

Social realities, Catholic response



Catholic social mission conference draws diverse audience to spend a day sharing and learning about "the church's best kept secret"

By Joyce Gan

SINGAPORE – You cannot claim to be Catholic and not be involved in social mission, said Laurence Lien to an audience of over 400 at the Social Mission Conference organized by the Catholic Social and Community Council (CSCC).

The full-day conference was held on Saturday Jul 26 at the Regional English Language Centre.

Mr Lien, Director of Lien Foundation Centre for Social Innovation, was one of 18 speakers invited to speak on different aspects of social mission at this conference.

CSCC has been promoting awareness of social mission among Catholics in the Singapore Archdiocese since its formation as the umbrella body of Catholic charity and social organizations in November 2006. It has actively encouraged and facilitated the recruitment of volunteers for its member organizations, and maintains a website and a social mission page in every issue of CatholicNews.

At the conference, three speakers – President of National Council of Social Services RADM (Ret) Kwek Siew Jin; CEO of National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre Tan Chee Koon; and Laurence Lien – mapped out the sociological trends affecting families and youth, the elderly and disabled. They elaborated on where help is unavailable or inadequate, and how Catholics can respond.

Panel discussions were held on how to deal with social realities and on how to serve the community. Faith and theological reflections also featured. □

Above, Archbishop Nicholas Chia reminds the audience, "Faith without good works, is dead."

Don't be afraid to ask "why"

Father Patrick Goh, Chancellor of the Singapore Archdiocese and Parish Priest of Church of the Holy Family and a member of the Senate of Priests and Board of Consultors, urged the audience to search for new ways to organize and to ask "what are the organizations and structures around us that keep us poor?"

Unlike before 1987, "we



Left, Father Patrick Goh tells the audience that Catholic social mission is done out of love for our brothers and sisters.



Speakers and panellists at the Social Mission Conference 2008 include, (from left) Msgr. Eugene Vaz, George Lim, Arthur Goh, Sister Maria Lau, Tan Chee Koon, Gerard Ee and Kwek Siew Jin.

A Hindu among Catholics

One panelist, Braema Mathi, current coordinator of a human rights group MARUAH and founder and former President of Transient Workers Count Too, shared with the audience what moving amongst Catholics has done for her, a Hindu educated in a Catholic mission girls' school.

One thing she has never forgotten about Catholics, Ms Mathi told the audience, was that "Catholics made all these perilous journeys to new lands to found what's important to that particular community". "Now the religious Brothers and Sisters communities are getting smaller... the layperson's good work has to increase." The religious who put in so much good work need us to come in now, she added.

Ms Mathi added that Catholicism "has articulated a lot of the thoughts already in [my] head, [such as] 'fair treatment' and 'impartial share of benefits' and what these mean. Catholics understand the fundamental principles of what motivates them. I have never found any other group as consistent in hymns, prayers, classroom teachings." □

don't ask the 'why' question anymore," he remarked. History has shown us that to ask 'why' is dangerous, he explained.

"If I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a... communist," he said, alluding to the 1987 "Marxist conspiracy" allegations levelled at some members and organizations of the Catholic Church in Singapore.

"If we are serious about our social mission, there's no way we can not ask the 'why' question – why this social injustice (exists or continues). We must penetrate through the sense of fear," he said.

"If we're working, we should not hide our light under the bushel," he said in response to a question. "At the same time, we shouldn't be doing [our social work] for our own glory. [We do our work] not to advance the stand of the church but out of love for our brothers and sisters."

CSCC Executive Director Joyce Koh was pleased that the conference attracted a diverse audience and hopes more Catholics will get to know that social mission is part of their duty.

"Creating awareness is a start" to actually getting them to be involved, she said. □