

On My Mind

3/25/05

Having Covenant Day fall on Maundy Thursday - with Good Friday and Easter following - presents somewhat of a challenge, in terms of choosing topics for this week's column. But to begin at the beginning, so to speak, it would appear that once again, Covenant Day was given but a minimum of attention. The NMI Council for the Humanities held its 3rd annual debate at the Guma Husticia on Covenant Day - an event that was not very well advertised. For some strange reason, neither was the topic of debate made known to the public in advance.</P>

Eight students from four schools (Hopwood Junior High, Marianas High, Saipan International and Whispering Palms) participated within the context of the National Forensic League. The debate is still on-going as this column is being put up on the web.</P>

As has been said before in this space, one would think that the founding document upon which the CNMI is based would be given more respect, more attention, than it gets, especially in today's world, where CNMI's rights, privileges and authority seem to be under duress more and more frequently. But it doesn't. Perhaps the fault lies, in part, in the fact that no agency, no office, no position, has ever been specifically assigned responsibility for providing protection and advocacy for the Covenant, and without that, everyone expects someone else to do it.</P>

Though it seems counter-intuitive, from a budgetary sense, to do so, nonetheless perhaps it is time that consideration be given to establishing an office for the 'protection and advocacy' of the Covenant (to borrow a phrase from NMPASI) - to appointing a Protector of the Covenant. The function of this office would be, first and foremost, to see to it that the provisions of the Covenant were pro-actively protected, adhered to and defended in any and all legal forums - a need identified by "Honorable Accord" author Howard Willens in the fall-out from the stateless persons issue. The office would also function to see to it that suitable observations were held on Covenant Day, and that knowledge and understanding of the Covenant and its terms were promoted year-round throughout the Commonwealth, but particularly in the schools and in government.</P>

Since the first function could become critically important to the CNMI, this is not a position to be handed out as a political plum. Stringent requirements would have to be defined as to the candidate's knowledge and experience, legal qualifications and familiarity with the history of the Covenant. And while the office could most likely operate on a part-time basis for most of the year, provision should be included for a higher level of funding should a legal issue arise and full time attention be required.</P>

Perhaps such an office could be established on the occasion of Covenant Day 2006?</P>

<P align=center>***</P>

Easter this year comes closely on the heels of the vernal equinox, and the first day of spring. The joy and hope and celebration Easter inspires in the Christian world is echoed by the celebration, in other cultures and societies, of the arrival of spring, and the hope of new beginnings. New crops are sown, new foals and calves and piglets born, and expectations raised

that the coming year will be better, brighter, more productive than what has gone before.</P>

While the season brings hope - be it on either a spiritual or secular level - to human beings, more than another spring seems needed to bring hope for the earth itself. A rather grim forecast is being circulated of late, highlighted by an article appearing in the Tablet by Michael McCarthy, editor of The Independent - both British publications - after attending a recent conference held in England for the purpose of providing an update on climate change to policy-makers around the world. At the conference, a UN panel released the third in a series of five-year reports documenting what climate scientists think is happening now, and what is likely to happen in the future in regard to global warming.</P>

McCarthy reports that what the scientists think is happening is pretty grim. If temperatures rise, as they are expected to continue to do due to ongoing emissions of carbon dioxide, he wrote, not only the ice sheet covering the western side of Antarctica but also the ice sheet covering Greenland may start to melt. Antarctica's was thought, only four years ago, to be safe for probably 1,000 years but evidence since then has led scientists to question that estimate, to believe it should be significantly reduced. Greenland's may melt with only a 1.5 degree C. rise in temperature above pre-industrial levels - and the world is already at 0.7 degrees above that level.</P>

Another major threat, notes McCarthy, was seen as being the increasing acidity of the oceans. "The billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide human society is producing are not only causing the climate to change. When they dissolve in sea water they are combining with it, in a simple chemical reaction, to produce carbonic acid. But the world's seas [have been] alkaline... for many millions of years, and it is in this environment that thousands of species of small marine, organisms at the bottom of the food web, from plankton to shellfish, have evolved. They will not be able to live in an acid sea," McCarthy writes.</P>

"The point about these two disclosures," he continues, "is that they were not based on predictions of future events by supercomputer models of the global climate, which is the origin of most scare stories - to use the term neutrally - about global warming. They were based on actual observation, in the real world, of things that are happening now."</P>

The most disturbing finding, though, is that not only is climate change proceeding much more quickly than anticipated, but that even if all emissions were to stop instantly, there is already enough carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to cause it to warm up an additional 0.6 degrees C.</P>

"But... the emissions are by no means going to stop tomorrow. Under the Kyoto protocol, abandoned by the United States - the world's biggest carbon dioxide emitter - the industrialised countries are struggling to cut their emissions back to merely 5 per cent below 1990 levels [while] controlling climate change would require a cut of perhaps 60 per cent.</P>

"Yet the 2004 World Energy Outlook of the International Energy Agency calculates that [in] the next 25 years global emissions of carbon dioxide are likely to increase by 62

per cent, mainly from the developing world, as the Chinese and the Indians rush to build coal-fired power stations to service their exploding economies."</P>

Concludes McCarthy, "It was the inevitability of what was going to happen, I think, that for the first time struck us with real force: that whatever flapping, floundering efforts human kind eventually makes to try to stop it all, the great ice sheets will melt, the seas will turn acid, and the land will burn....The earth is finished.....And what will our children make of our generation, who let this planet, so lovingly created, go to waste?"</P>

Dire indeed. The concern over opening the Talofofa area to development would seem to pale in comparison. Yet the fact remains that trees absorb carbon dioxide, and that by clearing all that land not only is habitat destroyed, but the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is increased. The CNMI might better the money into improving roads to and in Kagman, as a resident thereof has proposed in his recent letter to the editor.</P>

<P align=center>***</P>

A search of the web using the title of McCarthy's article, "Slouching Towards Disaster" shows that not everyone accepts the bleakness of his conclusions. For example, an article in Global Echo, proposes a strategy of "contraction and convergence," developed by the London-based Global Commons Institution, that would cut greenhouse gas emissions in a fair and timely manner, averting the worst climatic impacts. Unlike Kyoto, it is a global framework involving all countries, both 'developed' and 'developing'.</P>

The theory is that nations would reduce their carbon dioxide emissions over time - i.e., contraction - and eventually these reductions would converge into a safe level of emissions. But the idea has not caught on - which the article blames primarily on lack of adequate press coverage.</P>

The message, though, is clear. If effective action is not taken sooner rather than later, the damage being done may not be reversible. Will mankind awaken, and rescue its home?</P>

<P align=center>***</P>

Appropriate not only to Easter, but to the world situation at large is the just-opened exhibit at the Arts Council gallery on Capitol Hill. A number of the paintings depict the misery of life on earth, and the glory of life in the hereafter. More pointedly, several depict specific acts of torture inflicted on members of the Falun Gong by members of the Chinese government. The exhibit's title, "Truth, Compassion, Tolerance" provides a fitting theme for us all.</P>

It is a very moving display, contrasting hope and agony, good and evil; yet focusing on faith and perseverance. It is also an unsettling exhibit, disquieting and disturbing - particularly in light of accounts of similar torture on the part of the U.S. of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and other prisons. And it forces the question: what right does the the U.S. have to criticize China for its abuse of human rights when the U.S. itself is guilty of similar behavior?</P>

<P align=center>***</P>

A belated goodie: Bill Sakovich's statement that it doesn't take \$250,000 to promote the CNMI as what can only be a limited site for training Beijing Olympic contestants - see the 3/19 issue of the Trib. And a "baddie:" the presence, on Saipan this week-end, of the slick

salesman who sold the governor on the fraudulent idea of fabricating memorial coins, and who has a not-yet fulfilled sole-source contract with the CNMI offering him a \$400,00 bonus for lobbying Congress on recovering "hold-over" funds. Will our gullible governor fall for yet another of this "consultant's" sleazy schemes?</P>