

THE ENVIRONMENT: OUR ROLE AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

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Home is a special place for us humans. It is the place where we relax, unwind, share good times, raise our families and just be ourselves. We do our best to keep it clean, comfortable and welcoming. Or imagine if a rich philanthropist invites you to live in one of his stately manors, rent free. Would you trash the place or take good care to preserve things and extend your tenure?

Can we see our world in that light: the planet as our only home and God as the ultimate philanthropist who has gifted us with his awesome creation? What does our faith based perspective teach us about our existence, our environment, our role? Or can we at least see and appreciate the Earth as our home at a personal level in the same way as we perceive our residential address?

The Book of Genesis tells us that God created everything and saw that it was good. God created humankind in His own image and likeness (it was very good) and placed them as stewards of His creation. But as articulated in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church produced by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the principle of proper application must apply in the context of humankind's increasing mastery of nature: with great power (dominion) comes great responsibility. This means that while our technological advances might be intrinsically positive, the nature, end and means of our applied technology must be subject to "moral principles and values which respect and realize in its fullness the dignity of man".

This principle also extends to respect for other living things and the promotion of harmony with creation generally, as this is what sustains us in this phase of existence. The Church also cautions that we do not understand, let alone control, the impact of our actions in one sphere of endeavour (e.g. biological and genetic research), on the other interconnected aspects of our global ecosystem, and on future generations. Hence humankind must not make arbitrary use of the earth as though it did not have its divine designed purpose "which *humankind* can indeed develop but must not betray". Our environment is a home and a resource for ALL...truly a collective good, and, as St. Paul reminds us in 1 Cor. 4:2: "Being stewards, faithfulness will be demanded of us."

So there are theological and common-sense motives to our approach and indeed our responsibility for our environment. As a collective good, we must accept collective responsibility for its sustenance. This requires each and every one of us to take stock of our individual behaviour and advocacy on environmental issues. Yes, not everyone would feel the passion to become a public advocate but everyone is called, through faith or through common sense, to build greater awareness, assess one's own habits and adopt more environmentally friendly practices at a personal level. This would encourage families and, by extension, communities to do likewise.

So what really can **I** do? Start by considering what aspect(s) of environmental issues are of most concern to you personally. Is it the macro problem of global warming? Then figure out how you

might reduce your carbon footprint at home and at work i.e. the measure of how your activities contribute to the “greenhouse” gases that contribute to the problem. One’s carbon footprint might be reduced through direct means e.g. using less fossil fuel-based energy sources like petrol or (in T&T) electricity, or indirectly by consuming fewer imported and / or heavily packaged products which would have left a greater footprint for manufacture and transportation. A 2010 leaflet from the Institute of Marine Affairs recommends the following energy efficiency tips (among others):

- turn off lights and electronic equipment (TVs, DVDs etc,) when not in use
- unplug cell phones as soon as fully charged
- replace regular incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs
- use less hot water (after all, we do live in the tropics)
- conserve paper at work.

What about our local problems of sanitation, waste management and flooding? Beyond providing or advocating for adequate community sanitation services, think of activities or competitions for constituents to build pride in their communities and to live the mantra of *reduce, reuse & recycle*. How many drains clogged with plastic and carelessly discarded household effects have we seen cause distress to whole communities through massive floods?

Each of us should support the fledgling local recycling industry by separately bagging our plastic waste and taking them to neighbourhood collection centres where they exist or calling the recycling companies for collection. Neighbourhoods or communities could organize their own consolidated collection points to make the process more efficient. Such projects are great family, youth and school activities which would build community spirit and civic sensibilities so in need of enhancement in our country today. Social Justice parish groups could take the lead in instigating projects like these in this year themed “*Catholic family, become what you are.*”

Individual habits then, can make a difference in our families, our communities, our work places. Should each of us recognize and live our role as an environmental steward, whether from a faith-based or common sense perspective, we will influence those around us positively. Let us also involve our children in our environmentally friendly activities so that the attitudes and practices would be sustainable and enduring. The “Compendium...” teaches:

“Responsibility for the environment, the common heritage of *humankind*, extends not only to present needs but also to those of the future.”

Would that humankind could always enjoy in awe and harmony the wonders of creation: its order / balance, its beauty, its power... I’ll do my two cents. What about you?