



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL & COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Try a little kindness today

SUJEEWA'S house in Sri Lanka was completely destroyed by the Indian Ocean tsunami that caused devastation and death in several countries in December 2004. Her loss was similar to that of many Sri Lankans working in Singapore.

But Sujeewa's story is different. There was a silver lining to this maid's dark cloud.

When her employer, Dr Raymond Yuen, found out about her plight, he flew her daughter to Singapore to live with her. He paid for the girl's air-ticket and even enrolled her in school.

He moved Sujeewa and her child into a bigger room. They were treated like family, joining the Yuens for family dinners and outings. Dr Yuen also paid S\$1,000 to rent an apartment in Sri Lanka for a year to house Sujeewa's husband and parents while

It's not only about paying your maid a decent wage and giving her time off from work. Small gestures of appreciation can go a long way. And when things go wrong, a helping of compassion can make a big difference.

their home was being rebuilt.

As a maid, Sujeewa wakes up at 7:30am which is later than her 'madam' because she is not required to prepare breakfast. After lunch, Sujeewa gets to rest for two hours and she is free after dinner to watch TV, talk to her friends on the telephone or read in her room.

The media described Sujeewa's employer as "a dream boss". Yet, Dr Yuen told The Straits Times: "I think I did very little. If I had gone out of the way to help, I would have gone to Sri Lanka to help the victims." (ST, Dec 11, 2005). Yet, by any measure, his acts of kindness towards his maid

at a time of great distress were extraordinary.

The parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us about kindness to our fellow man. The Samaritan who passed a badly injured victim of robbers was "moved with compassion". He immediately stopped to help the man, treating his wounds and taking him to an inn to care for him (Luke 10: 30-37). The Samaritan did not stop to check whether the man was "one of his own". His response to help his neighbour in need was immediate. So Jesus urges us: "Go then and do the same."

Kindness towards our neighbour is a basic recognition

and response to our shared humanity – which is beyond one's station in life, nationality, creed or religion.

If we can recognise the kinship we share with our neighbours through our humanity, how can we not help but be more sensitive to their needs, to be more empathetic, to respond with greater compassion and love towards them? Mother Teresa reminded us: "There is only one God and He is God to all; therefore it is important that everyone is seen as equal before God."

Think of the times you have received kindness, especially when you were in dire straits and in desperate need. Did the kindness you received make you feel, in a special way, the presence and love of God?

Each time we perform acts of kindness – however small – we are really presenting the face of Christ to our neighbour.

As Catholics, we are reminded at the close of each mass, of our mission to take and share Christ's love with the world.

In our daily lives, we may not often encounter dramatic situations for help. Still, the opportunities for kindness are always present. We may not all have the means to do as much as Dr Yuen did, but all of us have ample opportunities in our homes, to extend a little kindness to our maids.

It goes beyond paying the maid a decent wage and paying her on time every month. Or letting her have some rest time during her working day, or a day off. Often a simple "Thank You" for cooking a delicious meal, or a compliment for doing a job well, can go a long way.

Like the Good Samaritan, let's try a little kindness at home today and try to make a difference.

The great way to shop

The Great Singapore Sale is a good time to reflect on the Christian approach to shopping.

IS THERE a Christian approach to shopping? Yes there is. For starters, remember that God has given human-kind a bountiful earth to meet all our needs, without excluding or favouring anyone.

In Catholic social teaching, this is known as the principle of the universal destination of goods. It invites each person to obtain what he or she actually needs and not hog things or money.

But, in reality, we see a great imbalance where some people have material luxuries of life in excess while others do not even have enough to feed themselves.

With the Great Singapore Sale around the corner, many of us will be tempted to go shopping, and some of us may end up buying more than we need.

The challenge is to buy only what you need, and not simply buy more and more for the sake of acquiring. The money you save could perhaps go to charitable ends.

KNOW WHOM YOU'RE BUYING FROM

As consumers, we have a choice of supporting businesses and companies that treat their workers well, and ensure that profits are shared equitably.

Since God has created all things for all people, every human person rightly deserves an equitable share of the bounty of the earth. This means the worker in the coffee plantation, the land-owning farmer, the middleman coffee merchant, the barista making the cup of coffee as well as the owner of the big-name coffeeshop chain should all be able to make enough from their honest labour to sustain a reasonable life.

However, in today's economy, a chief executive or entrepreneur can earn millions of dollars selling products

made by sweatshop workers who earn just \$1 a day.

One might argue that those who fork out capital take risks with their money and therefore deserve a bigger share of the pie. But in Christ we are all brothers and sisters. The love we share for one another and the respect we need to have for the dignity of each human person invite us to balance out these severe distortions.

LOOK FOR THE 'FAIR TRADE' LABEL

As Catholic consumers, we can use our dollar to support enterprises that practise equitable values and treat workers decently. For example, buy products with the "Fair Trade" label, which certifies that a business adheres to equitable standards.

To earn an official "Fair Trade" label, manufacturers, suppliers and retailers must comply with a system of checks established worldwide by international Fair Trade organisations. So far, Fair Trade products include cash crops such as tea, coffee, cocoa, sugar, honey and cotton.

For other products and services, look for companies that uphold ethical standards of behaviour. You can choose not to support companies that hire workers at ever diminishing wages with no rest days and no medical benefits.

SUPPORT SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

You can also support social enterprises. These are businesses with a social objective. Examples in Singapore range from moving companies run by ex-offenders in rehabilitation to handicrafts made by abused women at a shelter. (See story at right.)

The Great Singapore Sale is a good time to reflect on how our consumer choices can help achieve God's reign of love.

Are we shopping excessively? Are we letting material things possess us? Or can we shop in a way that makes a difference to others?



Lance Ng (left) and a team of student volunteers at the Gift and Take booth at VivoCity

A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE TAKES OFF

Trained economist Lance Ng, 34, used to be a jet-setting business development specialist. Now he has taken time out from work to run a social enterprise that sells handicrafts made by disadvantaged people.

With two partners, he set up Gift and Take (GAT) in 2006. It sources goods from various organisations to sell at flea markets and bazaars, making sure those who make the items get a good share of the proceeds.

GAT is registered as a company, but as a social enterprise, its main objective is not to make money, but to create employment for the marginalised.

So far, it has worked with abused maids from a Singapore

shelter to sew wine bags made from Thai silk. It has also worked with mothers from another shelter to create bags, and provided children from a Calcutta shelter help to sell their handmade toys.

Lance has volunteers who help the various organisations design and package items that will sell. "People need to buy gifts all the time, and rather than buy something off the shelf, we'd like to encourage them to buy something socially conscious to help the people who made them," said the new Catholic.

GAT's goods are on sale at VivoCity on the first and last weekend of every month, on the third floor beside Food Republic food court, and also at CANA, 55 Waterloo Street #02-00.