



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

From rejection to a worldwide movement



For four days in February, about 150 members of the Faith & Light Communities in Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand and France made a four-day pilgrimage to the Majodi Centre in Johor. Although most were meeting for the first time, the pilgrims experienced an air of spontaneity through their various activities, that gave them a spirit of trust and acceptance of one another regardless of background.

ONCE a decade, Faith & Light Communities worldwide make a week-long pilgrimage to the birthplace of the movement in Lourdes, France. It all goes back to 1968, when a French couple, Gerard and Camille Profit, wanted to join a pilgrimage to Lourdes with their two mentally handicapped sons, Loic and Thaddee.

They were not allowed to join the group. They were told their children would be too much of a nuisance. As the boys could not understand what was going on, they would be a waste of resources too. Dejected but not defeated, Gerard and Camille decided to make the pilgrimage on their own. No warm welcome awaited them when they arrived in Lourdes. Residents kept telling them that such severely handicapped children should be kept out of sight.

Innkeepers turned them away, saying such people were best housed in institutions or hospitals. The only innkeeper who agreed to take them in did so on condition that all their meals would be served in their rooms so that the boys would not be seen in the dining area.

When they returned home, the couple shared their pain with Jean Vanier and Marie-Helene Mathieu, well-known advocates for people with intellectual disabilities. Jean and Marie-Helene decided to organise a pilgrimage just for these special people, their families and young people who would be in solidarity with them.

After three years of preparations and having overcome much discouragement and resistance, in Easter 1971, 12,000 pilgrims from 15 countries, including 4,000 with intellectual disabilities, accompanied by their parents and friends, assembled in Lourdes. Against all odds,

Every 10 years, something good happens around the world that brings joy to a group of intellectually disabled people and their families. The Faith & Light Community Pilgrimages affirm acceptance and bring hope to many who are often shunned and marginalised.

the pilgrimage was bursting with a rapturous joy that infected many others with delight and silenced much dissent and rejection in Lourdes.

Pleased with the outcome, the group decided to keep the adventure going.

Jean suggested: "Continue meeting together in small communities, do whatever the Holy Spirit inspires you to do." Under the leadership of Marie-Helene, Faith & Light took off and flourished throughout the world. Forty years later, there are about 1,500 Faith & Light Communities spread across 80 countries and territories worldwide. Once a decade, these communities make their pilgrimages to Lourdes to remember the first at Easter, 1971.

For the 40th anniversary, communities have been encouraged to also organise pilgrimages to suitable regional prayer centres so that more can experience the

joys of this event. The Faith & Light Communities in Singapore belong to the Colours of Asia Province which includes the Philippines and Malaysia. On February 9, 2012, about 150 Faith & Light Community members from the province, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand and France made a four-day pilgrimage to the Majodi Centre in Johor.

From the very first day, there was joy in the air even though most were meeting for the first time. There was an air of spontaneity that gave pilgrims a spirit of trust and acceptance of one another regardless of background. The gifts of the Spirit began to flow more freely.

Alaric Wang Kok Wing, the Vice-Provincial Coordinator for Faith & Light Communities in Singapore, said: "We know from our years of experience in Faith & Light that it is the presence of the Special Person that often brings about the stirrings of the Spirit within us; he carries with him the gifts of welcome, affection, acceptance without contrivance, trust, vulnerabilities and sense of wonder. With these gifts, we cannot help but to be affected. In his presence, it becomes easier for me to remove my masks, to be more of myself with my vulnerabilities, to be simpler and more accepting of myself and others. Often, when the Special Person is accepted and loved, his presence infuses the atmosphere with his vivacity, honest affection and acceptance of people around them. You cannot help but feel safer in his presence."

In the days that followed, the pilgrims had liturgies, songs and dances done with little inhibition but with great depth by the special people. There was no spiritual conference or discourse from any learned religious personality, it was just everyone

being themselves and accepting each other as gifts.

Said Alaric: "By simply being with the special people, exposed to their honest, authentic and egalitarian personalities, created unimpeded channels of joy through which the Spirit flowed. For some strange reason, they seem to have become the accidental spiritual conference during the pilgrimage. It is no wonder that Scripture often repeats the paradox that God often exalts what man considers as lowly."

ACT:

The Church calls us to solidarity, that is, to realise that every human person is a precious gift connected to every other person no matter how broken he or she is. We are called to serve one another and to build up the human family.

- 1) Think about the people that you or those you know have a tendency to shun or marginalise. Reflect on why you do so.
- 2) How can you make space in your life and welcome these people? How can you be in solidarity with them?
- 3) What concrete steps will you take to be with them and journey with their families and serve them?