



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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WHEN we think of the environment, we usually think of recycling, saving electricity and something that is "good to do".

This is fine, except that it is usually the first to be discarded when we start to feel the real pain of doing it, for example, in the current financial crisis.

But being green should have a deeper meaning for us as Catholics, simply because caring for the environment is an important part of the Church's social teachings. It is not surprising then, that Pope Benedict XVI has sometimes been called the 'Green Pope' for his preachings on the environment and the need to protect it.

He has spoken passionately on the subject and has even turned the Vatican into one of the greenest cities in the world. It is the only carbon neutral city in the world and many of its buildings have solar energy panels to reduce the use of fossil fuels.

Why this emphasis on caring for the environment? The core concept behind Catholic teaching on the environment is "stewardship".

Stewardship is the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care. For instance, in medieval times, a king would place a steward in charge

of his kingdom while he went away to war. The steward was expected to care and run the kingdom in the king's absence.

In the Christian context, stewardship is applied similarly. To begin understanding stewardship, you need to look no further than the first few pages of the Bible.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air; and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:26-28).

At first glance, this passage runs counter to the concept of stewardship. It reads as if God gave us mastery over all on Earth to do with as we please.

But such a literal reading is both flawed and misconstrued. To understand the deeper and correct interpretation of the idea of dominion and stewardship, one has to rely on both an overall reading of the Bible

as well as what the Church teaches.

The key lies in understanding God's love for Creation.

Jesus Christ gave us two commandments: To love God with all our heart and soul and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Loving God also means loving His creation, which includes humans as well as animals and the Earth.

We are given authority to subdue the Earth but subduing it does not imply imposing our will onto it. We have been entrusted by God with the bountiful and beautiful Earth. We have been given dominion over all the Earth but we are also called to respect and care for Nature.

As early as 97AD, Pope St Clement had painted a picture of what we now know as symbiotic relationship between Man and the environment.

He wrote: "The heavens, revolving under His government, are subject to Him in peace...The very smallest of living beings meet together in peace and concord. All these the great Creator and Lord of all has appointed to exist in peace and harmony". (The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians. Chapter XX The Peace and Harmony of the Universe.)

But this delicately crafted balance between Man and Nature was disturbed when industrialisation and modernity arrived. Man was slowly but surely destroying the very home he was entrusted with and, in the process, also destroying himself.

In 1971, Pope Paul VI warned that "Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation". He added: "Everything is inter-related. (We must be attentive) to the large-scale consequences that every intervention of man brings about in the balance of nature which has been put at man's disposition in all its harmonious richness according to the loving designs of the Creator".

Indeed, if one thinks about it, the Earth is all we have.

Our entire lives, our economy, our jobs and cars depend on what the Earth provides for us. The fact that we no longer live in huts or hunt, but now use air-conditioning and eat processed cheese does not mean we are vastly different from the humans in Adam and Eve's time. We depend on the Earth for what we consume and produce.

More than that, the idea of inter-dependence is one that should not be lightly dismissed.

The forest fires of Indonesia cause the haze in Singapore and Malaysia.

In reality, our actions towards the Earth also affect our neighbours. It is thus no longer enough to treat the environment as being simply something we think about once in a while.

As God calls us to love one another as we love ourselves, we must also love the Earth.

Go Green, show you love the Earth

It's not just a fad or something fashionable. Caring for the Earth and all it provides us is part of the Catholic social teachings.

It's Advent, a time of hope

IT IS Advent and we know it because the streets, shopping malls and hotels are decked out in their best, dressed with festive decorations and lights.

Taking pride of place among the decorations is usually the most elaborately decorated Christmas tree, a Santa Claus or Snowman. All this in anticipation of Christmas.

While Christians prepare to celebrate this joyous occasion, others join too. However, there is a fundamental difference.

Non-Christians take the preparation and celebration of Christmas as a festive holiday. But for Christians, it is much more.

While we send our Christmas greetings, wrap gifts, stock up on festive food and decorate our homes, we prepare to welcome the birth of Jesus Christ.

We prepare to invite Jesus into our lives, remember His birth and anticipate His second coming at the end of the world.

So for us, preparing ourselves internally is the reason and purpose of Christmas and everything else that makes us so busy at this time is secondary and peripheral.

Advent is a good time to pause and reflect on what has happened in our lives.

It is a time of hope, and a time to remember that our present time is but a stepping stone to a glorious new reality proclaimed by Christ – the perfection of God's reign.

To help us in strengthening this hope, the Singapore Pastoral Institute and Caritas Singapore Community Council have prepared an Advent Booklet entitled "Being a People of Hope". In the lead up to Christmas, these four weeks of preparation will remind us to not forget what is really important in our lives.

This was also the message from Pope Benedict XVI in response to the current financial crisis, that we must remember

what is real and lasting – the Word of God.

He added that "we must not build our lives on passing realities, on things that are temporary, because they can quickly disappear as the banking crisis showed. Instead, build our lives on things that remain, recognising God's place in our lives".

So when we have really emptied ourselves and allowed Christ into our lives, He will gradually lead us in making the right decisions because then everything we do becomes Christ acting within us. Thus begins the journey to our salvation in Christ, built on faith and hope.