



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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Think “dignity” when you help

FOR I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

For many of us, this passage comes immediately to mind when we reflect on Christian charity. It describes very explicitly the way Christians should manifest our love for those in need of help. It states tangible actions that we can take to care for others and to love others. Indeed, it is a practical guide for our acts of charity.

In my work with charitable organisations in Singapore and abroad, I have met or worked alongside many dedicated people of various faiths who spend time and energy caring for the poor, those in need and those who are disadvantaged or marginalised in society.

Many donate money, clothes and food to the poor, visit hospitals and hospices, and volunteer to teach children from broken homes. Some visit prisoners and help those recently released to integrate back into mainstream society.

Then there are those who serve full time in charitable organisations, as paid staff or volunteers. They run programmes and services to meet basic needs or to help people improve their situation. All these acts of charity do matter, and they add up.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that “Charity is the greatest social commandment” (CCC 1889). As Christians, all of us are called to a life of self-giving and charity, and it is our duty and responsibility to care for and help those among us who are poor, disadvantaged, marginalised or in need of help.

Immediate Relief versus Longer-term Improvements

The passage from Matthew’s Gospel may appear to suggest that providing direct and immediate relief is more important than supporting longer-term programmes.

In this respect, the experience of relief and rebuilding efforts after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 are instructive. When the tsunami hit, particularly in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, we saw governments, national and international aid organisations, non-profit organisations and individuals rallying to help.

They offered rescue teams, equipment, food, water, temporary shelter, clothing, and other items to provide immediate relief.

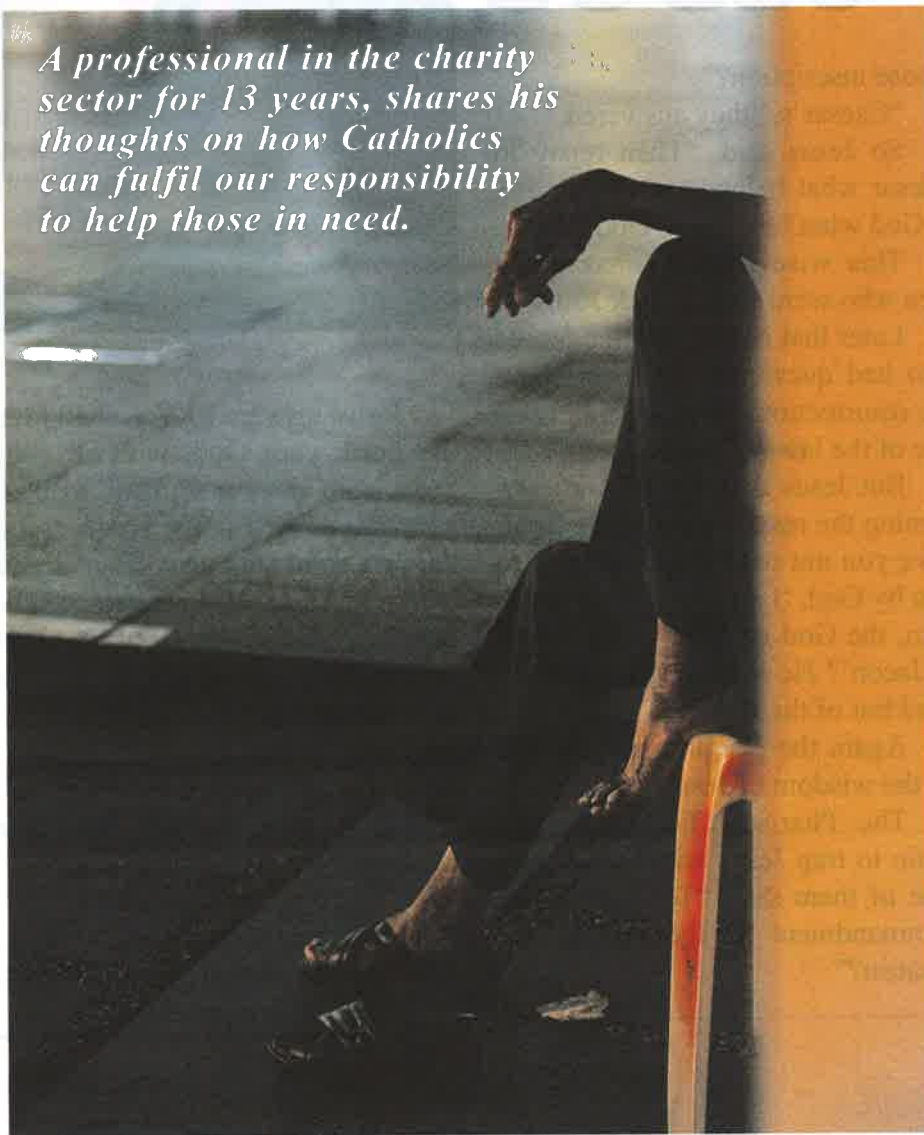
Yet, many communities are still committing a lot of resources to rebuild the lives and livelihoods of those affected.

Fishermen need new equipment and also need to look for new waters to fish. Farmers need to be relocated to areas where the soil has not been contaminated by sea-water. Infrastructure like roads, power-supply, water-supply and communication systems need to be rebuilt.

Significant resources are needed for the wide range of assistance.

Take another example nearer home. When it was found that many school children in Singapore had no pocket money for a school meal during recess, The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund was launched.

A professional in the charity sector for 13 years, shares his thoughts on how Catholics can fulfil our responsibility to help those in need.



This meant the children had a meal in school and could better focus on their lessons.

This seemingly simple and direct programme unravelled more deep-seated social issues.

Social workers and volunteers who visited the children’s families found that some parents were single parents, others were unemployed, a few were ex-prisoners who could not find work, and a few had disabilities that prevented them from working.

Knowing this, the social workers and volunteers were able to formulate and implement longer-term sustainable solutions for the children and their families.

In my view, both types of charitable acts are important and needed – we should support direct relief efforts as well as structured programmes that deliver a positive impact in the longer term.

There can be no longer-term impact if short-term survival needs are not met. But to only provide short-term immediate relief and not consider underlying causes or development programmes for sustainable improvements will just be “addressing symptoms” and we would leave those affected in a situation of needing help perpetually.

Empowering Rather than Creating Dependency

Aid programmes that address underlying causes or facilitate individual and

community development not only help to bring about sustainable improvements, but also help individuals and families in need to help themselves and live with dignity.

Direct help such as money, food, water, clothing and shelter may, if not managed well, foster a state of dependency among those in need.

If the children with no pocket money were just given money indefinitely, it is entirely possible that their parents might become dependent on handouts and not try to help themselves by finding whatever work they can.

But don’t get me wrong. What I am suggesting is that aside from providing direct relief, it is equally important to address underlying causes to empower and enable individuals and families in need to help themselves.

We can do this by supporting the development of infrastructure, education, skills, healthcare systems and other forms of support to help them help themselves and to live with dignity.

Pope Pius XI articulated the Principle of Subsidiarity and said: “It is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and/or industry.”

This is based on the prime principle of Catholic Social Teaching that being made in the image of God, each of us possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone capable

of self-knowledge and self-possession.

Take the situation in Asia. Many communities do not have readily accessible clean water, proper sanitation, safe homes or even basic healthcare.

National and international aid organisations are helping them to address immediate needs as well as to bring about longer-term sustained improvements. Some organisations run nutrition programmes while others provide equipment and logistics for distributing food and water or for removing waste.

Some build simple homes while others mobilise doctors and nurses from more developed countries to volunteer for medical missions to villages and rural areas. Aid organisations fund the building of technical and governance capabilities in these communities through education and training so that they can eventually establish and run their own water and sanitation, housing and healthcare systems.

Ensuring Dignity

What this also means is that when we offer and provide help to any community, we should always do so in a way that reflects and ensures the dignity of the individuals and families in the community concerned and also that of the whole community.

Our acts of Christian charity must never be condescending or patronising. There is no justification for us to think that we are superior just because we are helping them.

This leads to another reflection. If charity is our Christian duty, then is it appropriate for us to be publicly acknowledged for our contributions?

For many charities, appreciating donors and volunteers publicly is not just an act of courtesy, but more importantly, a means for them to gain credibility in their respective communities and among their stakeholders.

The logic is that if a charity is receiving significant donations or has been able to mobilise large numbers of volunteers, then it must be doing good work. And this attracts more donations and volunteers.

But here I am reminded of another passage from Matthew’s Gospel: “So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win human admiration. In truth I tell you, they have had their reward. But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right is doing. Your almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:2-4).

So, how do we reconcile the common practice of public appreciation events with what Jesus says in this passage?

I think such events may be useful for the charities but we must do everything we can to ensure that in highlighting the contributions of donors and volunteers, we do not demean or disparage the individuals, families or communities being helped.

Speaking at the Social Mission Conference 2010 in Singapore, Monsignor David Cappelletti cautioned that the need to feel the gratitude of the poor and disadvantaged in order to satisfy one’s ego will inadvertently diminish the dignity of the poor and disadvantaged, and subsequently, one’s own dignity.