



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL & COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Ma Jie: My maid, my family

BLACK-and-white-clad Ma Jies, the Chinese maids (domestic help) of decades ago, are known to younger Singaporeans only from movies and photographs. But older Singaporeans may recall them.

The Ma Jies were well-known for their professionalism and loyalty to employers. They were treated as part of the family, growing old among the members and eventually being looked after them. There was mutual respect and responsibility in this relationship.

Recently, a gentle old lady living in a HDB block passed away. For years, neighbours had thought she was the family's grandmother. At the wake, they learned that she had, in fact, been the nanny of the father, and he had undertaken to care for her in her old age.

Pasted on a pillar were photographs of her with the family members, including a recent one with a baby - the child of one of the grown-up children. The old woman had truly been part of the family, like a Ma Jie.

Living in the same block was another maid who always looked tired and sad. Concerned neighbours found out that she awoke at 5.30am and sometimes did not eat dinner till after 9pm. No one made any report to relevant authorities. Eventually the maid left to work in another household.

Why is it that some employer-maid relationships

are good, like those between Ma Jies and their employers in the past, but others so different? Is it because maids today come from a different country and speak a different language from that of their employers?

But Singaporeans are well-travelled, well-read and better educated than we have ever been. Surely this should broaden our minds and help us accommodate people from our neighbouring countries?

Jesus said: "From those to whom much is given, much is required" (Luke 12: 48). He said this after telling the parable of the servant who had been put in charge of his master's household, and was accountable for how he treated other servants.

Another difference between Ma Jies and maids of today is that the Ma Jies were migrants who stayed here for the long-term, whereas maids are on renewable work permits.

Employers may not think of maids as being here for long. But there are families with whom maids stay for many years. How long they stay depends as much on their employers as on them. "Where there is no love, plant love and you will reap love," said St John of the Cross, a Carmelite saint of the 16th century.

Or perhaps we can blame the fast-paced lifestyle in Singapore today. Life is stressful for us, so we become less tolerant of our workers' mistakes. We do unto others

as others do unto us. But Jesus tells us to do unto others as we would have others do unto us (Luke 6: 31). The former perpetuates a negative cycle. The latter starts a positive cycle and fulfills our vocation to be light of the world (Mt 5: 14).

From where comes the strength to resist hurting others when we are hurt? The strength comes from experiencing God's love for us, and knowing we need His forgiveness. So let us take time to pray, to let God heal our brokenness. Our relationship with God, or lack of one, affects our relationship with others.

It's human to love our families and people from our country more than "outsiders". But we are called to go beyond the human to the divine.

When the disciples told Jesus his family was looking for Him, He replied: "Who are my mother and brother? ...Anyone who hears the word of God and keeps it is brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3: 33-35) He was not rejecting His family but extending it.

Should the term "maid" be derogatory? Remember that Mary, the mother of Jesus, called herself 'the handmaid of the Lord'. She did the chores of a maid.

Let us try then, to see Mary in every maid, and appreciate the dignity of her person and of her work. She is human, with needs, strengths and weaknesses,

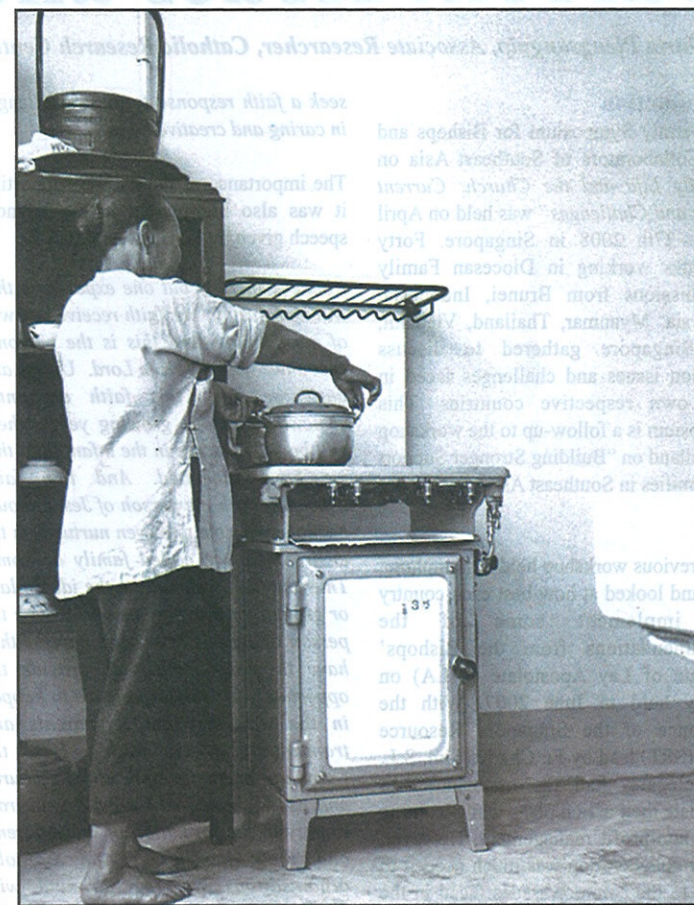


PHOTO: Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

just like us.

Many Singaporeans now work overseas, so we know how vulnerable we can feel in new environments, and how we hope our host countries will be kind and patient towards us.

Let us do likewise for our maids. It is through no merit of our own that we were not born in a poorer place or time. We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others, so that "God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15: 28).

Jesus is all around us, if we only look at those in need

THE Catholic Social and Community Council held its 2nd Annual Members' Forum on April 5 at Catholic Junior College. The theme was "Bringing The Good News To The Poor." The event enabled Catholic social organisations to come together to foster greater collaboration and sharing of resources in their mission to help the poor and disadvantaged. Some groups shared the stories of those under their care, with stories that struck participants as they saw the face of Jesus in many of those in need. Here are some of the stories.

JOHN, AIDS PATIENT

The Catholic AIDS Response Effort (Care) told the story of "John", a man who thought he had the love and attention of his family, friends and society until he became infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. From then on, life was one long, painful downhill ride.

His family drove him out of his home - a flat he had helped to pay for. He lost his job and was soon reduced to a bare existence, roaming the streets with no money to pay for the expensive medication he needed.

Broken and rejected, he found his way to CARE, which took him in. The staff took care of his medical needs and showered him with love. They even started assigning him work which helped to rebuild his sense of self worth. John took his work seriously. Slowly, he regained his basic human dignity, something which we all take for granted.



JAMES, THE PRISONER

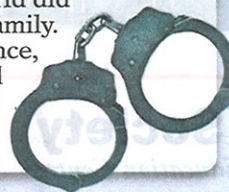
The Roman Catholic Prison Ministry told the story of "James", a Malaysian, and his wife who were both imprisoned for related offences.

James had appealed to the volunteers of RCMP to help his son who was being fostered out. In the process of helping him, the volunteers found out that James and his wife also had other children in Malaysia.

The volunteers spoke to the prison officials and obtained special permission for the family to be reunited for a short while. The volunteers arranged for the children to be flown down to Singapore so that they could meet their parents. It was a tearful and emotional reunion as parents and children clung tightly to each other.

James was very grateful, and was reminded that the world did care for him and his family.

After that experience, James went on to read the Gospel and has since found the Lord.



AN OLD WOMAN, HOME ALONE

A volunteer from Acts29 narrated the story of how she once visited an old woman living alone in a one-room flat. Upon entering her home, she noticed that the old woman had numerous cans of Milo stacked neatly one on top of the other, almost forming a metal wall in her small flat.

When asked why she had so many tins of Milo, the old woman replied that whenever someone came to visit her, they would buy her a tin of Milo when what she really needed were other food items.

This story reminds us of the need to listen to the poor when we work with them.

