



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Why charity and justice must go together

QUESTION: If we donate generously to charity but do nothing to address the systems that prevent the disadvantaged from rising up in society, have we practised Christian love? And does it matter whether we give money to the poor out of the kindness of our heart, or because we believe that it is their due?

Yes it does matter, for the Church draws a distinction between the two virtues of charity and justice, and says that one must not be mistaken for the other.

Charity commonly refers to works of mercy to relieve human need of every kind. Justice, on the other hand, is to render to one's neighbour his or her due, addressing the root causes of problems and resolving unfairness and inequalities.

In the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People issued by the Second Vatican Council, the Church highlighted the difference between the two. It says: "It is imperative that the freedom and dignity of the person being helped be respected with the utmost consideration; that the purity of one's charitable intentions be not stained by seeking one's own advantage or by striving for domination; and especially that the demands of justice be satisfied. That which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity." (Apostolicam Actuositatem, 8)

Here, the Church clues us in on why the distinction between charity and justice matters. The explanation hinges on respect for each person's freedom and dignity.



Central to the Church's social teaching is the belief that every person is made in the image of God. Thus, what is due to each person - without exception - includes the means necessary to live his or her life with dignity.

Hence are we giving people what should have been due to them in the first place according to their human dignity? That is the benchmark against which we assess the justness of our own actions and those of our society.

Everyday we are faced with this choice.

For example as consumers, we love a good bargain but do we consider

whether the lower price of a product or service has resulted from compromising on some workers' safety or well-being?

Or perhaps the workers might have been underpaid? You might say these workers entered a contract with their eyes wide open and technically, no law has been flouted. But is this just?

Justice demands that we ask what has compelled these workers to accept poor working conditions and what has caused this situation. More importantly, have we contributed to it by what we have done or not done?

The Church's social teachings also remind us that it is unjust to keep

consuming and accumulating more than we need, not questioning the means by which we have made our money or whether we have deprived someone else of the earth's resources, even if we occasionally give some of our surplus money to charity.

The Church upholds that what is due to each person must be decided based on both that person's contribution and needs.

A proper understanding of justice will lead us to help see to it that our society is set up so as to ensure that each person receives his or her due, especially those who are most marginalised. Do our current laws, systems and practices contribute to a just end? If not, what can we do to address this?

This is where the call to work for justice can be unsettling, because it challenges us to question some social norms that we have grown up with and feel attached to.

And the more comfortable we are within the system, the less we will want to change the status quo. We instinctively sense that if the structures are changed, we will have to change along with them and that could well be painful!

We must remember that the Church calls us to practise both charity and justice, which are the hallmarks of a Christian.

Our lives need to show the fruits of both qualities so that the world might indeed become a better place. Only then will we truly be salt of the earth and light of the world.

(This article was previously published in the Catholic News, April 13, 2008.)

Can we make a gift of something that justice demands a person should already have? Can we build an economy with a conscience? Why are there still cases of abuse and neglect in our developed nation?

These are some of the questions and issues that will be discussed at "The Social Mission Conference 2010". The flagship event of Caritas Singapore will be held on August 21, 2010 at St Joseph's Institution.

With Archbishop Nicholas Chia as guest-of-honour, the theme for this second biennial conference is "Transforming Ourselves and Society in Charity and Justice". While charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine, our challenge is to go beyond charity to enable the needy to build a better life with dignity.

This conference will bring together 33 speakers and panellists with a wealth of experience in addressing the issues of the poor and the many in need of help in the social space. Speakers will include leaders of Catholic charities as well as several practitioners and thought leaders from outside the Church with an

The Social Mission Conference 2010

in-depth perspective of the social sector.

A keynote speaker is Dr Lesley-Anne Knight, Secretary General of Caritas Internationalis, the confederation of 164 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations worldwide. Sharing from her experiences in humanitarian programmes for the needy across the world, including Africa, Latin America, India, Europe and most recently Haiti, Dr Knight will touch on how we can reshape global institutions and structures based on ethics and values.

Monsignor David Cappelletti, the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Adelaide and Commissioner for the Social Inclusion Board of South

Australia, will provide a theological perspective on charity and justice and how the two are inextricably intertwined. He has spearheaded many social policy reforms to address homelessness, school retention, youth offences and mental health.

The conference will also include panel discussions on charity, justice and the common good, with specific tracks focused on five vulnerable communities: the poor, migrant workers, family, overseas humanitarian help recipients, and the marginalised.

"Caritas Singapore held its inaugural Social Mission Conference in 2008 to provide an overview perspective of the national social issues, and how the Church has been responding to these issues", said Linda Low, Chairman of the organising committee. "This year's conference will further challenge us to go beyond just the giving to addressing the root issues."

Every Catholic has a part to play in social mission work and in the pursuit of the common good. Be a part of this conference to learn, share and network - register today.

REGISTER NOW!

When: Saturday, August 21, 2010
8.45am to 4.00pm

Where: St Joseph's Institution
Performing Arts Centre
38 Malcolm Road
Singapore 308274

How: Pick up a registration form from your Parish or download a copy from the website www.caritas-singapore.org/smc2010

Cost: \$55 per person
\$40 per person (for group of five or more, or students)

Religious - complimentary (other discounts are also available for various categories, see registration form)

For enquiries, call Henry Tsen at Caritas Singapore at 6337 3711.

PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

Alive With Our Social Mission
Archbishop Nicholas Chia

Values & Social Change In A Post Crisis World

Dr Lesley-Anne Knight, Secretary General, Caritas Internationalis

Faith, Charity And Justice

Monsignor David Cappelletti, AO, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Adelaide, and Commissioner for the Social Inclusion Board of South Australia

Panel Discussion

Pursuing Charity, Justice And The Common Good
• Laurence Lien, Chief Executive Officer National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre
• Zulkifli Baharudin, Former Chairman Mercy Relief

• John Gee, President

Transient Workers Count Too

• Dr John Hui, Former Master Catholic Medical Guild

• Dr Mathew Mathews, Lead Researcher Caritas Singapore Study of the Poor

• Dr Tan Chi Chiu, Chairman

Study On 'Unmet Social Needs'

Breakout Tracks

Track 1: The Poor

Track 2: Migrant Workers

Track 3: Family

Track 4: Overseas Humanitarian

Track 5: The Marginalised

Looking In The Mirror

Arthur Goh, Director Singapore Pastoral Institute