

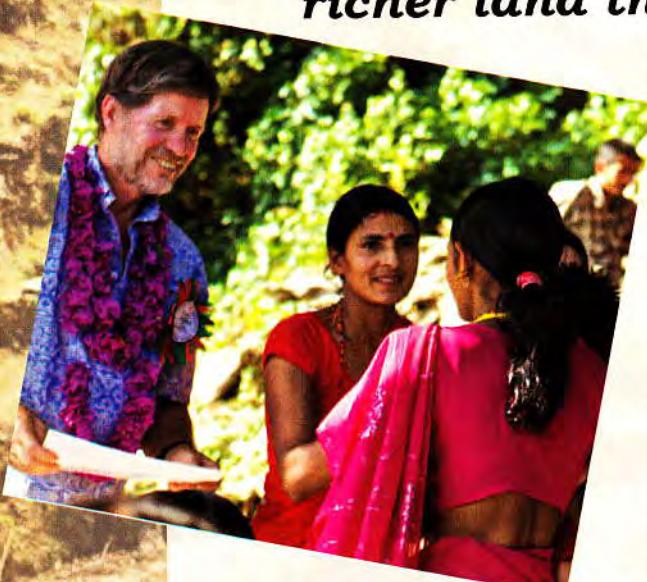


Stewards of Creation in Nepal

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“You are stewards of some of the most important resources that God has entrusted to humanity. Therefore, conserve the land well, so that your children’s children and generations after them will inherit an even richer land than was entrusted to you.”

These were the words of Pope John Paul II when he visited Des Moines, Iowa, in 1979.



His remarks are applicable far beyond the heartland of the United States. They would be appropriate today in the mountains of Nepal, a landlocked nation located between India and China. Nepal is slightly larger than Arkansas and has a population of 28 million people. The country is known for Mount Everest and the Himalaya Mountains, which form the northern border. Less well known is that climate change is affecting the lives of people there.

As a Divine Word Missionary, I was invited to join a team from Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand to assist Caritas Nepal with documenting on film some of the ways people are coping with the changes that are occurring. We were in villages in the hill region of the Syangja Province, a ten-hour drive from the capital, Kathmandu.



The so-called Green Revolution technologies have not brought the growth and prosperity expected. In many places, the technologies have had negative impacts on livelihoods of the local farmers, who have become dependent on others for seed, fertilizers, pesticide, credit, and marketing of produce. In recent years, degradation of the environment has meant lower production and an increase in the external inputs required. In addition, weather patterns appear to be changing. Long, dry periods and lighter snowfalls in the mountains result in less water in the rivers, which have their sources in the mountains. With extended dry spells, forests are more susceptible to fires, and burned slopes are subject to landslides and erosion.

Caritas Nepal is helping farmers adopt more sustainable organic farming techniques. Small farmers have formed cooperatives, and we visited communities now practicing sustainable, integrated crop and pest management, organic farming, and drought mitigation through water management and forestry replanting programs. These measures are leading to much higher yields for rice and vegetables, which enables more people to feed themselves for longer periods in the year.

The integrated pest management training is quite remarkable. I observed how farmers (mostly women) gather at one of the training test plots where they move in teams through the field, literally collecting insects of all kinds. They put them in small jars and bring them back to discuss which are "bad" insects that hinder plant growth and which are "good" ones (perhaps ones that





feed off the “bad” ones). If there was any doubt, they will set insects free in a small gauze “zoo” to observe their behavior. Pesticide is made from animal urine, and fertilizer from animal leavings and compost.

Forests provide timber for housing, wood for fuel, and foliage for feeding animals. Every able-bodied person is expected to plant and tend at least fifty trees each year, and cooperatives manage tree nurseries for this purpose. The schools run enviro-learning programs with their own areas of forest that the students plant and tend.

The majority of Nepalese are Hindu. The next largest group are Buddhist. Buddha himself was born in Nepal and is very much respected by Hindus of the country. A number of Buddhists in Nepal are refugees from Tibet. Less than one percent of the population are Christian. People appear very devout in their faith. We were welcomed at the village Buddhist monastery, and morning and afternoon, people went to worship, turned the prayer wheels, and lit incense. I stayed with two different families and, in each, the children had morning chores that included putting fresh flowers in the family shrine and offering respect before the image of the god portrayed at the shrine. As a Divine Word Missionary, I have learned about interreligious dialogue. It is said that the principal aim of dialogue is not conversion. Yet, while living with these Hindu-Buddhist families, I experienced “conversion” to new ways of integrating the Divine Mystery into my own Catholic faith.

The Buddhist and Hindu religions stress how we humans live in relation to other beings and the world around us. We see in recent times a greater appreciation of this in the Catholic Church with the understanding of how we can relate to God through creation. Everything that exists coexists. In his message for the World Day of Peace in 1990, Pope John Paul II stated that care for creation is an essential part of what it means to be Christian.

Today, there is also a renewed understanding of Genesis 1:28, “Be fertile, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.” In the past, this was seen as putting humanity in a central, dominant position that too easily sanctioned plundering the earth’s resources. Now the stress is on “stewardship” rather than “domination.” The earth has been entrusted to us, and not just to us, but to future generations also. In his World Day of Peace message in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about a “human ecology,” and in 2010, he noted, “Natural resources should be used in such a way that immediate benefits do not have a negative impact on living creatures, human and not, present and future.”

The staff of Caritas Nepal impressed me. They have a large number of personnel working in hundreds of projects throughout the country. They have earned the respect of the Nepalese authorities through their professionalism.

There are few Catholic priests in Nepal so people appreciated my presence. They even asked me to present the certificates to graduates in a special ceremony of the Farmer School. The administrator of the diocese in Kathmandu knows the reputation of the Divine Word Missionaries in the area of interreligious dialogue and sharing the Word, and invited more of our missionaries to come.

I also saw another, more challenging, side of Nepal. With a general "strike" looming, we had to hurry back to Kathmandu before everything stopped. From our lodging, we watched thousands of Maoist youth marching through the streets. It was a difficult time.

For my part, I am left with a great respect for what communities in Nepal are doing together to cope with ecological changes. There are questions in my own mind about how we can live more simply so that others may simply live. Practical measures are called for. For example, there is an arrangement whereby carbon offset donations by New Zealand World Youth Day pilgrims go toward assisting community forestry plantings in Nepal. With creative imagination, a lot more can be done. Creation is not something that happened and was completed thousands of years ago. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Creation has its own goodness and proper perfection, but it did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator. The universe was created 'in a state of journeying' (*in statu viae*) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained." (#302) ♦



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**Can you imagine...
every morning
of every day,
desperately searching
for food to eat
and clean water
to drink?**