



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL & COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## If you have a maid, pay her fairly and on time

*This is an ongoing series to help us reflect on how we can be better employers of foreign maids. Today we focus on paying our maids a fair wage and compensation.*

### Dignity home

**G**ETTING paid fairly and on time is something every worker expects. Our maids are no different. They are here to do a job because they need the money.

Often, their families back home depend totally on the money they remit for basic necessities like food, medical expenses and education, or to settle family debts.

It is not uncommon for foreign maids to support their entire family, extended family members and even other families within their village. "Some of these women remit their entire pay packet," said Ms Elizabeth Tan, executive officer of the Archdiocesan Commission for Migrant and Itinerant workers (ACMI).

Maria (not her real name) was not paid her salary for more than two years. When she finally plucked up the courage to ask her employer for the money, she was told: "You're only a maid, keep money for what?"

Maria tried to contact her agent for help but to no avail. When her two-year contract ended, her employer alleged that she was responsible for a scratch on the marble floor and wanted to deduct \$2,000

from her salary to make good the damage. She said her employer told her that if she did not renew her contract, he would give her \$50 and a ticket to go home.

As she needed to continue supporting her family, Maria renewed her contract despite her reservations about working for this employer. Finally, another maid who knew of her plight came to her rescue. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) is investigating her case.

The ministry advises employers to pay their maids within seven days of the agreed salary period, which must be a month or shorter. The onus to prove payment is on the employer, who should get the foreign domestic helper's signed acknowledgement. Unfortunately, these are only guidelines and not law, so our conscience must move us to pay the correct amount and pay punctually.

The Catholic Church is less equivocal on this subject. "They commit grave injustice who refuse to pay a just wage or who do not give it in due time (*Deuteronomy 24:14-15*) ... The just wage is the legitimate fruit of work," says the Compendium of the Social



**SENDING MONEY HOME:** Maids toil in our homes in order to earn money to send home. Getting paid on time is critical because their monthly pay packet goes a long way, as some maids support not only their extended families, but also other families in their village.

#### Doctrine of the Church.

There is no minimum wage requirement in Singapore, which lets demand and supply determine wages.

The Philippine Embassy recommends a salary of US\$400 (S\$552) for Filipina maids. In reality, foreign maids here earn between S\$250 to S\$350 a month, although those working for the same employer over several years may earn up to S\$500. In contrast, local part-time cleaning ladies charge about S\$15 per hour, with a minimum of four hours

per session.

It is because foreigners are a source of cheap labour that there is such a high demand in Singapore. But our responsibilities as Catholic employers should go beyond such simple economics.

The Church tells us that a just wage must meet the worker's level of subsistence. This means that even if someone desperately poor is willing to work for peanuts, we should pay more than peanuts. We should not rejoice that Singapore has no minimum wage requirement,

but ask: What is a fair wage that will allow the maid and her family to live with dignity?

The Bible tells us: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." (*Luke 6:31*).

In the same way that we look forward to our bonuses at the end of the year, so too will our maids appreciate such small gestures. A hong-bao at Chinese New Year, a Christmas gift or buying her lunch on her birthday does not have to cost much, but the goodwill won is priceless.

## Everything costs more... How can you help?

**LET'S** face it. The rising cost of living is real. Many thought the bulk of price increases happened in 2007.

Yet in 2008, we have been faced with further increases in ERP rates (and gantries), NETS charges, Medishield premiums, taxi fares, university tuition fees, electricity, petrol, paper, rice, cooking oil, coffee, milk, you name it.

The current annual inflation for Singapore is 7.5 per cent, the highest in 26 years. But we are not alone. Our nearest neighbour, Malaysia, is at 7.7 per cent. The highest inflation in Asia is Vietnam's 27 per cent.

Still, nothing beats Zimbabwe's staggering hyperinflation of 2.2 million per cent. The government of Zimbabwe recently introduced a new currency unit,

which shaves 10 zeroes off the old banknotes.

Although our situation in Singapore is nowhere near that in Zimbabwe, the poor are affected by the rising cost of food.

Is there a Catholic approach to the situation? Pope Benedict XVI said at the World Summit on Food Security in June that hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable. He felt the world needed "to globalise not only economic and commercial interests, but also the expectations of solidarity".

The principle of solidarity in Catholic social teachings tells us that we should be of one heart with others, especially the suffering. Those who are "poor or in any way afflicted, they are

the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

Solidarity means that our actions should go beyond just satisfying the immediate needs of those who are lacking; it means that there must be a genuine desire to be concerned about the long term well-being of the afflicted.

The Church is leading the way in showing this solidarity.

A good example is Caritas International, which has many aid and development projects to help those in poverty. They give aid by providing immediate assistance and help the community work together to break the cycle of poverty and dependence.

Catholic Relief Services, a member of Caritas International, is the official overseas relief and development agency of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

On top of its ongoing projects in more than 100 countries, it is committing US\$11 million immediately to about half a dozen countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia and elsewhere, to provide food, cash and vouchers to those struggling to cope with rising food prices.

At home, Catholic charities such as Catholic Welfare Services and the Society of St Vincent de Paul focus on helping the poor and destitute with programmes that offer financial, housing and other support. Organisations such as Willing Hearts, ACMI and several parishes have soup kitchens and other direct programmes to feed the poor.

#### What can we do as individual Catholics?

First, however well-endowed we are, we should live simply, taking and using only what is sufficient for our needs. We can more conscientiously

look for ways to keep our costs down:

- Use cheaper, no-frills brands, including retailers' house brand items;
- Plan ahead to minimise trips and use public transport in place of taxis and private cars;
- Always reduce, recycle and reuse; and
- Switch off electrical appliances not in use.

If we are able to get used to a simpler lifestyle, we start a process of emptying ourselves (like Jesus did), and we will be able to empathise better with and even reach out to help others in need.

We can consider volunteering with and giving to St Vincent de Paul and other helping charities.

We can also seek to influence where we can, those policies and decisions that will help the poor.

In the words of St Ambrose, "when we give to the poor, we give back what belongs to them".