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The Church's Green Commission



With rampant development all over the island, such as this one at Qawra just a stone's throw from where the conference was being held, opportunities are certainly not in short supply for the commission to speak out on environmental issues

One of the milestones of the Church's recently established Green Commission was the first national conference on the Church and the environment held last weekend.

Officially, the aim of the conference was to start a formal dialogue about the relevance of Christian beliefs to environmental issues but, having witnessed the calibre of presentations made at the conference, I believe that a much higher benchmark had been reached at the end of the day.

Many lamenting today's ecological crisis point an accusing finger at the now notorious Genesis 1:28 passage: "Be fruitful and multiply, 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", which has frequently been adopted as a justification for environmental destruction by many Western cultures and is considered by many as the historical root of today's ecological crisis, despite the fact that the Bible is replete with other passages that highlight the importance of man's stewardship with respect to the rest of nature, such as the 'First Endangered Species Act' witnessed in Noah's attempt to save two from every species on Earth.

Compared to other Western religions, in terms of environmental awareness, the failings of the Catholic Church stick out like a sore thumb. The Spanish conquistadores, on the pretext of taking religion to the pagans, wrought environmental and social strife in Central and South America in their subjugation of indigenous people. This contrasted sharply with existing indigenous populations living in harmony with nature, e.g. Tikal in Guatemala, one of the largest cities of the Mayan civilisation, with a population of 120,000 at its height and located right in the middle of the rainforest which rendered its unearthing today even more difficult.

Other Christian branches and monotheist faiths were certainly more environmentally aware. A congregation of evangelical Christians had been instrumental in opposing Congressional attacks on the Endangered Species Act in the US in the 1980s while the Central Conference of American Rabbis declared that desecration of the Headwaters Redwood Forest in California breaks our covenant with the Creator.

The Koran in Islam and Torah in Judaism, like the Christian Bible, are also chequered with green principles, such as the prohibition of various activities which engender cruelty to animals, even though such principles rarely translate into concrete action.

A welcome respite within the Catholic Church is provided by St Francis of Assisi, whose approach to nature was symbolised by his love towards 'Brother sun, Sister moon'. He believed that ecological integrity is an essential part of religious faith and is an essential element around which dialogue, collaboration and mutual understanding can be promoted and in 1979 he was proclaimed by Pope John Paul II as the heavenly patron of those who promote ecology (Apostolic Letter *Inter Sanctos*).

Western monotheist religions should seek to bridge the great divide that exists with Eastern polytheist faiths when it comes to environmental awareness. Buddhist teachings, for example, state two basic principles: to abstain from harming living beings (non-violence - ahimsa) and to abstain from taking what is not given. Thus Buddhism condemns chopping down a rain forest

and destroying the habitat for other creatures and possession of freely available resources such as underground water.

Buddhism recognises a common thread that binds living things and their environment and this is something that had been lost in Western religions and that is something fundamental in the understanding of life. According to the Buddhist principle of oneness if we destroy the environment, we destroy ourselves and if we take care of the environment, we take care of ourselves because we are constantly exerting an influence on our surroundings while our surroundings are constantly influencing us.

Hinduism is highly conservative and there has always been a high respect for nature. It urges frugality, i.e. prudence in use, which contrasts sharply with our consumerism, which is the root of many environmental misdemeanours. Thus everything in life is kept to the minimum and there is careful use of resources with the idea of conserving for the future. A large number of natural sites are considered sacred and receive worship.

Sacredness implies that one cannot damage or pollute the object of worship. Shiva Nataraja - Lord of the Dance - symbolises the fine equilibrium between destruction and creation in the natural world.

Shintoism in Japan is based on ancient folk beliefs and rituals, which perceives the presence of gods or of the sacred in nature. Similarly in Taoism, people base their belief on the concept of acting in accordance with nature, and with finesse rather than force. Such beliefs bond these people to nature as paganism binds its followers to nature in the West. Confucianism is an inner attitude rather than a religion, modelled on nature and based on moral order.

Attempts are under way in bridging the gap between the two environmental paradoxes of the Eastern and Western faiths - in 2000, representatives of 11 world faiths met in Nepal to find ways to help improve the environment. Led by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation and the World Wildlife Fund, they pledged to combat forest and marine destruction, climate change and other issues.

Setting the background

The first murmurs about the percolation of faith into more mundane aspects of life, such as culture, were already aired in 1989 with the publication of 'the dove homing in the owl's nest' which amalgamated various contributions from academic and theological exponents.

Two sterling contributions within such a compilation among others are those by Mgr Professor Carmel Sant and by Professor Patrick J. Schembri. The former lamented the destruction of the northern coasts by "such tasteless buildings as the monstrous agglomeration at Bugibba" or the loss of fertile land due to the construction of senseless roads and roundabouts in his paper "Natural Environment: The Biblical Perspective".

Professor Schembri also illustrated various examples of how man was tampering with the delicate balance of nature, such as the exploding human population (despite warnings by Malthus in 1798), the channelling of toxic waste from the developed world to African countries, the need to preserve the world's biodiversity, unbridled economic development and global warming phenomenon. In his aptly named "Faith and the Ecological Consciousness?", Professor Schembri refers to the stewardship of nature delegated down by God when he quotes from Genesis 2,15: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it".

The Catholic Church started to embrace an environment-conscious image in 1972 when a Holy See delegation participated in the UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm. Pope Paul VI stated that "The care of preserving and improving the natural environment... meets needs that are deeply felt among the people of our time".

During a visit to UNEP headquarters in Nairobi in 1985, Pope John Paul II went further when he stated: "The Church's commitment to the conservation and improvement of our environment is linked to a command of God". The Pope continued with his spearthrust when on January 1, 1990 (World Peace Day) he compiled one of the mother documents of environmental awareness - i.e. "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation", in which he declared that "all Christians in particular realise that their duty towards nature and creation is an essential part of their faith".

On a local scene, leading Church activists vociferously spoke out against projects such as the Portomaso, Kalkara and Tal-Virtu golf courses in the late 1990s.

Seminar's salient points

The conference, opened by the commission's chairman, Professor Victor Axiak, was addressed by Archbishop Mercieca, who reinforced Pope John Paul's message in 1990 that environmental justice was at the core of Christians' responsibilities. "We should love the environment.

Everyone is in duty bound to take care of what God entrusted into our hands. We should ensure that no avoidable damage is done".

The Archbishop was flanked by exponents of the three political parties - Minister George Pullicino, Labour MP Carmelo Abela and AD chairman Harry Vassallo. The minister's appeal to leave the buzzword 'environment' out of the political board game was laudable as was his promise that development boundaries will not budge in future.

The accolade should however be reserved for Dr Vassallo, who impassionately embodied the environmentalist's buoyant mood at witnessing such a landmark conference being held for the first time in our islands. He also lamented the rampant disappearance of our remaining rural habitat.

The conference agenda was chock-a-block with riveting contributions: Rev. Professor Emanuel Agius spoke on the Church's social teachings on the environment, Rev. Dr Konrad Grech, SJ, on the Church's participation in international fora on the environment, Rev. Professor Peter Paul Zerafa elucidated the reference to environmental issues in the Bible, Fr Eric Overend and Rev. Dr Paul Pace, SJ, gave examples of sustainable lifestyles within the Church hierarchy and Vincent Caruana chaired an open discussion on the expectations of NGOs and government entities vis-à-vis the Church's environmental stance.

This is a brief summary of what they referred to:

Fr Eric Overend stated that children need to be inculcated with Green principles from an early age, with people taking them on hikes dispensing green wisdom, such that flowers should not be cut, etc. He insisted that there is no place for an amateurish, shambolic approach when tackling environmental issues.

After all, we were only stewards of the environment for posterity. He also stressed the reckless waste of resources, such as paper in offices.

Rev. Dr Paul Pace referred to eco-congregation: an auditing system of the environmental work being undertaken within parishes (similar to the EkoSkola and hotel Green Awards schemes).

Parish billboards should be used to post global alerts with a world map and information on current environmental issues, he suggested, while parish newsletters should include information on initiatives being taken elsewhere.

Also, the focal point set up within every community should funnel information to the rest of the community.

Vincent Attard expressed the public's concern that politics would finally undo all the commission's useful work and that such work will be a half-baked initiative which is not acted upon. He stressed that the 0-15 age bracket is the most at risk from green misdemeanours.

Working groups

The conference also reserved some surprises, such as the holding of a number of working groups, during which various stakeholders from all strata of society could make tangible suggestions as to how the Church's green pledges could be more incisive by starting with Knisja Oht u Qaddejja (the Church as a sister and servant).

One augurs that the commission does indeed heed such suggestions, which included a greater use of the Church media to voice Green messages, the earmarking of land for environmental restoration, the planting of trees on religious festivities, speaking out on the occasion of every major project, etc.

The conference aptly ended with an environmentally-themed Mass on Sunday morning at Zejtun parish church.

What next?

Just a stone's throw from where the conference was being held, more fields were being cleared to make way for more tourist development, the sacred cow of the Maltese Islands, on the way down to Kennedy Grove and Salina.

The opportunities for the commission to air its views on disproportionate development in the islands will certainly be legion. The public is also prodding the Church to be more pro-active, as seen from contributions in the local media, such as the one by Salvu Felice Pace - "Needed: A Church that walks on water" (The Sunday Times, May 16). Hence, the stage is set and the ball is in the Church's court - will it take the environmental cue? I sincerely wish the answer to be yes in view of the Church's pivotal role in Maltese society.

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