



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL & COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Do your part to bridge the income gap

It's not just a familiar Bible story. Lazarus may be sitting at our doorstep, but we fail to notice him. The Church's social teachings tell us to open our eyes, and act.

THE parable of the rich man and Lazarus is one that we're familiar with. In it, Jesus describes a rich man dressed in fine robes, dining at a table with plenty to eat. At his doorstep, Lazarus lies starving and largely ignored, except for the dogs that came to lick his wounds.

Such scenes of contrast between rich and poor are not uncommon in our world today. Just as Jesus exhorts the people of his time to cross the chasm while they are still living and help those in need, he exhorts us today to bridge the gap between the haves and have nots. Are we also ignorant of who's at our door?

According to government data on wages, the lowest-paid Singapore residents are cleaners and labourers. In the last decade, their wages actually fell. Official data shows that their median monthly starting pay went down from

\$860 in 1996 to \$600 in 2006. (The median is the mid-point, so that means in 2006, half of all cleaners and labourers earned a starting pay of less than \$600, and half earned more.)

That figure refers only to Singapore citizens and permanent residents. Foreign workers from countries such as Bangladesh and Indonesia who work here as maids and cleaners are paid much less.

At the other end of the income scale are chief executive officers of large companies, top lawyers, doctors, accountants and administrators who draw millions of dollars a year. Every million dollars in annual income translates into earnings of \$2,700 daily - more than four times what some cleaners and labourers earn in a month. And this gap between top earners and those at the bottom of the pay heap is growing.

Perhaps such news is no longer shocking or even surprising. After all, we have learned that such a yawning gap is an unwelcome but inescapable part of globalisation and the advent of new technologies. In today's economy, we have also heard, certain types of talent and skills are in short supply.

Those who have them must thus be amply rewarded, otherwise they will up and leave for greener pastures.

These statements are accurate but leave unsaid what really matters, which is the question of justice. Are the economic and social structures that have resulted in such an income gap, just?

There is a real danger that because we live in a culture that has come to accept the income gap as a fact of life, we too may be lulled into a state of complacency and indifference, especially if we are comfortable and benefiting from the way things are right now. But we need to examine the situation in light of the Church's social teachings, which guide us in our dealings with each other.

We know from the book of Genesis that God created the earth and all its bounty for all human beings and their sustenance. What we often forget is that God meant for the earth's goods to be shared fairly, so that every person would have what is needed for his or her full development. This principle is known as the Universal Destination of Goods and it is spelt out clearly in the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*

(Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World).

The document teaches us that "God destined the earth and all it contains for all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity". (*Gaudium et Spes*, 69)

So what is the Church calling us to do? That question is aptly answered in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

It says: "The principle of the universal destination of goods is an invitation to develop an economic vision inspired by moral values that permit people not to lose sight of the origin or purpose of these goods, so as to bring about a world of fairness and solidarity, in which the creation of wealth can take on a positive function." (*Compendium*, 174).

In other words, can we be more resourceful and inclusive in the process of our wealth creation such that the well-being of all people is promoted?

Bridging the income gap goes beyond charitable giving to the poor from the surplus that we have. As Christians, we are called to ensure that the

very process of wealth creation - each step of the way - is based on the Gospel values of love, solidarity and inclusiveness, and not left solely to the forces of demand and supply. After all, we're dealing with human beings and their families, not commodities!

So take for example the employer who strikes a balance between making profits for shareholders and paying just wages to the labourers.

With labourers ample in supply, it is certainly easy to fix wages as low as possible. But a just wage is one that is adequate for a family's breadwinner to maintain the family and secure its future, including allowing for caregivers (especially mothers) to focus on their task of care-giving.

The labourer is but one simple example of the "Lazarus" at our doorstep and within our reach to help.

What about those of us who are not employers? What can we do?

As consumers, do we consume more than we need? As members of a community, do we help others "learn to fish" or are we too caught up with upgrading our own fishing skills and ignore those who are merely trying to catch up?

Also, can we be the eyes and ears to help spot the ways in which certain groups may be left behind?

In our parishes, we can also pay more attention to disadvantaged families who live within our parish boundary - Catholic and non-Catholic alike. Often it is not just financial support that can help these families but also social and emotional support, especially from those around them such as Small Christian Communities.

At the end of the day, a true community is one where people look out for one another right from the start, and not only after they have "made good" for themselves.

We live in a wealthy nation but there are poor and needy people among us. Government statistics for 2006 show that the poorest 10 per cent of households, numbering about 100,000, earn around \$160 per month per capita, the equivalent of \$640 a month for a family of four.

However the Department of Statistics estimates that the average basic expenditure needs of a family of four adds up to \$1,040 a month. Certainly there is much to do to bridge the gap.

As Christians, we have a responsibility not only to be aware of the plight of the needy in our midst but also to recognise and respond to God's call for us to do what we can to help address the systemic issues and encourage others to do the same.

Indeed, our witness of solidarity will speak volumes to a world that says "every man for himself".

Who is the Lazarus sitting at your doorstep today?

Half a century of serving the needy

IT started out in 1959 as an agency providing cooking oil, rice and other food rations to the poor. Almost five decades on, the Catholic Welfare Services is still focused on helping those in need.

But beyond handing out food rations, Catholic Welfare Services has evolved into an action arm of the Catholic Church in Singapore - by initiating and organising social service schemes to help the down and out of all races and religions.

The chairman of the group, Brother Emmanuel Gaudette, said: "Catholic Welfare Services is modelled after Jesus Christ, who helped the poor and the unwanted."

Among those it helps are the old, the destitute, the sick and abused women. It funds and supervises the St Joseph's Home and Hospice, Villa Francis Home for the Aged, St Theresa's Home (a nursing home, pictured right), Poverello Teen Centre (a drop-in centre for youths at risk) and the Good Shepherd Centre (a shelter for abused women and children).

Together with the St Vincent de Paul Society, it also runs the St Vincent Home for elderly destitutes, and helps the Missionaries of Charity Sisters run their Gift of Love Home for the elderly, many of whom are neglected by their children.

A registered charity, Catholic Welfare Services also extends financial aid to those in need. The amount given depends on the needs of each individual but "no one is turned down if they are found deserving of help", said Brother Emmanuel, 74. It helps the sick pay their medical bills and gives bursaries to poor students.

The group needs about \$1.8 million each year. It gets its funds from Charities Week, the annual fund-raising campaign of the Catholic Church, and from a pool of regular donors. Some people have also bequeathed donations to the charity after their deaths, said Brother Emmanuel.

Brother Emmanuel hopes that Catholic Welfare Services will find ways to reach out to more people in need.

"Although Singapore is rich, there are poor people, there are people who are neglected. We want to reach out to the most unwanted ones," he said.



About Catholic Welfare Services

It is an established Catholic charity which helps the poor, the old, the sick and the neglected.

Can you help?

The group needs volunteers to help in its various fundraising campaigns.

Find out more

Go to www.catholicwelfare.org.sg
Call: 6337-7954

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