

CONVERSATIO 2008



MONTH : May
NUMBER : 5
VOLUME : XXXVIII

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St. Scholastica's Priory
Manila


Dear Sisters,

As you know in the last month, I have accompanied Jun Lozada to Truth Masses, Fora, etc. The amazing, incredible, amusing and in a way touching phenomenon that I invariably observe is the reaction of people to him – whose face lit up in recognition, and inevitably a request to have a picture with him, their cell phones inevitably used as their cameras. (In fact, I remarked once, this is really a picture-picture revolution!) These are not just celebrity struck teenagers, but matrons, sophisticated looking gentlemen, lowly vendors, security guards in buildings, staff of government or court offices, cooks and waiters in restaurants, passengers in the airport waiting for their flights. It is not so much awe that is reflected in their faces but genuine affection.

One of the lessons that Jun shares about his experience is how students would say: “We believe in what you are saying but why are you doing this?” They cannot imagine someone doing something so risky without any money or promise of office or some material reward for it. And Jun says he is saddened by this fact that young people seem no longer to hear from their elders about conscience, dignity, integrity, etc. He tells them that it is possible to act according to one’s conscience even without material reward. And then he ends his sharing by saying: “But although I don’t get any material reward from what I have done, I have gained something that is priceless—one that cannot be commanded or paid for—the genuine affection and respect of complete strangers.” And I can attest to that. It is really something to think about: “ONE CANNOT COMMAND OR PAY FOR GENUINE RESPECT OR AFFECTION. A politician or someone in authority may be respected for their positions but it may not necessarily be personal respect and certainly not personal affection.

In our religious life, even if one is General, or Prioress, or Superior, we cannot command people to respect us, much less to like us. RESPECT and AFFECTION are the spontaneous reaction of people to a positive signal coming from us that evokes either respect or affection. They are a resonance, a natural response to a corresponding stimuli coming out of us. And precisely because they cannot be commanded or paid for, they are priceless. Power, prestige, positions could be paid for but not these human recognition of goodness in another person. I really feel blessed and happy to constantly witness this.

Lovingly yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

S T A T I O C O N F E R E N C E

Consecrated Chastity

by S. Josefina G. Nepomuceno, OSB

Consecrated chastity is given a concise but comprehensive presentation in Our Constitutions. It is located within the section on *conversatio morum* following Benedictine monastic tradition. (Constitutions, 2002, Chap. II, 202) We do have a vow of chastity even if we do not pronounce it separately as other religious do.

For us Benedictines consecrated chastity has a double significance. In this short conference on such a very basic, broad and important topic, we hope to be able to animate a deeper appreciation and understanding of consecrated chastity in itself and as intimately integrated in *conversatio morum*.

Consecrated Chastity in the early Church

Consecrated chastity goes all the way back to the early Church with its antecedents in the consecration of virgins. In fact, “the consecration of virgins is one of the oldest sacramentals in the Church and is the oldest form of consecrated life. . . .Through this sacramental, after renewing her resolve to live in perpetual virginity for God, the virgin is set aside as a sacred person, espoused to Christ, and belonging to Him alone.” (consecrated virgins@vocations.ca)

This setting aside “as a sacred person espoused to Christ and belonging to Him alone” is the very essence of consecration and makes consecrated chastity “outstanding among the evangelical counsels.” In fact, Pope John Paul II made it a special point to say that Vatican II departed from the usual order in enumerating the evangelical counsels and instead “expressly mentions consecrated chastity before the other two vows (cf. LG 43; PC 12, 13, 14), because it considers chastity as the determining commitment of the state of consecrated life.” This is due to its being “also the evangelical counsel that ‘most obviously shows the power of grace, which raises love beyond the human being's natural inclinations.’” For “it is a gift of divine grace given by the Father to certain souls, (cf. Mt 19:11; 1 Cor 7:7), whereby they may devote themselves to God alone the more easily, due to an undivided heart (cf. 1 Cor 7:32-34) (CHASTITY FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM. General Audience, November 16, 1994, Pope John Paul II)

Consecrated Chastity: a gift of love

Consecrated chastity is the determining commitment to the consecrated life because it is a matter of love raised, as stated above, by the power of grace beyond purely human possibilities. “It is an initiative coming wholly from the Father (cf. Jn15:16), who asks those whom he has chosen to respond with complete and exclusive devotion. The experience of this gracious love of

God is so powerful that the person called senses the need to respond by unconditionally dedicating his or her life to God.” (Vita Consecrata, 17) The response is a complete “radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus and in him of every member of the human family.” (ibid, 3) It is a complete gift given voluntarily in love for the sake of a greater love, the *summum bonum*.

A Gift of Divine Grace to the Church

Consecrated chastity is a gift of divine grace to some persons who are granted the gift of light and decision. It is also a gift *to* the Church. Consecrated chastity along with poverty and obedience, make “constantly ‘visible’ in the midst of the world” the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history even as it awaits its full realization in heaven.” (Ibid, 1) Through these evangelical counsels, the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God and are an assurance of its full realization. As our Constitutions declares it beautifully, consecrated chastity “is a sign of God’s reign in this world already begun and still to come.” (Cons, II, 3)

The consecration stands as a sign to the People of God that we “have no lasting city here below, but look forward to one which is to come. This being so, the religious state by giving its members greater freedom from earthly cares more adequately manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below .” (LG 44)

For the sake of the Kingdom

By the gift of consecrated chastity, one is set aside as a sacred person, espoused to Christ, and belonging to Him alone. Values so close and dear to the human heart – home, family, married companionship, children -- are left behind, are renounced for the sake of a greater and higher good. This is the positive aspect of the renunciation “the total dedication to the kingdom, which implies absolute devotion to God ‘who is supremely loved’ and to the service of his kingdom.” (Chastity for ... the Kingdom, ibid)

We are all familiar with St. Paul’s statement on the demands and advantages of this dedication to the kingdom: "The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord, but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. The unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit.” (Ibid) That is why Vatican II states that chastity is "the most suitable means by which religious dedicate themselves with undivided heart to the service of God and the works of the apostolate" (PC 12) (Ibid). Our Constitutions echoes this: “Consecrated chastity frees us for a greater love for God and people and this love impels us to a more intensive apostolate.” (Cons, II, 3)

Manifests the bridal relationship of Christ and the Church, his bride

By consecrated chastity religious “give witness to all Christ’s faithful of the wondrous marriage between the Church and Christ her only spouse, a union which has been established by God and will be fully manifested in the world to come.” (Perfectae Caritatis, 12) The consecration “serves as a better symbol of the unbreakable link between Christ and His Spouse, the Church.” (Lumen Gentium 44) In this marriage the basic value of virginity or celibacy in relation to God is discovered. It is for this reason that one speaks of "consecrated chastity." (A Witness to Spousal Love for the Church, John Paul II, General Audience, Nov. 23, 1994)

Pope John Paul II elaborates on the bridal relationship pointing to Jesus himself.

Jesus used the nuptial imagery to say that he himself is the bridegroom foretold and awaited--the Messiah bridegroom (cf. Mt 9:15; 25:1). He also insisted on this analogy and terminology to explain what the "kingdom" is that he had come to bring. "The reign of God may be likened to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son" (Mt 22:2). He compared his disciples to the bridegroom's friends, who rejoice at his presence and will fast when the bridegroom is taken away from them (cf. Mk 2:19-20).

By calling himself the bridegroom, Jesus expressed the meaning of his entrance into history. He came to bring about God's marriage with humanity, in accordance with what the prophets foretold, in order to establish Yahweh's new covenant with his people, and to fill human hearts with the new gift of divine love, enabling them to taste its joy. As the bridegroom, he invites everyone to respond to this gift of love. All are called to answer love with love. He asks some to give a fuller, stronger and more radical response: that of virginity or celibacy "for the kingdom of heaven." (ibid)

Many are invited, but few accept

Not everyone can understand the gift of consecrated chastity or the way of voluntary celibacy, in the sense that not everyone is able to grasp its meaning, to accept it, to practice it. “Those to whom the gift is offered are required to make a deliberate act of will conscious of the duty and the privilege of consecrated chastity. Therefore, the choice must be well thought out and stem from a firm, conscious decision that has matured deep within the individual.”(ibid) Accepting and observing the evangelical counsel of consecrated virginity and celibacy requires sufficient "psychological and emotional maturity" (PC 12), which is indispensable to live this way.

What are the conditions for faithfully following Christ on this point? “trust in God's love, and prayer to him stirred by the awareness of human weakness; prudent and humble behavior; and above all, a life of intense union with Christ.

This last point, which is the key to all consecrated life, contains the secret of fidelity to Christ as the one bridegroom of the soul, the only reason to live.” (CHASTITY FOR THE KINGDOM, IBID)

We who have accepted . . .

We have taken a fast review of consecrated chastity and we are filled with awe and wonder at how beautiful, profound and inspiring this way is that we are walking. It seems sublime for us and when we look at ourselves we must admit in all honesty that this is beyond our natural capabilities and also beyond our holiest dreams and fantasies. That I, by my accepting the gift of consecrated chastity, in all my frailty and weakness, am committed to the one love, Christ; that by this I am a sign of the Church's espousal to Christ; that my being consecrated directs attention to the primacy of God and his kingdom; that I am living already now the eternal life of the Trinity. Am I living up to being this sign?

To get some indication of how I am living my being a sign, I must get a sense of how this vow touches me. This vow singularly reaches down to the most intimate thoughts, inclinations and desires of my heart, the values I hold dear, my loves, and their exterior manifestation in my acts, behavior and deeds which are the presentation of myself in daily life. My living of the vow to love the Lord with an undivided heart is spelled out in all aspects of my personal life, permeates my life in community and my commitment to his mission and my assigned apostolate. This vow is totalitarian.

It is a matter of the heart, my human heart which I have offered totally as an oblation to the Divine Heart so that he can change, transform and conform it to his own. Living this vow is a continuing process of heart change, a struggle and a battle. A struggle because even if I have taken the vow with all seriousness and sincerity, my human heart does not take kindly to the required change this metanoia, it resists and tries to bargain and to settle for compromise. The human heart tends to be bifocal, and the vow calls for focus and direction: singleness of heart.

But we are in this state, painfully aware that by our own capabilities and power, we are incapable of the fidelity of our promise. Fortunately, when we made the vow, the Lord also assured us that he is with us, he accompanies us, he will never abandon us, he will always be there for us. Does he not assure us, you are mine, you are cherished, I love you beyond your wildest imaginings, you are beautiful in my sight, and so dear to my heart? Have I not paid the price of my life for you? And so the more we accept this love, the closer we are to him, the surer will be the change of our heart.

The crux is union with the Lord which is fostered and deepened in an intense prayer life. In the struggle for transformation of heart, we are blessed with the necessary "weapons" for the spiritual battle for our heart. The first line of our weapons are 1) the Eucharist; 2) our Divine Office prayed in community; 3) lectio divina; 4) and our private personal prayer specially before the Blessed Sacrament, and study.

These weapons are as effective as the quality of our participation, the level of our attentiveness, the sharpness of our focus, and the determination of our perseverance. We can ask ourselves, have we taken and used these opportunities in our daily schedule with zeal and dedication so that they are productive of genuine prayer and intimacy with Christ? (Const, II, 4)

For instance when we are before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration of the Lord, do we realize that the One whom we are facing is the Father's splendor, beauty, truth, loveliness, majesty, love and power who dwells in the silence and loneliness of the tabernacle in unfathomable humility, simplicity and total presence to us? Are we likewise present to him?

Asceticism. This is a weapon absolutely necessary for victory. I believe that the purpose of ascetical practices is to nurture the undivided heart that is the distinctive mark of consecrated chastity. Our genuinely good desires to give ourselves totally and unreservedly to the Lord in love are necessary but they are not sufficient to nurture the undivided heart. This does not happen automatically. Rather it requires continuing successive painful "renunciations" as the Lord prunes us to make us more fruitful. In the words of Jesus, "my Father is the vinegrower. . . he prunes every branch that does bear fruit that it may bear even more fruit." (Jn 15: 1-2) As we grow in years and experience in the consecrated life, the pruning will get closer to the very core of our self so that we are given the chance to choose to lose our life in order to save it. We experience our own *kenosis*. We must remember that the happiness promised to the pure of heart presupposes denying one's life in order to win it.

We are reminded that our accepting the gift of total self-giving will mean a closer following of our Lord. "In the light of the cross, we understand that every union with Christ the bridegroom is a loving commitment to the One who was crucified. Those who profess consecrated chastity know they are destined to a deeper sharing in Christ's sacrifice for the redemption of the world" (cf. RD 8, 11). (A Witness, *ibid*) And so instead of running away from the daily cross, why do we not welcome it. We should conquer and calm our fears of pain and suffering because these unite us to our Bridegroom in the nuptial embrace of the cross.

Community Life

Consecrated chastity is lived not in isolation but within the community which is the new and larger family in place of our natural family. Probably we have not imagined community to be a weapon in our spiritual combat, a source of strength in our journey to the undivided love for Christ. A different perspective in reading this passage of our Constitution will be a revelation.

The community provides
a sense of belonging and acceptance
but in turn requires self-giving
and self denial.
In our dealings with others
we will be simple and natural,
spontaneous and disciplined,
knowing how to unite openness and reserve. (II. 5)

If we take time and effort to reflect on these statements, we will find them potent weapons in the spiritual battle for our hearts.

Counterforces. The culture that dominates our world as propagated by the various media constantly allure us with “wants” that could easily erode our resolve to keep our needs simple. We are also bombarded with enticing images that can blur our self image as consecrated persons who, by the very consecration, no longer place a high value to being physically attractive and admirable. Yet how often do we hear our own sisters remark on how “sexy” we are and we feel flattered by it. Now that we can use things that are bought from stores for public consumption, we are challenged to buy and use those styles and models that are more appropriate to us as religious persons. One point for discussion is, what are appropriate for us?

We have accepted the gift of consecrated chastity in order to be free to dedicate ourselves with undivided heart to the service of God and the works of the apostolate. As our Constitutions declare:

Consecrated chastity frees us
for a greater love for God and people
and this love impels us
to a more intensive apostolate. (II, 3)

How should this greater love express itself except in a human way, a human way that is recognizable to the people we serve and deal with in our apostolates. Therefore, the expectation is a love that is warm, affectionate, cheerful, humorous, and with a joyful face. Is that how we deal with people? Or do we grow into frozen delights that are masungit, mahirap kausap, nakakatakot? What is our weapon against the unloving behavior that can creep in with our concern for nothing-less-than-perfect situations, when we are not in control, when we become irritable, give in to frustration and discouragement because things don’t go our way?

This passage from the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI is both enlightening and instructive in the ongoing struggle to love our sisters and our neighbor.

Love of neighbor is . . . shown to be possible in the way proclaimed by the Bible, by Jesus. It consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern. . . . Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give them the look of love which they crave. . . . If I have no contact whatsoever with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God. (*Deus caritas est*, pp 39-40)

We are invited, urged, to reflect on how Jesus looked at people: with the gaze of love, mercy, compassion. Was he, *is he*, not slow to anger, quick to forgive, making allowances for the weakness of character of his disciples and friends? We could do a *lectio* on the gaze of Jesus, the gaze that transforms our hearts and make them like his own. We should also go through the Rule of Benedict to discover the gems of a loving heart that are found there.

From all that we have read so far, can we not already see how the living of the vow of consecrated chastity is a living of our *conversatio morum*?

In our battle for a loving undivided heart, Mary is also our icon and model. Let us contemplate Mary as the one who out of love gave up everything to give life to Jesus. And in that total self-giving she found her true self and her place in the drama of our salvation. In Jesus she gained everything. And she is also our advocate before the Father, our coach and cheer leader in the big contest of our life to be undivided, singlehearted, focused on loving our Lord and our sisters and brothers in him. Providentially, this is May, the month when we hold the *flores de Mayo* to honor Mary and to ask for her prayer. May our prayerful reflections in this *statio* be as floral bouquets offered to our Mother to merit her special patronage and intercession.

“But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the expressible delight of love.” (RB, Prologue.)

U.I.O.G.D.

Suggested questions for reflection and sharing:

1. Among the different realities of which consecrated chastity is a sign, which can you best identify with and why?
2. At this stage of your consecrated life, which aspect of consecrated chastity do you find
a) most comforting, b) most reassuring, c) most challenging.
3. Discuss how the vows of *conversatio morum* and consecrated chastity intersect and interpenetrate in our Missionary Benedictine life.

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OUR EARTH – OUR MISSION

by Thomas Malipurathu, SVD

(Excerpts)

1. GLOBALIZED PRESENT, ENDANGERED FUTURE

Through her haunting 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson inadvertently set in motion a great movement. For Carson the book was the concrete expression of her life-long advocacy of nature and environmental ethics. It is widely credited with starting the modern environmental movement. Thanks to this movement, many people – although their percentage is still somewhat small – today are aware of the serious implications of a degenerating environment. It is unfortunately true that most people still think of the ecological problem and as something that affects the faraway polar regions and outer space! Others, vaguely aware of some of the issues involved, by and large limit themselves to thinking that planting more trees in their compounds and keeping their backyards free of litter are all that is required of them to ensure the health of the environment. But more dangerously, many people who are aware of the seriousness of the issue, deliberately seek to downplay its relevance because they feel threatened by the life-style changes that some of the remedial measures might demand.

The immediate aim of the author of *Silent Spring* was to alert the public to the disastrous consequences of the uncontrolled production and indiscriminate use of pesticides. Concretely she focused on the gradual disappearance of the American song birds. But the book had a much wider scope that went far beyond the mere voicing of a sharply-defined caution against the agricultural and domestic use of certain poisons. By taking on the powerful chemical industry, this courageous woman raised important questions about humankind's impact on nature. *Silent Spring* made people think about the environment and during the four decades in which it has been read and re-read, the book has exercised a profound impact on many an environmental enthusiast.

The image of a devastated earth that the title of the book conjures up is truly chilling. A spring without chirping birds, humming bees and the murmur of the gently swaying trees is both repellent and fearsome. Widespread and continued use of highly toxic pesticides has already resulted in the extinction of many rare species of birds and numerous species of insects and microbes – slowly but surely paving the way for a silent spring. Given the fact that every living organism on the face of the planet is part of an interconnected web, loss of one or more links in the chain progressively weakens the entire system. Carson pointed this out in her book with compelling narrative force.

Carson wrote her monograph long before the process of globalization had assumed the savage force that we experience today. This process sometimes reveals itself as something that goes beyond the realm of economic activity, a predatory process that has no regard for environmental concerns, national boundaries or cultural sensibilities. It considers profit as the sole driving force of all economic activity. A mindless exploitation of nature which feeds the frenzy of production and consumption is generally recognized as the hallmark of globalization. The culture of consumerism that globalization had produced considers consumption as the main

form of self-expression and the chief source of identity. “I consume, therefore I exist!” seems to be the principle that has the highest approval rating in our day. The truth is that the economic and social dynamics that result from this stretches the eco-system beyond the endurance level, giving rise to a series of lethal consequences.

In the past couple of years a series of weather-related natural disasters that caused heavy losses to life and property in different parts of our planet profoundly shocked the world. There are many in the scientific community who believe that such devastating events are closely linked to the mindless exploitation in such ways as the ongoing destruction of rain forests and the undertaking of developmental projects that ignore the ecological impact. A good number of people think that these are wake-up calls that Nature gives us.

The recent scare caused by the rapid spread of the bird flu infection, although it was mostly limited to birds, had once again set the world thinking about environmental issues and about the human misuse of Nature’s bounty. Discerning people have been pointing out for a long time that interfering with the laws of nature to maximize production and profit can lead to disastrous consequences. The sudden outbreak of hitherto unknown strains of deadly viruses and their ferocious manner of attack are causing sleepless nights for medical researchers and healthcare experts all over the world.

Many, for instance, see the bird flu infection as a result of the callousness with which poultry is raised – or rather mass produced – in most countries. Huge numbers of birds are forced into tiny cages, where they have no room to move and are forced to stand constantly on their legs. These horrifyingly unhealthy living conditions experienced by many generations of birds, they contend, have resulted in the deadly H5N1 strain of virus. Foot-and-mouth disease and the mad cow syndrome, prevalent in farm animals in many of the developing countries, are widely believed to be the consequence of the indiscriminate use of hormone injections to boost the quality and quantity of meat production.

The introduction of the Genetically Modified Seeds is frequently hailed as a breakthrough in scientific research. The use of GMS to boost agricultural production is now common in many countries. It appears that we are stepping into the age of ‘designer’ crops. But what remains to be seen is what kind of effect it will have on the metabolism of humans and animals consuming grains and pulses produced by this breakthrough method. Sane but isolated voices are already advising caution.

Bird flu and foot-and-mouth disease are just two of the more evident examples of nature getting back at us for our total disregard for its laws. Many of the ecological problems that we are facing today can ultimately be traced back to the same disregard exercised in ways both evident and subtle. Air and water pollution that impairs the health of vast sections of the population, depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, shrinking biodiversity as well as the unusual and often harmful weather fluctuations are foreboding signs. Add to them such potential threats as the rapidly dwindling stocks of non-renewable sources of energy, the gradual disappearance wetlands and water bodies, diminishing water-tables, the melting of the polar ice-caps, expanding deserts, the mindless destruction of rainforests for cattle-raising especially through illegal logging and large scale erosion of topsoil, and the picture dismal.

The point is this: the process of globalization, although it has been beneficial in many ways, has accelerated the degradation of the environment, inexorably pushing the earth to the brink. The situation is fast becoming critical, because at stake is the ability of the planet to support life.

2. Christian Mission and Environmental Activism

It is now commonplace knowledge that mission theology has been constantly evolving. Some would say that this evolution is visible already in the different layers of the New Testament tradition. It has surely come a long way from the days when the focus was on an expansionist agenda progressing in tandem with the Western colonial enterprise. Through the providential intervention of Vatican II the process of reinventing was accelerated, and today the concept of mission is developing along the lines of dialogue. Dialogue in this context is to be understood in a very broad sense. Normally people tend to think of dialogue as an exchange of ideas between two or more parties which is almost exclusively carried out through the exercise of the human vocal chords. But when dealing with the topic of mission, dialogue is to be understood as a comprehensive process of respectful interaction with the other. It is making space for the other in our scheme of things. It is an effort to put ourselves in the shoes of the other. It is trying to see reality from the point of view of the other. Looked at from this angle, dialogue has less to do with speech and more to do with an attitude: of inclusiveness, of solidarity, and of respect. Some would designate this process as the dialogue of life.

It is from this perspective of looking at mission as an activity inspired by an attitude of dialogue that we can establish our initiatives for protecting the integrity of Creation as a genuine act of witnessing to the Reign of God. If we proceed from the starting point that an attitude of dialogue must permeate every aspect of our missionary outreach, we can easily see that the whole Creation, with its divinely ordained richness and diversity, becomes our partner in dialogue. It is instructive to note that 'ecology' is derived from the Greek word '*oikos*', meaning house or home. Every act that in some way contributes to the restoring of ecological soundness is in reality an act of caring for our home. It is true that missionary outreach is primarily addressed to human beings in all situations of need. But human beings are intimately linked to their physical environment. Our desperately endangered environment deserves to be considered as a situation of need calling for committed action.

In the Bible's first story of Creation, the Book of Genesis makes it clear that God created the universe for the sake of human beings and indeed placed humans at the head of Creation. That is the unmistakable meaning of the creation of humans at the end of a graduated process (cf. Gn 1:1-25). It is made explicit through clear statements, first in God's own words in direct speech (cf. Gn 1:26) and then in indirect speech in the words of the narrator (cf. Gn 1:27) – a double affirmation that human beings are created in God's image. Subsequently God entrusts the whole of creation to humans in words ringing with significance: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on the earth" (Gn 1:28).

God entrusted humanity with the noble task of being the steward of Creation. Now, a steward is someone who takes care of things for the owner. God is the owner of Creation and God passes it on to us humans for safe-keeping. In the same act of being appointed stewards, we are also endowed with the supreme liberty of subduing Creation and making use of it for the advancement of the common good. There are certain limits and responsibilities implicit in the process of subduing and making use of creation. As we all know, freedom entails a corresponding responsibility. Perhaps initially we were mindful of those limits and responsibilities, but somewhere along the way the human family lost sight of this important dimension of God's generous act of trust.

There are many who point out that today's humans have lost the sense of wonder that was so much a part of life in earlier stages of history. This is assumed to be one of the main reasons for the thoughtless exploitation of nature and its bounties. Today's humans think of themselves as well-informed and sophisticated in an unprecedented manner, with the result that nothing in the created world inspires a sense of wonder. When we are deprived of this vital sense of wonder, we end up abusing the gifts of nature. The grave ecological crisis on our hands is its inevitable consequence.

The restoration of a healthy attitude towards the environment perhaps has to start with the rekindling of this sense of wonder. Some of the damage that we have inflicted on nature is irreversible and therefore we have to live with the consequences. But determined action now can still apply the healing touch to the wounded earth and make it faster for future generations. This is precisely where Christian mission has a role to play.

It is in this context that the whole of Creation, considered as a corporate personality, emerges as a dialogue partner. It is true that that description of Creation as a partner of dialogue has to be understood in a modified sense as we are not dealing with a person with self-determination and free will. But just as missionary outreach is essentially an effort to care especially for those in situations of dire need, the wounded earth becomes an eminently worthy target. Mission thus also involves the task of promoting the integrity of Creation and bringing it back from the brink. Missionaries as leaders and animators of communities at the micro-level can and should make a serious effort to motivate people to care for Mother Earth.

“Determined action now can still apply the healing touch to the wounded Earth...”

On the macro-level missionary institutes and congregations can lend their weight to impress upon lawmakers and rulers to accept the concept of “sustainable development” as an imperative of economic growth and social engineering. The Brundtland Report (Our Common Future) had already in 1987 defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.” It is based on the principle that growth should be carried out in such a way as to recycle physical resources rather than deplete them, keeping the levels of pollution to a minimum.

Spreading awareness is surely the first step. Most people, even the well-educated, are blissfully ignorant of the environmental problem and its perilous implications. Making people aware of the issues, starting with what may be immediately present to them – the contamination

of water sources, streets strewn with non-biodegradable plastic objects, bulging dump sites, etc. – is an achievable target. Awareness of a problem is often half way to its solution. By sustained efforts even people with little or no formal education can be conscientized regarding this matter.

The example of the “Chipko Movement” is very illustrative in this context. It is an initiative started mostly by the rural women of the erstwhile northwestern State of Uttar Pradesh in India (parts of which are now found in the new State of Uttaranchal), who were deeply concerned about the alarming destruction of the forest around them through commercial logging. ‘Chipko’ literally means ‘to embrace’ or ‘to hug’. These highly motivated women, known as ‘tree-huggers’, tried to protect the trees by physically posting themselves between the tree and woodcutter’s axe. This eventually grew into a powerful movement, and the Government was forced to intervene and to decree stringent rules to protect the forest.

Adopting and persuading others to adopt an eco-friendly lifestyle is crucial. There are numerous little ways in which we can contribute to the process of healing the earth. Sparing use of water and electric power, preferring public transport to private vehicles, creating car pools, opting for recycled paper, refraining from the use of disposable carrier bags, opting for environment –friendly consumer products, etc., are small but very significant steps towards environmental protection. Small steps *now* are infinitely better than megaplans for later implementation.