



Part One:
Singapore

Bishop John's Diary from 2022 visit
to South East Asia

Days one and two...

I must say that, after nearly three years of virtually no travel, the prospect of this trip has been very attractive. I certainly valued the days in Lebanon last January and the Far East has always held an appeal for me. Despite the horrors of the recent history of so many countries of the region, there is always such a smiling and helpful welcome of the people. I must start by recognising how privileged I am to be making this trip.

I should explain that there are three different reasons for this trip, and I have put them together to minimise the flight mileage. I will explain the different reasons, as the journey unfolds.

The first day, and into Day Two, is all travel, Manchester to Dubai, Dubai to Singapore. It was long, but not unpleasant. I have now arrived at my hotel and getting used to time change and jetlag.

I have often hoped that one day there would be reason to visit Singapore. Even from a distance and with my very limited knowledge, it seems to encourage a good combination of economic progress which includes all people at all levels of wealth, and a care for the environment. It is good to know that it is making such progress in providing housing, implementing a just wage, providing healthcare and education, while protecting nature and open spaces. I have some meetings already arranged, but this is the part of

the trip that seems to have some free time, providing the possibility for some exploring.

What I find really appealing, as I arrive, is the knowledge that within my own lifetime this sovereign state has made so many improvements and developed into such a vibrant place. Just in 1959 it was rife with poverty and lacking education and healthcare. I am looking forward to seeing the development.

Why am I visiting Singapore? I have often heard people speaking about the initiatives that Singapore is taking in protecting the environment and the priority it is giving to projects which are specifically designed to repair the damage of climate change. That is particularly interesting given the priorities of economic growth and wealth-building. So often it seems that whenever economic growth and environment are being discussed together, economy wins. It will be good to see how the two can develop together.

My arrival. I was relieved by the efficiency of the security and passport control and the luggage was quickly available. The road from airport to the city is a surprise. It is a dual carriageway lined with trees and plants and not a building in sight for most of the way. On one side of the road, for about 12 miles, runs the East Coast Park - heavily wooded and open to the public. The driver, Alan, also spoke about the Garden By The Bay and the large areas of Singapore given over to green and open spaces.

One very noticeable absence is litter. There is no sign of it. Alan told me about the strict law: first offence of littering is a \$300 fine, second offence is \$600, third offence is \$1,000 and a day of community service cleaning public areas.

I went for my first walk in the early evening and the place is spectacular. The business areas are a cluttered Manhattan with the noticeable difference that most of the high rise buildings have greenery climbing their walls, hanging over their verandas and on their rooftops. There are plants, bushes and trees everywhere. I am looking forward to seeing much more of this city-state.



Day three...

Although I am happy to explore on my own, it is always better to have some people with local knowledge to make sure that things are not missed. Alan, yesterday's driver, made a very good start for me with all

his information about lots of things. For example: Cars here are much more expensive because of a purchase tax which is imposed in order to persuade people to use the very comprehensive public transport system. Individuals also need to purchase a permit in order to buy a car, which is in itself very expensive. The information about the extent of the parks and the ban on litter. He suggested that I need to visit South Bridge Road where there is a mosque, a Buddhist temple, a church and Hindu Temple in close and happy proximity.

I had an early start and a walk back through the business centre. I think I am beginning to get my bearings. I am staying near Chinatown and I found South Bridge Road. The four centres of the religions are indeed impressive and I was particularly pleased to be in the Buddhist Temple when there were monks chanting. The church was a Methodist chapel, despite the number of Catholic churches in the city.

Keith and Michelle from Catholic News Singapore came to collect me at 11am. They are part of the Communications Team for the Archdiocese. I was taken to Archbishop's House and to their offices for a half hour interview on the environment. The two of them were great company and we spent time talking about Singapore and life here.

Both are great fans of much of what is happening here, but they were also honest and realistic about the challenges. There is poverty. There is a high cost of living. But the government seems to be very positive about the vision for development.

After a radio recording, Keith took me into Archbishop's House and into the Cathedral. It is a simple but elegant building and, as everywhere else, spotlessly clean. It was open for a later Mass and there were a team of about twelve lady volunteer vergers on duty.

I was invited by Keith and Michelle to lunch and we had a rather excellent Japanese lunch in a restaurant nearby. I was told, not for the first time, that eating is a favourite pastime for the Singaporeans and every style and type of cuisine is available here. That even includes McDonalds, KFC and the like

I learned quite a bit about the Archdiocese of Singapore and had various facts in my pre-visit research confirmed.

The numbers sound very good but there is clear evidence that vocations are not keeping pace with retirements among the priests, and religious life vocations are declining.

As Keith and Michelle made their way back to their office, I went about 400 yards along the road to the Carmelite Church of St Joseph. Newly refurbished, it has a campus of pastoral buildings. Given the size of Singapore, the 32 churches are not far from one another - as has been the case in Salford and Liverpool. But Singapore still has the density of population and the attendance numbers to warrant that number of churches.

Having returned briefly to the hotel, I set off again for a good walk to the Marina Bay. This is an important region of the city, for several reasons. It is dominated by that enormous triple tower building with a model ship joining the roofs of the three towers. It is one of the biggest and highest buildings in Singapore and is the Marina Bay Sands Hotel. I have no idea how many rooms it must contain. To the side of this building is a three-storey shopping mall, called "The Shoppes at Marina Bay".



The third reason to visit this area is the ecological park, with its extraordinary metal tree structures housing diverse vegetation which are part of generating renewable energy. I cannot admit to understanding how it all works but it generates power and fuels two sport-stadium-sized greenhouses full of trees and shrubs, called “The Cloud Forest” and “The Flower Dome”. I am hoping to learn more of what is being achieved. The whole area is lush and green and packed with trees and bushes, stretching as far as the eye can see.

The walk back took me across two of the many channels that divide this city. There are certainly many very large buildings. Some are named as the biggest banks, accountant firms and insurance companies, but many are just enormous hotels. Singapore clearly demonstrates that it is a hub for trade, business and tourism.

The conversations I am having with people suggest that this is a remarkable place, with many attractive aspects but I am also hearing about the reality of living in such a densely populated place, and the impact that COVID has had. The extent of mental illness has been increased by the fact that the large majority of the population live in apartments and the very strict lockdown had serious consequences.

Tomorrow is fully booked with Caritas Singapore and a visit to the Jesuit Parish of St Ignatius. The weather suggests rain, which was supposed to happen this afternoon but held off. It is certainly very humid and maybe some rain will freshen the air.

(As I end my day, and Europe is several hours behind, the news is dominated by the death of Mikhail Gorbachov, the flood disaster in Pakistan and the 25th anniversary of the death of Princess Diana. Tomorrow the U.K. will have a new Prime Minister).

Day four...

Today I met with Eve Ong at 10am and was driven to Agape Village, Toa Payoh, where Caritas Singapore has its offices. While Toa Payoh is a suburb of the city, Agape Village is really a single building. About ten years ago, land was given by the Archbishop and Caritas built a four storey building which houses the staff of some thirteen different agencies of Caritas.

I was then given a ninety minute presentation of their work by Eve Ong, Christine Wong and Gail Ng of Caritas. It was quite a fascinating account of the re-structuring of Caritas and all its agencies. There was a good insight into life in Singapore. While there is really no sign of "absolute poverty",

poverty can be identified in various different ways. There is a degree of homelessness but this is usually due to mental illness and breakdown, bereavement, or the vulnerability of the elderly. That was very interesting from the point of view that although - as I listed yesterday - the Government has an impressive manifesto, progress is not as quick and easy as it might be wished. Singapore has its problems. It is a very expensive place to live. I mentioned the licence to own a car - which costs about GP\$100,000 (£70,000). Then the car has an inflated purchase price. Cost of housing is very high, with the stress of mortgage repayments.

Caritas was founded in 2006 to be “God’s love in action” with the mission to coordinate, enable, mobilise and serve the people who came for help. The assistance offered at the present time includes legal representation, business advice, care for prisoners on release, help for migrants, hospice care, dental treatment, care for the elderly, after school provision for children with working parents, refuge for abused women and children. There were a couple of novel activities: the provision of home-bathing of the elderly (where staff arrive with a folding bathtub), and “Share a pot” offering physical activity for the elderly, followed by a meal and social time together. This is being encouraged in each parish to build up local community sense and to avoid causing the participants to travel long distances.

There was a great emphasis on respecting the dignity of the individual who comes for help. Each arrival is given a full interview in which the various needs of the person are identified so that agencies can work together. The individual is asked to take responsibility for any care package so that they feel empowered and in control of the help that they receive.

Rather in the mode of our Caritas and CSAN arrangements, Caritas Singapore deals with internal needs in the city, while Charis is concerned with overseas development. They collaborate closely together.

We then continue for an explanation of Caritas Singapore's environmental work. The government here is far more active than our own, and Caritas is intent on local training, good practice and publicity through conferences and events, The accent is on "Reduce, Re-use, Recycle". There are various parish initiatives with the accent of greening all the available ground, and the use of hydroponics for the re-cycling of water and irrigation. They had a Climate Action Conference in 2021, being repeated this year, with parish posters offering ideas for practical action. Tree planting is encouraged, and I have been so pleased to see greenery on the walls and verandas of skyscrapers and so many roof gardens. Almost every city pavement has shrubbery and bushes, all beautifully maintained, with all dead leaves being swept up every day. The place is spotless!

Eve and I returned to the car for a journey to the Parish of St Ignatius,

which has been a beacon in developing environmental work. There I met Fr Colin Tan, a Jesuit, and parish priest. The parish has numerous buildings, including two large halls and a retreat house. The church holds a little over 1,000 people and is full, with standing room only, for all six Sunday Masses. Fr Colin was so enthusiastic about the transformation of the grounds which is being achieved. Tree planting, fruit and vegetable growing, every inch of the property being greened in some way. He was surrounded by a staff of lay volunteers, all helping in some way with the project called “Green Movement Ministry”.

After dinner with Eve and her husband, Den, I made my way back to the hotel experiencing underground train system - cheap, fast, and frequent trains. With well over one hundred stations in this city, no-one is ever far from a station. There is also a very comprehensive bus service.

Tomorrow, I meet again with Christine and Eve in the morning and then I have Keith and Michelle (from Catholic News Singapore) for another interview and a trip to the illuminations in Marina Bay in the evening.

Day five...

There was a good dose of rain this morning. The people I have been speaking to have commented on the change of the weather. Rains, in

recent years, are more frequent and often outside the long-defined “rainy season” and the showers of rain are much heavier than before. There have been comments about the dangers of sea-level rise, given that Singapore boasts only a couple of hills and most of the land is just a few meters above sea-level. That remark was made to me this morning when a gentleman was explaining some roadworks which are the construction of a two-level underground highway under a part of the city centre. Will it be flooded out in years to come?

This morning I was taken by a Caritas member of staff, to the Church of St Alphonsus, known as the “Novena Church”. It is a foundation of the Redemptorist Order and one of three Catholic churches in Singapore that do not actually have their own parish. I was surprised to see a gothic church as we approached, and assumed that it was probably a monument of the colonial period. No so. It was founded in the 1950s by Redemptorist priests from Australia. They built a small church at first which in time became very popular for its novena to Our Lady. It was in the first decade of this century that plans were drawn up to extend the small church and build something much more impressive. The City authorities did not want a modern style church so the Gothic design was accepted. The building of this “gothic” church was completed only in 2017! The original church is now just one side aisle of the new.

By chance it seems, I met with Jerome who is the Lay Manager of the

church and the surrounding campus who offered to give me a tour. He was a volunteer here from the age of 16 but has been in his role for about ten years. (He is an accomplished singer and artist, I have learned). He has overseen the building of the new church and is clearly very proud of the church and its mission. Although this was a Friday morning, with the next Mass not until 12noon, the grounds were busy. The church itself was closed at first because it is still being sanitised after every Mass but the beautiful prayer garden had many silent visitors. When the church opened, about 10.30am, there was an immediate stream of visitors who were not tourists, but pilgrims. There was a solid line to the confessionals. The church has a weekly Novena which is attended by thousands of people, and not limited to Catholics and Christians. This Sunday there is the annual procession with an enormous icon of Our Lady which was already being bedecked with flowers by lay volunteers. Jerome took me around the church explaining the various materials that had been used in the building, with the clever features of the hidden speakers and ventilation fans. The stained glass is really superb, being completed by two Italian artists over a period of about four years. The Stations of the Cross are groups of statues, rather than paintings or carved relief. I was shown other rooms, like the sacristy, which are not open to the public and Jerome was introducing me to all sorts of people. I met one of the twelve Redemptorist priests, Fr Eugene. I felt disappointed that I could not accept the invitation to join the Novena Procession this weekend, as I will be leaving Singapore. (A good reason to make another trip one day?)

It was time to get back to the hotel in order to meet Keith, my broadcasting friend, again. He had asked that we might record another interview for his radio channel. The subject this time was to be the Synod. On the way back, I spotted three Rolls Royce cars. I have now remembered the official title of the permit needed to buy a car: “Certificate of Entitlement”. According to the size of the engine, the “certificate” will cost a minimum of \$87,000 Singaporean dollars, rising to more than \$100,000 for larger cars. That makes for a strong incentive to travel on public transport and, on rare occasions, to hire one of the very many taxis.

The evening with Keith and Michelle has gone very well. I made another recording for his radio interview, this time concerning the Synod. They certainly seem to have been very organised in their response in this Archdiocese; with events, meetings, written submissions etc. After the recording we met with Michelle and she drove us to the Marina Bay area where we sat on the side of Marina Reservoir and more prawns and rice. The reservoir is part of the Singapore River and a vital part in the radical water plan for this city which includes much recycling, even of sewage. It is generally heralded as a remarkable achievement which will be important to many cities as water becomes more scarce. Then we made our way to the Cloud Forest. I had seen it from the outside on Wednesday but Keith and Michelle insisted that we go inside. I was not disappointed. It is a gigantic



Basile Morin, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

greenhouse, larger than a football stadium with mountains of shrubs and trees and flowers. There is a space walkway up into the top of the greenhouse. It is all part of the research into environment damage repair.

From the Cloud Forest we made our way to The Supertree Grove, which is the forest of those giant metal trees which house all kinds of shrubs. There is a daily light display, which is spectacular, particularly for the children spectators. Worth seeing the once, particularly as the electricity is all from renewable energy. The Supertree Grove is overlooked by that enormous Marina Bay Hotel with its three towers and rooftop ship. I learned today that the hotel has 2,500 rooms and 250 executive suites. After the lighting display, I was able to politely decline any further food and Michelle drove

me back to the hotel. Keith and Michelle have been excellent hosts, as have Eve and Christine and everyone I have met.

The day has been full. Tomorrow should be rather different and I am invited to concelebrate Mass in one of the parishes, and I look forward to witnessing what sounds like a vibrant liturgy.

Day six...

With washing (and ironing) done by 9am, I was on my way into the city! In fact, the washing and drying facility of the hotel turned out to be just two washers and two driers in the corner of the underground carpark and not very salubrious at all. But the job was done.

I set off walking along the Singapore River and walked past a solid line (over 60) restaurants on the waterside. Again, the variety of cuisine was impressive, including Italian and French and English restaurants. I thought I should also have a look at this renowned retail centre - Orchard Road. It really does outdo Oxford St in London. Not only are there shopping malls after shopping malls, but the same designer shops repeat themselves. The accent is decidedly Western fashion. The place was getting crowded at 10am.

My intention was to try to get out of the city and away from the skyscrapers that dominant every view. I took the underground railway to one of the terminals (on the Purple North-East line). The station is called Punggol. Coming out of the station, there was an enormous bus terminal, with lots of double-decker buses, all providing for the high-density housing. All those familiar high-rise apartment blocks were all around. I decided to keep walking in a straight line away from the centre of the city. After an hour, no sign of being “in the countryside”. I do not think “countryside” exists on this tiny island with its 5.9 million citizens. (I am told that, with temporary residents and tourists, the total number of people at any one time is more like eight million). The parks are important and wonderfully maintained with all the trees and shrubbery but there seems to be no extensive, cultivated areas - apart from the golf courses. Punggol has the same wide streets, and choked traffic intersections, as the centre of the city. There were fewer eating places but they seemed full of mid-morning snackers. The sense of the city being a bit overwhelming was confirmed for me by my asking directions, from three Singaporeans, and none of them knew the direction.

I had a very pleasant experience this evening when I was taken to the Parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour and invited to preside at one of their two vigil Masses. The church was pretty full, the music of a high

standard, the very evident devotion of the people made it a great experience. There was a large team of perfectly behaved servers, with a large number of ushers keeping everything in order. There are three priests in the parish, including a French priest, of a missionary order. Next door was a very simple but comfortable home for retired priests. Fortunately, they already had a visiting preacher for the Mass - a Singaporean missionary working in Manila. He was excellent. The church was in a suburb with, exceptionally, quite a lot of houses rather than apartments. The church had a large car park which was packed solid, with queues of cars waiting. There was, of course, another meal in a shopping mall on the way back to the hotel.

There is a lot more that I would like to see and do here but time has virtually run out. Tomorrow I am flying first to Ho Chi Minh City and getting a connecting flight to the city of Vinh, where I am invited to stay at the Bishop's residence.

I am getting some thoughts together about Singapore. It is clearly a financial and economic miracle. Claiming independent sovereignty in 1965, just 57 years ago, there was a successful trading port but none of the wealth, and few people. People my age will have seen the building of this metropolis with the skyline changing by the day with another collection

of skyscrapers rising as offices and hotels in the downtown district, or as apartment blocks in every direction. Most of the government housing projects seem to be between 20 and 30 storeys. Some of the more prestigious private developments can be considerably higher. The few individual houses which are mouth-wateringly expensive, that I have seen, are overwhelmed by the high-risers all around them.

It was very interesting to hear Caritas Singapore's rather different approach to the reality of poverty and where it is to be found in this place. While Singapore has brought prosperity to millions, I wonder about the divisions that are now growing (similar to our own) where the richer are getting richer and the poor, poorer. A recent study estimates that, by 2030, there will be 37,000 millionaires in this city.

I think I should end this visit to Singapore with a brief summary of the reasons for being here. I had always heard about the Singaporean initiatives in care for the environment and thought that a stop-over here would make sense. I think it has been valuable. Singapore is leading the way and the government here is very pro-active in addressing climate change. They have water security with a capacity well beyond present needs. The Barrage reservoir conserves the river and rain water, the re-cycling provides real scientific advance from which we must learn. There are all the greening projects, with the extension of the areas dedicated to

parkland, the greening of the walls of buildings, and their roofs, the street and pavement greenery. The Cloud Forest is making scientific advances, while being a tourist attraction. There is the project to plant a million trees, within a very short space of time. Public transport is comprehensive and the cost of cars and the need for the “Certificate of Entitlement” have persuaded many people from car ownership - though the wealthy use this as a particular means of displaying their wealth. There are strong initiatives concerning waste and re-cycling. There are plenty of solar panels to be seen, and wind-turbines are apparently a common feature off the coast and on some of the many small islands of this State.

While I have been very pleased to see how the Church is making the environment a priority, it is clearly the State which is giving the impetus and encouragement for further action. I do not see such determination at Whitehall.

Day seven...

Changi airport is a major hub for Southeast Asia and it is enormous. One curious feature is called “Jewel” which is another shopping and eating Mall. This is again a stadium sized greenhouse, loaded with greenery and boasts the highest manmade waterfall in the world. The terminals are also loaded with trees and bushes and walls covered with shrubbery.

I suspected that I was moving into quite a different world when I exchanged about £100 in Singapore dollars into 1.9 million Vietnamese Dong.