

## **Social Mission Conference 2016**

### **Address by His Grace, Archbishop William Goh**

Good morning your Eminence, and Good morning fathers, brothers and sisters and all of you. Actually when the organisers asked me to give this opening address, I told them “You have one of the greatest keynote speakers this morning already. What else do you want to hear from me?” Cardinal Tagle is a well-known speaker, very eloquent, very insightful, very edifying. So I told them what else do I need to add to address? But then they told me – but you are the bishop! So in obedience to them, I’m giving this address. But more than that, I do not want to be addressing you, to say something because I have to, but I want to make sure I have something to say.

So what have I to say this morning with regards to the theme – ‘Witness to mercy, Bearer of compassion’.

You know my dear brothers and sisters, most of the time as social workers, as care-givers, our immediate concern is always how to help the poor. What ways can we help the poor. What are the approaches. What are the methods. It is all about the how, about the giving. Of course that is important and we must certainly give consideration to how we reach out to those people who are in need. But I think it is equally importantly to underscore the need also to care for our care-givers, to form our social workers because very often we all like to give, we all like to serve. But we forget that we also need to be ministered to, we all need to be formed. Otherwise, there is a serious danger that if our workers are not well-formed, instead of rendering services to the poor, to those who are disadvantaged, they can cause more harm at the end of the day. Therefore conferences such as this are important reminders that all of us need formation even as we seek to form others, and to help others.

And so if you’re to ask me, my reflection of this theme ‘Witness to Mercy, Bearer of Compassion’ – instead of understanding as a verb, I would like to see, not so much the object but the subject. Therefore I would like to underscore this morning, the importance of giving consideration to the social worker. For two reasons. From my experience dealing and encountering social workers. Two pitfalls that we often fall into without knowing.

Firstly, with regards to our social workers. Many of them, they help in the service of the poor. Yet it is good to realize, even in their generosity, in their good will, their motives are not always clear. Some of them do not really serve from noble motives. Many of them themselves are hurt, they are wounded. And if we are not careful, we can use those recipients of our love and mercy as means by which we boost our own ego, to fill the vacuums in our own lives. Instead of rendering services to them, actually we are making use of them for our own personal fulfillment. And this explains sometimes, you know among social workers, instead of being humble in service, generous in giving themselves, they are seeking for power, for glory, for recognition. And this is because again, they are not too clear of the motives for their service, for their works of compassion. And so this is the first pitfall we need to avoid.

The second pitfall is this. For Catholics, they are not clear about the distinction between humanitarian works and Christian charity. They are not exactly the same, although the outcome might look the same, the objective might look the same, but it is not.

Because Humanitarian works springs from the compassion that is already embedded in every human person. That is why we have the word compassion, common passion. And it is called humanitarian precisely because it comes from the human heart. Just like what we heard just now – a mother caring for her children. That is natural. That is natural. And so when we see people suffering, it is natural for us to respond to someone, our fellowman who is suffering. But that is humanitarian. Works of mercy.

Christian charity is not another form of social assistance. Christian Charity springs and is motivated by the love of God in us. It is inspired by an active faith in Christ that works itself through love. In other words Christian charity is motivated beyond humanitarian concern but rather it is because of the love of God in us and therefore we want to extend the same love, not just a human love, the same love we have received from God for others. That is why in 2Cor 5:14 – St Paul said the love of Christ urges us on. Because if one man has died for all, he said, all therefore have died. He died for all so that we will no longer live for ourselves but for him. So that is the motivation of Christian charity and that is the

reason why also if every Christian who is doing social work is motivated by the love of God, you can be certain that service is unconditional, sincere, genuine, because it is motivated by the same love of Christ. And when that happens, the recipient of that mercy, knowing that we love them with divine love. They will surely be able to see the face of God in us, even if we don't utter the word of Christ, explicitly. Like Mother Theresa, like what St Francis of Assisi says, go proclaim the gospel, if necessary use words.

So if we are conscious of these 2 pitfalls, then what must we do? Social Workers, therefore must constantly remind themselves they need to be formed, and they need to grow in faith and in human integrity. Formation. So how do we form our social workers, Christian social workers?

The most important formation really is a spiritual formation. Do our social workers, have they encountered the mercy and the compassion of God? We cannot give what we have not got.

Therefore the beginning of Christian charity is always encounter with the Divine Mercy. If you have read the letter of St Paul to Timothy, he spoke of himself as a blasphemer, as a persecutor, a man of violence. If St Paul became a preacher of the gospel, a preacher of mercy, it was because he was first and foremost a recipient of mercy. And therefore what makes us really merciful is when we have experienced mercy. The greater the mercy you experience, the more merciful you become. Otherwise, you would become condescending, proud, arrogant, even when you give mercy to others, because you have not yet received mercy.

Flowing from this point, it means to say therefore Christian charity is not a means of proselytization, we must be clear, at the same time, although while it is not a means of proselytizing, because we love everyone, it does not exclude the sharing of the good news. Because at the end of the day, no amount of material things, no amount of physical things can ever fulfill a person. At the end of the day, every human person, his body can be satisfied, but his spirit also needs to be satisfied. That is why the failure to offer the gift of God's love to them, and the gift of Jesus Christ is to fall short of Christian charity. Because Christ at the end is the one who give us the fullest of life. No man can find fulfillment until he encounters God. And that is what Mother Theresa does, has done. Reaching out and at the same time, as she reaches out to others, they came to recognize that God is love.

And this also means, secondly, Christian social workers, because our acts of mercy comes from our experience of God's mercy, and Christ is the source of that mercy, it also means that we do not take things into our own hands. We don't think that the achievement is solely by human efforts. That is why Christian social workers not only work, it is not only enough to work for the poor, but we need to pray for the poor. We believe that ultimately it is God who brings about all the possibilities and therefore a Christian social worker must believe in the power of prayer. Not simply using his efforts and if he was to deepen his compassion for others, what must he do? He must be contemplating everyday, everyday, on the face of God and Christ Jesus.

The strength of Christian charity must come precisely from contemplation of God's love for us in the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the reason why Mother Theresa and all those people involved in charity. What will they tell you? Everyday Eucharist, everyday one hour before the blessed sacrament. Those religious who spend an hour before the Blessed Sacrament, derive strength to go and help the poor and to see Christ in the poor. But if you want to serve the poor without contemplating on Christ, what are you trying to do? From your own compassion, from your own human compassion and that is danger. Because if your mercy is mere activism, secularistic work, you will be burnout. Number one.

Number two what will happen is that when things do not go the way you want, when your expectations are not met, you become angry. You become angry with institutions, angry with the government, angry with the church. Why is the church not doing more? Why is the government not doing more? You become resentful, in the end you become resentful of God. You become even angry with God. How can you be angry with God when God is the source of mercy? It is a contradiction. If God is the source of mercy, you are angry with God, you are fighting with God at the end of the day, what kind of mercy are we rendering?

So that is important.

Consequently, because I have seen many Catholic social workers, in rendering mercy, instead of being set free, they become more bitter and disillusioned. This cannot be the case. That is why I say there is

also the great importance of forming our social workers. That they have a greater integrity. You cannot really render mercy to others, to love others if you first don't love yourself. That is why the two-fold commandments of Jesus – love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

But to be able to love God with all your soul, with all your heart, with all your strength, it is only possible when we first encounter God's love. If you love God, you will love your neighbor. But you cannot love God until you have encountered God's love.

And so my dear brothers and sisters, let me conclude. If we truly want to be witness to mercy, and be bearers of compassion, we must first be witness of mercy. That is to say that this mercy of God is already experienced in our lives, either directly through prayers, through encounters, through healing or through others, but that is a presupposition. And as we reach out to others, and this is true, as we move out to others, we begin to realize that in helping others, actually we are being helped in return. We must always remember that when we talk about charity, it is always two ways. It is never we helping them. As much as we help them, they also help us. That is why those of us who are involved in charity, we know that they enrich us as much as we enrich them, in different ways. And it is also in our personal involvement and encounter with them that we come to realise how much we should be grateful for the blessings that we have received.

And this is true. Those of you who go for mercy trips, and so on, after you come back, you ask yourselves why are these poor people, they seem to be much happier than us. I went to Cambodia and the people there are deprived, and yet they are much happier than us who have everything we need. And yet Singaporeans complain the most.

Last point, you know what I have learnt recently is this. If you truly, as what Janet said just now, if you truly want to have a heart for the poor, you must live among them and with them. If not you cannot feel with them.

For those you who have gone for mercy trips, whether it is Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Philippines. You will understand what I am saying.

And recently when I was in the World Youth Day, I tell you honestly it was a hard time. Please, it was not a holiday, it was truly a pilgrimage. Under the hot sun. It's either very hot or very cold or under the rain. Walk for 5 hours under the heat. And we were standing in the field when they were having the papal mass. The field. No shade at all. We were just carrying umbrellas. I said to myself, 'Goodness me standing in the field for 5 hours, only 5 hours, we were complaining. Look at the refugees. They have been there for months and maybe years.'

Thank you.