others to provide an impressive body of theological and liturgical resources for the celebration of creation.

To return to the Pope's decision of 6<sup>th</sup> August, 2015 and its aftermath, Cardinal Tagle of Manila responded immediately by affirming the longstanding commitment of the Church in the Philippines to establish a Season of Creation. Catholic Earthcare Australia was likewise quick to respond, inviting Catholic communities to participate, not only in the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, but also in a Season of Creation.

There is potential for 1<sup>st</sup> September, now established in the Catholic Church as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, to become a significant ecumenical day of celebration of creation for Catholics as it already is for our Orthodox and Protestant sisters and brothers. There is likewise potential for Catholics to share with both Orthodox and Protestant communions the practice of dedicating this extended period of time to focussing on creation, particularly given the incontrovertible evidence for Earth's distress. As was explained in *Liturgy News* last September, the Catholic Community has been reluctant to establish a formal liturgical season with designated readings that would break the semi-continuous cycle of readings for Ordinary Time.

How then might we engage in a meaningful ecumenical practice of honouring God's creation and ritualising our shared concern for planetary health? We might pay particular attention to creation from 1<sup>st</sup> September to 4<sup>th</sup> October every year, drawing on the many resources now available to us, reading and reflecting and meeting in parish or ecumenical groups. Another more far-reaching suggestion is that we plan to celebrate God's creation at every Eucharistic celebration throughout the year, bringing to the liturgy preparation, to the prayers and the readings an ecological hermeneutic or interpretive stance. Such a stance recognises and acknowledges that the biblical texts are products of a pre-scientific, human-centred and patriarchal world. It seeks to critique the elements in the texts that might re-inscribe human domination as opposed to care of the earth. Such a stance presupposes inclusivity of the entire Earth community and consequently precludes a purely human-centred focus in our prayers and preaching, while in no way discounting the concerns of the human community.

There has always been a process of selection at work in our choice of liturgical texts. There are some texts that are not to be proclaimed as word of God in our communities, one obvious and universally agreed example being the directive for slaves to be subject to their masters. In these times of Earth's distress, we are likewise called to critique any text that might promote destruction or degradation of the earth itself. At the same time, an ecological hermeneutic invites us to affirm the goodness of God's whole creation, human and other than human, to acknowledge that God's earth cares for us and for all its inhabitants, to receive the goods of the earth as gifts of God, to use them responsibly and never to take for granted the privileged access that most of us have to the fruits of God's earth.

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