

**PASTORAL LETTER (HOMILY) FROM BISHOP SEBASTIAN FRANCIS,
BISHOP OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF PENANG
Given on the First Sunday of Advent, 3 December 2017**

Dear People of God,

“Joy, Mercy, and Hope from the Trinitarian God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit”.

On this First Sunday of Advent, we give thanks and praise to God for all the graces and blessings received this past year of the Lord 2017 and hope for new opportunities and graces as we begin the new Liturgical Year 2018. Advent is a time of waiting for the final return of the Lord, who is our Hope and Salvation. And it seems that the world has never needed such hope and salvation as urgently as today. “So stay awake because you do not know when the Master of the house is coming...” (cf. Mk 13: 35)

My people, our world is in a '**global climate crisis**' which is also called the 'global climate emergency'. Climate change, threatens all life on Earth. 2016 was the hottest year on record.¹ The polar ice caps are melting. Sea levels are rising. Ocean acidification is killing corals and reducing fish stocks. Crops are producing less. Heat waves and climate disasters are increasing. As at 2012, climate change contributed to the deaths of more than 400,000 people a year², a figure fast rising. From 2008, an average of 21.5 million people have been displaced each year by climate hazards such as floods, storms, wildfires, and extreme temperatures.³ We have seen the devastating impacts of extreme climate events this year in countries like Haiti, Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Mexico, and the United States. In fact, we have even experienced the effects of climate change in our very own Diocese. Climate change is hardest on the poor.

Dangerous climate change is already happening; but we can avoid catastrophic climate change by personal, family and community participation in ecological integrity. In December 2015, world leaders agreed to keep global warming well below 2°C, and to pursue efforts to limit temperature to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.⁴ If we do nothing, global warming can rise by up to 4.8-7.8°C by 2100.⁵ This will be devastating for life on Earth. The world as we know it is fast passing away. We are giving our children a completely different planet with unpredictable consequences. Therefore, the world stands at the most crucial tipping point in human history.

In June 2015, Pope Francis issued an Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, “*Laudato Si*”. His Holiness was applauded by people all around the globe for taking the lead on addressing the whole world on the urgent issue of the global crisis. The Pope cites, “*Things are now reaching a breaking point*” (LS 61). The Pope tells us firmly and clearly that the Church “*must above all protect mankind from self-destruction*” (LS 79).

The Word of God clearly reminds us that we are responsible of caring for the rest of creation as stewards and not as owners. It is my duty, as your Bishop, to inform you that the stand of the universal Roman Catholic Church is that the current climate crisis is a real and existential threat to all life on Earth and that it is primarily caused by selfish and indifferent human activities.

We are all accountable for the situation the world is in and the future that will unfold. Let us not leave devastation as our legacy. I reiterate Pope Francis: “*What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the Earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity and the dignity of God’s creation. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn. (LS 160)*”

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/nov/14/2016-will-be-the-hottest-year-on-record-un-says>

² <http://www.daraint.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/CVM2ndEd-FrontMatter.pdf>

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/11/581f52dc4/frequently-asked-questions-climate-change-disaster-displacement.html>

⁴ Agreement by the Conference of the Parties (COP) 21 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2015 in Paris. <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>.

⁵ https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/AR5_SYR_FINAL_SPM.pdf

What then is needed, dear people of God? Our Pope calls us to an "ecological conversion" whereby "the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us" (LS 217). He calls us to "hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor". The Pope emphasizes that "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience (LS 217)."

"Ecological conversion" calls for a change in our lifestyle. This means that true transformation of the world must come from within each one of us, not from without. We must *choose* sacrifice over want, sharing over greed, and serving the common good of all creation over convenience. Only then can we truly be Disciples of Hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.

Last year, the Post-Peninsular Malaysia Pastoral Convention IV Statement by the Bishops of Peninsular Malaysia stressed that "We must aim and strive towards building a nation founded on a spirit of integrity – personal, spiritual, political, financial, and **ecological integrity**, and therefore, commit ourselves to work with all Malaysians who want to see a more integrated Malaysia".

The Diocese of Penang is committed to taking up the torch of **creation justice and resilience** whereby we opt to act with the "spirit of creativity, inclusivity, and bridge-building" (which emerged at PMPC IV) to ensure creation justice for all creatures, both human and in nature, and to build resilient communities and a resilient Earth. It is for this mission that the Episcopal Commission for Creation Justice (which was earlier called the Commission for Justice and Peace since 2013-2016) was formed by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei in 2017. This Commission falls within the purview of the Commission for Ecology in the Vatican. Thus, the Penang Diocese is working very much in tandem with the universal Church on this global issue.

I call upon each and every one of you to be one in mind, spirit and action in this important mission. Be true ecological citizens and disciples of hope. Love and pray constantly for all creation. Stop polluting, reduce the excessive consumption of unnecessary disposable materials such as paper plates, plastic cutlery sets, tissue papers and plastic bags, conserve water, save electricity and plant more trees. **REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE. Do all you can to build a just, resilient and ecological world from your homes to your communities, parishes and organizations.** Remember who you are: God's own children; "the salt of the earth and the light of the world" (Mt 5:13-14), anointed to spread the Good News to all and free a world imprisoned in a deep and dark crisis (Lk 14:8; Is 61:1). Go forth in full confidence in the Lord and be bold witnesses of His saving power.

"Indeed, God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. (LS 245)"

St. Catherine of Genoa, [1447-1510] "Renewal without Reform (Repentance, Conversion, Reparation) is the corruption of the Church"

Together with St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology, I pray that all of us will open our hearts to an ecological conversion this Advent, and I look forward to journeying forward with you in hope for all creation.

Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the Earth!

Mary, Mother of the Church and Earth, pray for us and be with us!

"Be Disciples of Hope"



Rt. Rev. Sebastian Francis
Bishop of Penang