



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

**A**S A Jesuit, Father Mark Raper, SJ could be said to have a soft spot for city life. “Jesuits live in the cities of Asia. There is an old saying, ‘St Bernard loved the valleys, St Benedict loved the mountain tops; St Francis loved the towns, but Ignatius preferred famous cities.’ All around the world, Jesuits have a preferential option for cities since they are most appropriate for teaching, preaching, spiritual conversation and other ministries of the Word,” said Fr Mark, who is president of the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific. The “Ignatius” he refers to is St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus.

The Jesuit Conference, an umbrella body for coordinating activities among a dozen Jesuit Provinces in the Asia-Pacific region, is engaged in works as diverse as services for the urban poor, as well as accompanying displaced persons in refugee camps and urban squatter settlements, and helping indigenous peoples in forests in northern Thailand, southern Philippines and eastern Indonesia.

Jesuit works include pastoral service, emergency disaster response, research, education and media. “Involvement on behalf of justice is integral to our mission, whether through direct engagement or in advocacy at all levels,” said Fr Mark.

As cities in Asia grow in size and number, with rural folk flocking to urban centres seeking jobs and other opportunities, the urban poor face numerous challenges.

One challenge is that of “invisibility”, where their problems are not acknowledged or addressed. In Manila, for example, where Fr Mark is based, “the official figures for squatters is 30 per cent of the population, and you can safely imagine the real figure must be about 50 per cent. A Manila dweller cannot avoid contact with the poor, though some can insulate their eyes, hearts and homes,” he said.

In well-to-do Singapore, which Fr Mark has been visiting since the 1980s, poverty sometimes has a hidden aspect.

It can be difficult to go up to someone working at a construction site to befriend him and talk about his needs and problems, but Fr Mark knew a Singaporean who did just that, about 30 years ago.

Fr Mark was the first director of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Asia Pacific during the 1980s, and its international director from 1990 to 2000. In the 1980s, he spent a lot of time visiting refugee camps in Southeast Asia and would come to Singapore too.

“On those early visits I met up with one saint from Singapore, Paul Chin, who is now in heaven. For years he collected goods to send to the refugees on Pulau Galang in Indonesia,” he recalled. “When that was no longer needed, he sold his business and took

## Reach out to the ‘invisible’ poor

**Father Mark Raper, SJ will be speaking about the Catholic response to poverty at the Social Mission Conference 2012 on Saturday, Sept 1, organised by Caritas Singapore. Registration forms for the conference, on the theme of Partnering the Poor, Living Our Faith, are available at your Church Parish Office or at [www.caritas-singapore.org](http://www.caritas-singapore.org).**

up a fulltime ministry helping migrant workers in Singapore. He would fill his Volkswagen van with clean clothes and hot food and go around to construction sites. If need be, he took the sick to hospital. He was truly a Good Samaritan. There should be a cause for his canonisation.”

One way to counter the powerlessness and isolation the poor and marginalised often feel is to build community. Fr Mark explained: “To be left alone is the greatest poverty. If people are isolated, they are defenceless, without power. United in some way, a community can resolve problems, like drainage, access to water, hygiene. Communities can bargain in ways that

individuals cannot, for example, for employment, land or services. To build community is the greatest service.”

In his work with refugees, he has encountered poignant stories of strength and selfless community spirit. “You meet women who’ve lost their children, husbands, yet seem to retain a strength and can impart hope to others. Women may have lost their own children, yet take in others. This happens especially in Africa, where children are never abandoned,” he said.

“In Rwanda, I saw widows whose husbands had been killed by Hutu men, who nonetheless got together with their Hutu neighbours to take food to prisoners, some

of whom were possibly the very ones who killed their husbands. They had all always lived in the same village, they had always been friends, they saw no reason to change this despite all that had happened.”

The JRS concept of accompaniment, or journeying with refugees and sharing in their lives, is not about patronage but establishing a relationship of equal dignity. Accompaniment is also helpful in working with other groups of poor and marginalised persons, said Fr Mark.

“If we’re journeying with people, then we’re impelled to see what the causes of their suffering are, and to do something about that. It’s not a soft option, it’s a strong motivation to act for justice if you know the people involved,” he said.

He has personal misgivings about the phrase, “a voice for the voiceless”, which is sometimes used in non-government organisation and charity circles.

“People have a right to speak in their own name. Accompaniment allows them this. I’m uncomfortable with the phrase, ‘a voice for the voiceless’. We shouldn’t necessarily be the one speaking for them. Speaking with them, listening to them, they get a chance to speak. They hear their own voice and it encourages them to speak about their situation.”

Asked his view of Catholics who are uncomfortable with or confused by the concept of working for social justice, Fr Mark suggested that this might have to do with political or societal pressures.

“The Church’s teaching on social justice is clear and strong. Confusion may come from a poor social analysis, or the threat justice might offer to a comfortable life, or attitudes passed on by peers or politicians.

But let there be no confusion about the Gospel preference for the poor, or about the Church’s commitment in faith to serve justice. From early in the Bible, the message is consistent: to protect the widow, the orphan and the migrant is the test of the authenticity of our faith,” he said.

“This is such a consistent message of the Church and of the Popes that it baffles me how it can be so frequently misunderstood. If we seek Jesus, we may find him among the poor, where he prefers to dwell.”

He acknowledges, however that it is not always clear how best to act. “Yet there are often occasions when inaction is the worst option. It is easy to say ‘I stand for social justice’. But it is not so easy how to protect fellow citizens against the ravages of the gambling industry, or to rescue young women from a criminal trafficking ring, or for a young mother with a family to know how she can assist refugees who are at risk of pirates in the Gulf of Siam.”



The island of Culion of the Palawan group in the Philippines was in the early 1900s the largest leper colony in the world. Although Hansen’s Disease (leprosy) has been virtually eradicated, the descendants of the original exiles still live there. Culion (below) is an island of displaced people, and Loyola College Culion is the Jesuit response to the need for quality education and training of a largely forgotten people. During the past year, Fr Xavier Alpasá, SJ was the parish priest and director of Loyola College Culion, a high school and tertiary college, and implements outreach projects (above) among the indigenous Tagbanua people who live on surrounding islands.



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