

It's more than just 'reduce, reuse, recycle'

THE threat of climate change has certainly made the world sit up and take measures to protect the environment with greater urgency. We are encouraged to "reduce, reuse, recycle".

Even celebrities have got into the act through concerts and advertisements. All this is in the hope of averting a potential environmental disaster that could see many parts of the world wiped out.

The question is: Is care for creation an important agenda only because it might come round to hit back at us through these environmental disasters? And if there is no threat of disaster, can we still carry on exploiting and polluting the natural world?

The Church's social teachings guide us to live in justice – that is, in "right relationship" – with God, self and others. This network of "right relationships" extends to the physical environment as well.

After all, this is the "Garden of Eden" where God has created and placed us. This is where the history of salvation unfolds. And this is where the paschal

mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection happened.

All these things do not take place in some intangible, spiritual realm. They take place on the very soil on which we stand. Indeed, the physical environment has a very important role in God's plan of salvation.

Imagine if someone who loves you very much builds a magnificent house for you and invites you to live there with him. You would certainly not do anything to damage the house because it is your home; not merely an assembly of construction material that you would peel off and use for other purposes until the material is all gone!

More importantly, how you treat the house will be a reflection of your relationship with this person.

It is the same with the environment. This physical world is the very place where we grow. It is where we come to know our God and embark on the road of salvation.

For this reason Creation itself has a special dignity. It

In this ongoing series on the Church's social teachings, we focus today on the Principle of the Dignity of Creation

reveals the mystery of God. Not only do we need to treat it well, we are also invited to listen attentively to Creation – its beauty, its natural rhythms – in order to hear and heed what God is communicating to us. And this helps us to learn how to live in dignity.

We sometimes get carried away and think that the resources in the world are solely meant to meet our insatiable wants.

In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II reminds us that "it is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards 'having' rather than 'being'.... It is therefore necessary to create lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the

sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments." (*Centesimus Annus*, 36)

The Bible points out that "God took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it" (*Genesis 2:15*). This verse from the story of creation shows us that not only are we given this physical environment to live and grow in but we have even been entrusted with the stewardship of this world. God has appointed us "Masters" of the earth (*Genesis 1: 26-28*).

However, this is not so that we can manipulate and exploit the earth. As co-creators, we do not "play God" and ignore the original God-given purposes for the earth and its resources.

Instead, our role is to help order all things closer to God's vision of the "new heaven and the new earth" (*Revelation 21:1*). Stewardship implies that we are managers and not owners.

At the end of time, the whole of Creation is returned to God in God's plan of salvation through Christ, "so that God may be all in

all" (*1 Corinthians 15:28*).

As stewards, do we make use of the land for fruitful purposes and in a sustainable way? Do we ensure that the earth's resources are fairly distributed and enjoyed by everyone? Do we consume more than necessary?

For Christians, care for creation goes beyond "reduce, reuse, recycle".

It ultimately means cherishing this place we call home, listening to it in order to discover God's loving guidance and working to help realise God's plan of salvation.

We can take time to reflect on the following:

- "God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good". (*Genesis 1: 31*) Do I appreciate the beauty of all that God has created?
- How can we pay better attention to the natural world and live in harmony with it so that we can lead a more balanced and dignified life?
- What can we do in our society to promote care for creation?

SOCIETY OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL

More seek help, more helpers needed

A GROWING number of poor families are turning to the Society of St Vincent de Paul for help.

This well-known Catholic charity – which gives cash handouts and food rations, among other things, to the poor – helped 1,874 families in 2006, up from 1,457 in 2001.

Its president, Mr Lucas Williams, attributes the rise in numbers to a variety of factors. He thinks more people now know about the society, which assists people of all races and religions. Also, given the widening income gap, some of the poor are getting poorer.

Compared to other secular groups, the society is also less rigid about the criteria families must meet when they seek help, he said.

"If people come to us for help, we try to give them some help immediately, such as food rations," he said. "We give them the benefit of the doubt first. Who are we to judge?"

But the society's volunteers then visit the families to check that their claims are valid, and these visits also allow them to befriend the families and provide other forms of assistance.

For example, it has subsidised the university education of a few students. And its members have also helped poor students obtain free textbooks, buy school uniforms and pay for their examination fees.

Mr Williams recalled with pride how one single mum came

up to him one day and said her children had grown up and started working. For over a decade, the society had helped the family and supported the four children through school.

"I was so happy when she told me they didn't need help any more and that they had come up in life. That happiness can't be described," said Mr Williams, a retiree and Society of St Vincent de Paul volunteer for the past 38 years.

The society was founded by Frenchman Frederic Ozanam and his companions in 1833 to serve the poor, and arrived in Singapore in 1951. Its first president was the late "Father of Charity", Dr Ee Peng Liang.

Many of the families who receive help hear about the group through friends or neighbours. Others are referred by social workers, the prisons and hospitals.

In 2006, the society collected \$3.4 million – the bulk of it from the second collection at all masses on the first Sunday of the month – and gave out \$3.2 million. It is a registered charity and submits its accounts to the Commissioner of Charities and the Registry of Societies.

One family left an indelible mark on Mr Paul Foo, the society's vice-president who joined the group in 1975. The husband was an irresponsible man who spent his money on women in Batam and even withdrew his son's paltry savings for his own use. The wife was "emotionally unstable".



The Society of St Vincent de Paul provides help to anyone in need, regardless of race or religion. Volunteers visit aid recipients and organise outings.

The couple had two sons, one of whom was so worried that he could not afford to pay his school fees. So the society helped both boys with their polytechnic fees.

The elder son has since graduated and works in a hospital laboratory.

Said Mr Foo, an engineer:

"When we see families move on, these are the things that make us very happy."

But the Society's leaders worry about its ageing volunteer force. The average age of its 600 plus volunteers is 60, said Mr Williams, who is 65 himself.

He added: "Our Lord Jesus

said the poor will always be with us. So we need more younger people to join us so that they will be able to carry on our work."

Together with the Catholic Welfare Services, the Society also runs the St Vincent Home, which houses the destitute elderly.

What is the Society of St Vincent de Paul?

This is an established Catholic charity that helps the needy, regardless of race or religion. It provides cash, food provisions and other forms of support for families in need. Catholics contribute towards its good work by giving to the second collection at all masses on the first Sunday of every month.

Can you help?

The Society of St Vincent de Paul runs on volunteer power. It is looking for more young Catholic members to help run its activities and provide fresh ideas. The average age of its members now is 60.

Who to contact:

Call Mr Lucas Williams at 9665-0892 or Mr Paul Foo at 9177-2882