

MARY COLWELL

The Church in the forest

Thousands of sacred forests in Ethiopia are protected by the Orthodox Church and the state. The fact that they are so regarded speaks not of paganism, but of a special respect for God's Creation. This kind of stewardship of the natural world could be a model for other Churches and other countries.

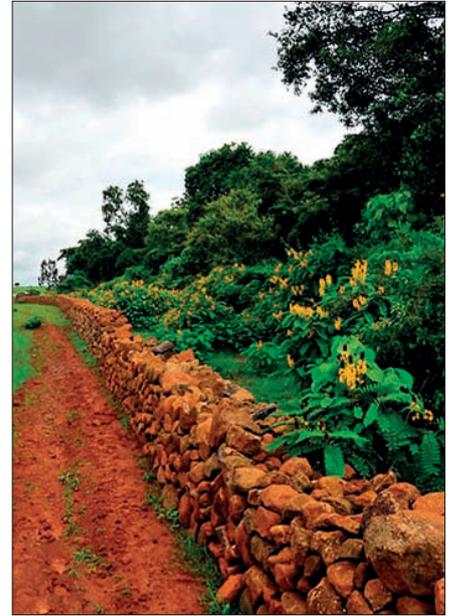
“What you notice immediately is that when you leave the agricultural fields and go into the forest you experience a sense of prayerfulness and peace; it's a spiritual place. I'm not surprised the locals see the forest as an extension of the church.” Claire Ozanne is deputy provost of Roehampton University, London, a specialist in the ecology of forest canopies and a Catholic. She has recently returned from an international expedition to record the invertebrate life of Ethiopia's sacred forests, which surround all Ethiopian Orthodox churches. The pictures provide a stark image of islands of greenery amidst desert and fields.

Ethiopia has experienced great changes over the last 50 years. The population has increased fourfold from 22 million in 1960 to more than 80 million today (World Bank Statistics). Climate change, decrease in the fertility of soils, increasing urbanisation and agriculture, combined with political turmoil and mismanagement have meant that a once

fertile and biodiverse nation is struggling to feed its population and the majority of Ethiopians live in abject poverty. It is therefore not surprising that the only land that survives intact is that which is properly protected. In northern Ethiopia church forests are the only areas left that contain native trees and wildlife. Thankfully there are 35,000 of them of various sizes, providing refuge and habitat for species that have otherwise disappeared from the rest of the country.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTW) is the predominant Oriental Orthodox church in Ethiopia, and more than 42 per cent of Ethiopians are members. It was part of the Coptic Orthodox Church until 1959, but was then granted its own Patriarch by the Coptic Orthodox Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa. There are 45 million followers making it the largest sector of the Orthodox Church.

EOTW has a strong theological conviction that the natural world is a gift to be protected and respected. It has a long history of nature



‘Religious protection is the main mode of safeguarding the forest’: Zhara church forest wall in northern Ethiopia

conservation in the form of planting, protecting and preserving trees. Care for nature is an integral part of the life of the Church and followers are expected to respect and exercise good stewardship of forests, at least in the church compound if not in the whole landscape, which is obviously more difficult. The basis for this belief is biblical and drawn from Genesis: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” (Genesis 2:15)

Stewardship is a word that causes discussion in western environmental circles but in this case it is a good description of how the locals see themselves in relation to the forest around them. Claire Ozanne points out that nature worship is certainly not an aspect of EOTW faith, rather it is based on respect for a gift provided by God, and a religious obligation that has to be carried out daily and not sidelined or considered less important than other Christian duties.

This belief is so strongly held that the forests have developed two forms of protection, one by the Church and one by the State. Religious protection is the main mode of safeguarding the forest and is achieved through encouraging religious commitment and respect among the followers. As the church is believed to be the house of God, everything in the compound is sacred and holy. The local church authorities give permission for some activities such as collection of fruit and medicinal plants, but forbid others such as collection of wood for fuel or construction.

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Habits of virtue

The Advent season is a time of watching and waiting. In our final reflection taken from Cardinal Newman's writing he considers those qualities that distinguish the Christian from other law-abiding people

The substance of religion consists in faith, hope, and charity; and the qualification for eternal life is to be in a state of grace and free from mortal sin; yet, when we come to the question, how we are to preserve ourselves in a state of grace, and gain the gift of perseverance in it, then a number of observances have claims upon us, over and above those duties in which the substance of religion lies, as being its safeguard and protection. And these same observances, as being of a nature to catch the eye of the world, become the badges of the Christian, as contrasted with other men; whereas faith, hope, and charity are lodged deep in the breast, and are not seen. Now, one of these characteristics of a Christian spirit, springing from the three theological virtues, and then in turn defending and strengthening them, is that habit of waiting and watching, to which this season of the year especially invites us.

If, indeed, we listen to the world, we shall take another course. We shall think the temper of mind I am speaking of, to be superfluous or enthusiastic. We shall aim at

doing only what is necessary, and shall try to find out how little will be enough. We shall look out, not for Christ, but for the prizes of this life. We shall form our judgement of things by what others say; we shall admire what they admire; we shall instinctively reverence and make much of the world's opinion. We shall fear to give scandal to the world. We shall have a secret shrinking from the Church's teaching. We shall have an uneasy, uncomfortable feeling when mention is made of the maxims of holy men and ascetical writers, not liking them, yet not daring to dissent. We shall be scanty in supernatural acts, and have little or nothing of the habits of virtue which are formed by them, and are an armour of proof against temptation. We shall suffer our souls to be overrun with venial sins, which tend to mortal sin, if they have not already reached it. We shall feel very reluctant to face the thought of death.

All this shall we be, all this shall we do; and in consequence, it will be very difficult for a spectator to say how we differ from respectable, well-conducted men who are



The Nativity, as depicted on a roof boss in Norwich Cathedral. Photo: © Julia Hedgecoe

not Catholics. In that case certainly we shall exhibit no pattern of a Christian spirit, nor shall we be in our own persons any argument for the truth of Christianity; but I am trusting and supposing that our view of Christianity is higher than to be satisfied with conduct so unlike that to which our Saviour and his Apostles call us. Speaking, then, to men who wish now to take that side and that place which they will have wished to have taken when their Lord actually comes to them, I say, that we must not only have faith in him, but must wait on him; not only must hope, but must watch for him; not only love him, but must long for him; not only obey him, but must look out, look up earnestly for our reward, which is himself.

■ Our Advent series has been prepared by Stratford Caldecott, editor of *Second Spring*. The above is taken from *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, 1908.

If someone does transgress and cuts a tree or even a dead branch for personal use, they would be presented to the church community and scholars and asked to repent and be committed not to repeat the mistake again. If they fail to confess, or they make the same mistake again, they would be alienated from the community and would not be entitled to services from the church. This sanction is known as *Gizet*. Although churches are primarily houses of God, they are also afforded legal protection by the state. Some larger churches are assigned guards and anyone who encroaches on to church land with cattle or crops, and anyone who acts as a poacher or illegal logger, is brought before the civil courts.

These sanctions have worked well for many years but as pressures increase in this ravaged country, encroachment from the surrounding fields is causing increasing concern and ways are being sought to raise the level of protection. The scientific findings that Ozanne and colleagues are collating now will provide concrete evidence of the richness of the invertebrate life of these forests (invertebrates are the bedrock of all other life) and help increase awareness of the importance of the forests to the ecology of Ethiopia. Vegetation surveys that have already been carried out show that the forests house a large proportion of the endangered plant species of the area and provide ecosystem services to local people, such as fresh water, pollinators (which are essential for the surrounding crops), honey, shade, and spiritual value.

Pope Benedict XVI has made many statements on the need for the Catholic Church to protect nature. On his recent visit to the UK he mentioned it three times and in his final address before boarding the plane he pledged cooperation between the UK Government and the Holy See on environmental issues. We do not yet know how that relationship will develop and what can be achieved, but perhaps this sector of the Orthodox Church could provide inspiration and point a way forward.

It is obviously not possible to create forests around all Catholic Churches, but a sense of the sacred and respect for nature is not always evident; there is a far more utilitarian approach to the natural world in the West. Land, however small, around a church could be made into a welcoming haven for urban wildlife and act as a witness to the wider community. So often Catholic church gardens and borders look barren and denuded.

In 2007 the Vatican accepted the gift of a potential forest from a carbon offset company to be planted on degraded land in Hungary to account for the Vatican's carbon emissions. The forest is being carefully sized on the level of emissions from the Holy See in 2007. This is often highlighted as a prime example of the Catholic Church's intent to be green, and so it is as far as carbon offsetting is concerned.

However, the image portrayed is one of calculation and mathematical equations, not reverence and respect. If the Vatican also declared the forest to be sacred and the life

in it worthy of protection because it is a gift from God then it would send a message to the world that nature is not just for our use but is to be cared for and revered as holy. As the UN report "Harmony with Nature" has just been published, detailing a bleak outlook for so much of life on earth, this would be a welcome boost to an issue whose serious importance is increasingly appreciated.

The Catholic Church has often been wary of embracing a spiritual approach to the natural world, sometimes for fear of encouraging paganism and nature worship, but also because it is concerned about blurring the distinction between nature and the special place of people in the eyes of God; but as Ethiopia shows, that is not necessarily the result of a more spiritual approach. What happens when nature is considered sacred is that it gives back, in ways that benefit all of humanity, resources, spiritual succour and aesthetic pleasure, all sorely needed in an increasingly urbanised and functional world.

The sacred forests of Ethiopia are a stark reminder of the extent to which people will go to convert rich forest into desert if left unchecked. As the population of the world continues to increase we will need more, not less, biodiversity to provide us with what we need to survive, both physically and spiritually.

■ Mary Colwell advises the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales on environmental matters.