



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

# The Wrath of God?

*This third article in a series on climate justice addresses the question of whether natural disasters are divine chastisements*



**W**hen the earthquake of 7.0 magnitude shook Haiti in January this year, the American Christian televangelist Pat Robertson said that it was God's retribution for Haiti's "pact to the devil" to free them of the French.

He similarly declared that Hurricane Katrina, which caused a trail of death and destruction in New Orleans and parts of the United States in 2005 as America's punishment for legalised abortion.

Robertson was extreme in his views of man's sins in causing these events, but he is not alone. Some Christians believe that natural disasters are modern-day chastisements from God especially since it is increasingly accepted that many natural disasters are caused by climate change which in turn were caused by man's actions.

This view can be reinforced by the fact that natural disasters are classified as "acts of God" in many insurance and other contracts.

### What is the Catholic view?

First, the Bible does teach us important lessons from the chastisements of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, it may seem that God rewards good people and punishes the sinful, as when He refused to destroy Sodom because of Lot's family (*Genesis 18-19*) and punished the pharaoh in order to free God's chosen people from slavery (*Exodus 7-12*).

This vengeful view of God was so predominant that by the time Jesus came, He had to correct the Jews' perception of God by pointing out that faithful Jews died together with faithless Gentiles (*Luke 13:1-5*). He told them that God has no favourites and death comes to both the good and evil: only when our time on earth is up will we be judged.

Meanwhile, Jesus advocates love, not punishment. He teaches that it is love that inspires conversion to holy living on earth.

Secondly, when God made the universe and the heavens, he set in place many "laws of nature" like physics, chemistry and biology, to maintain "the order and harmony of the created world" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 341). He also introduced moral laws through the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic Laws.

Man will be wise to respect established laws for they are meant to protect us and allow us to fully benefit from what creation offers. We have not done that for the environment.

Global warming has resulted in modification of weather patterns and increase the number and intensity of storms and typhoons. Nature's response to global warming has resulted in the quickening rate of melting polar ice caps, leading to rising sea levels and coastal flooding. Rapid and unplanned urbanisation, deforestation, over-logging and overuse of concrete have caused mudslides, landslides and many other environmental ills. The list goes on.

Thirdly, when we make bad decisions, we have to take the consequences. It is a spiritual law - that we reap what we sow



The earthquake in Haiti last January destroyed communities and caused widespread loss of life, but Catholics do not view such calamities as acts of punishment by God.

## Disaster, a time to reflect

“The Catholic view is that natural disasters are not punishments for the sins of Man against the environment or against anything else for that matter. Rather, God has created laws of nature, and if those laws are not followed - as with many instances of environmental damage - then there are natural consequences.

When there is a disaster, we should reflect on the God-meaning of this in our own lives, remembering always that our God is a loving God and that God's love should inspire us to holy living on this earth.”

(*Galatians 6:7*). As we sin, we should learn from our sins and repent. However, God is merciful and he does everything possible to help us repent in an easier way.

The Church also teaches that temporal punishment (ie, earthly punishment rather than eternal punishment after death) is the damage caused by sin. For example, the extra flooding in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina was caused by dikes that could not withstand the heavy rainfall because repair money for the dikes had been spent instead on nice bicycle paths on top of the dikes.

God allows the whole community to reap what a few civil leaders sowed with their bad decisions, not because the community deserves it, but because of the natural ripple effect that any sin has. Sin and human errors can cause temporal punishments whether we deserve them or not.

Fourthly, we should always reflect on the "God-meaning" of the major events in our life, whether these are blessings or tragedies. The difficulties that we face in life can be crosses we need to carry and will help us on the road to holiness. When St Ignatius of Loyola was seriously wounded in the battle of Pamplona in 1521, he took the opportunity to reflect on the God-meaning of his injuries, pain and situation. He underwent a spiritual conversion as he recovered. He eventually founded the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). Finally, the Church teaches us that we must be good stewards of God's creations.

Where natural disasters are caused by mankind's greed or pollution or laziness, in effect, they are acts of Man rather than acts of God. As Pope Benedict XVI puts it: "The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa. ... Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society." (Caritas in Veritate, 51).

In short, if we do not start being responsible stewards in maintaining the everlasting beautiful garden that God has given us, we will only have ourselves to be angry with because we are the cause of our sufferings.

The Catholic view, therefore, is that natural disasters are not punishments for the sins of Man against the environment or against anything else for that matter. Rather, God has created laws of nature, and if those laws are not followed as with many instances of environmental damage, then there are natural consequences that follow.

When there is a disaster, we should reflect on the God-meaning of this in our own lives, remembering always that our God is a loving God and that God's love should inspire us to holy living on this earth.