

The Church speaks out on the environment

There are no nagging doubts that the Church is currently in the middle of a self-assessment process. The writing on the wall is not that rosy, with plummeting Mass attendances, spiralling numbers of marital separation cases (around 600 in the first six months of this year alone) and a general deterioration of society's moral fibre, the Church feels it should be more in sink with society.

To give an example, against the sobering backdrop of over 60 per cent of Gozitan youngsters saying in a recent survey that Mass is boring, Gozo Bishop Nikol Cauchi said he believed that his priests must adopt a more modern approach to make Mass more interesting and relevant for youngsters. Such an announcement, together with other initiatives, is a harbinger of things to come.

Green credentials

Certainly a more pervasive, ground-breaking venture will be the implementation of the Maltese Diocesan Synod. The very fact that one of the committees drawn up during the synod dealt with environmental issues (with the setting up by the Archbishop of the Commission for the Environment last August) is heartening in that one can perceive that the Church is reading the signs of the times in acknowledging society's increasing concern over our environment.

And the way for all this has been paved way back in the roots of modern Catholicism as outlined by what can be dubbed as the Church's first environmentalist, St Francis of Assisi, with his trademark Brother Sun, Sister Moon.

Even more recently, Pope John Paul himself claimed in his landmark papal document Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation that "all Christians in particular realise that their duty towards nature and creation is an essential part of their faith".

Closer to home, a veritable agitation was concocted in September 2002 when the Archbishop's pastoral letter was read out in churches across Malta and Gozo in which he candidly criticised the manner in which environmental planning was being conducted (with a special accent on the Kalkara Valley issue) and the Church's vehement opposition to the Verdala golf course project is no secret.

This is a far cry from years where the Church was accused of endowing its altars with endangered flora or of actively or passively buoying the pro-bird shooting campaign in 1992.

A milestone

All this history pales in the face of the initiative to be taken in all our churches on the occasion of the celebration of Christ the King next weekend. Specially designed information leaflets will be distributed to the faithful attending Mass.

One side of the leaflet will include a short prayer related to a leading environmental theme in our country, while the other side will include some rudimentary information on the same theme.

The first theme chosen for next Sunday has an especially critical local pertinence in that it deals with the need to protect our scarce freshwater resources. In addition, it makes the general congregation aware of simple facts, like the one that a citizen of Mali uses daily ca. eight litres of freshwater while we Maltese use 90 litres of freshwater, that we in Malta expend lots of resources and energy to extract freshwater from the sea (so, don't waste it), that five million worldwide don't have appropriate access to freshwater resources around the world and that in Malta there is a high risk of freshwater contamination.

At the same time, it includes a small prayer soliciting divine intervention to increase our appreciation of freshwater resources.

Similar leaflets will be distributed during every month of next year spanning themes like the need to conserve biodiversity and endangered species (such as the local much-sought-after Narcissus flower), the need to preserve local landscapes (an especially difficult message to stomach for many local developers), our responsibility to maintain the air and coastal waters

free from pollution, solid and liquid wastes, etc. The addressing of such themes will be two-pronged - one on a local and one on an international level.

Those still with orthodox tenets of Catholicism in their minds will get a rude awakening - to be a good Catholic, it does not suffice to respect dogmas to the letter, like not stealing, etc., but also requires respecting the natural environment.

Over 30,000 of such leaflets have been distributed around the various parishes - the onus is now on every parish priest to disseminate these leaflets among his parishioners during Sunday Mass and to solicit their thorough perusal.

As an environmentalist, I certainly find myself on cloud nine as a result of this initiative. No-one can doubt the leverage and clout the Church still exerts in our country and finally to be able to see such virtues being used in bulwarking our bedraggled environment - it's like buying five minutes airtime for free during Sunday Mass (airtime which was previously not available) during which the environment will take centre-stage.

One only hopes that this wind of change sweeps our prejudiced traditional views of environmental issues under the carpet and even galvanises the power wielders in this country.

Let's also hope that the Church's loud, resonant call for the word ethics to be incorporated in the field of environmental protection is heeded. I laud the Church for the monumental venture it is embarking on - an environmental awareness campaign par excellence!

Church's future green plans

The leaflet initiative appears to be only the tip of the iceberg in that the Church also aims to set up and sustain a network of local focal points within the various parishes in Malta, working within the existing structures of the Church, who would take specific initiatives to protect the local environment of the parish.

This comes hot on the heels of the programme of intensive training courses in environmental education directed towards the members of the clergy as well as lay people who normally play a key role in local pastoral councils.