



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL & COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Help your maid beat culture shock

Anyone who has studied or worked abroad knows the stress of adapting to a new culture. Sometimes, the differences can be so overwhelming, one is left confused, anxious, even frustrated. What more, for the foreign maids in our midst?

A SINGAPOREAN studying in New Zealand, used to having dishes washed under running water, was horrified to see dishes cleaned in a plugged sink filled with warm water and detergent. There was no second rinse. Her Kiwi hosts believed a second rinse was just a waste of water.

When we encounter a different way of doing things, many of us are taken aback. From young, we are raised into the culture we live in. Culture frames our way of life, shapes our beliefs and perceptions and is an inherent part of our identity.

Singapore has experienced an influx of foreigners in recent years, from people coming here to work at all levels of jobs, to young people in our schools. But no foreigner comes as closely in contact with us as our maids, who live and work in our homes.

Yet, we often forget that our maids are foreigners, who come from less developed countries where the culture and the way of doing things



A FOREIGNER IN THE LION CITY: Sometimes we forget that our maids come from places very different from Singapore, and they need time to learn, understand and adapt to the way we do things here.

are vastly different.

How patient are we with our domestic helpers to teach them "our way" of doing things? How much time do we spend explaining why we want certain tasks done in particular ways?

When diverse cultures meet and interact in everyday life, what are the ingredients necessary for an amicable, sustainable relationship? As in all human relationships, communication and openness are key.

Ironically, sometimes, language itself can pose a barrier. A maid from Myanmar recalls an incident when the agent instructed her in English, to take the chicken from the fridge. To the agent, this was a simple task.

But the maid did not understand the instruction because she did not know enough English. For failing to do what she had been told, she was knocked on the head for being "stupid". Was she truly stupid?

An Indonesian maid, used to eating rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner at home, found it very hard to eat two slices of bread or cereal in the morning in Singapore. It left her feeling hungry. But her employer accused her of being greedy. Sometimes we may be ignorant when we do not understand our maid's culture.

We cannot apply our own cultural yardsticks to set expectations and judge our maids. Expecting a newly arrived foreign maid to speak

like us, behave like us or work the way we do is unrealistic. She needs time to learn, understand and adapt.

Some aspects of our cultures, such as religion, are inviolable.

As employers, do we accord due respect and space for our maids to live their faith? Do we give time off to our Catholic maids to attend Mass? Do we respect the beliefs of our maids of other faiths? For those with special dietary requirements because of their religions, do we accommodate rather than violate those needs?

Our relationship with our maid must be built on charity. This calls for mutual respect and trust so that both can come to communicate freely and understand each other better. If charity and goodwill are abused, trust is no longer viable. Both employers and maids have important roles to play to ensure the relationship works.

It has been said that God loves diversity - the diversity we see in creation. The differences that exist amongst persons and cultures are part of God's plan. These differences should encourage the practice of generosity, kindness and sharing and foster the mutual enrichment of cultures (*Compendium, Catechism of the Catholic Church, verse 1946*).

Only then can we grow spiritually, together, to be the loving children of our Father in heaven, allowing His kingdom to come, and letting our Creator's will, which is love, be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Volunteers needed at Villa Francis

HIDDEN amid the heavy industry off Woodlands Road is an oasis of nursing care for the aged.

Villa Francis looks after 137 residents aged from their 50s to 104. In the morning, the therapy room is full, with some residents on exercise machines looking out onto a serene lawn, or flexing their fingers and brains over puzzles.

As afternoon approaches, they gather in the airy, cheerful dining room which opens out on to a beautiful garden.

"It's a good environment for volunteers," said Anthony Mak, 57,

who looked around at various places before deciding to help here. "The staff are supportive of volunteers, and the need for volunteers here is more critical, because it's so out-of-the-way. Not many people know of this place."

Anthony helps the physiotherapy staff motivate residents to exercise. He also supports male residents, who are heavier than the women, when they walk between the parallel bars.

"Sometimes they just need someone to chat with," he said. "It's the loneliness that gets to them most." One of



the elderly women has started calling Anthony her son.

As many of the staff are foreigners, Villa Francis especially needs volunteers who can chat with the residents in their own dialects.

Volunteer S.H. Chen has been helping there since 2002. He began with singing hymns and

praying with the residents, but now focuses mainly on preparing the music and readings for the Masses. Two weekday Masses and a Sunday Mass are held weekly, attended by 40 to 60 residents each time, in a pretty, tranquil chapel.

There are also nine volunteer doctors and a

musician from Sentosa who sings with the residents after lunch. They love the oldies, says the home's administrator Sister Maria Sim, and one resident likes belting out opera songs.

Sr Maria is conscious of volunteer training and welfare too. Volunteers were invited to attend a talk for staff on dementia, and Sr Maria said she understands when volunteers need to take a break sometimes.

"Everyone has their own problems, and they can get volunteer fatigue too, but we hope they will come back," she said.

Anthony, who has been coming back regularly, said: "I find it very fulfilling to help others. Here, I'm also learning how to avoid giving others problems when I grow old!"

About Villa Francis Home for the Aged

The home was set up in 1973 by the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM) sisters for the destitute poor and sick. Catholic Welfare Services took over the administration of the home in April 2001. In July 2006, the Canossian Daughters of Charity were appointed to manage and operate it under the Catholic Welfare Services Nursing Homes Management Committee.

Can you help?

Volunteers are a welcome sight to the residents. No special training or skills are required, only patience and a willingness to befriend the residents. Activities range from helping in physiotherapy and cognitive therapy, to singing songs with the residents, playing musical instruments, playing chess and other games, teaching simple handicraft or simply chatting with them.

Contact

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Committee members

The home's administrator is Sr Maria Sim, who works under the Catholic Welfare Service Nursing Homes Management Committee.