



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL & COMMUNITY COUNCIL

We are all foreigners on our way

Foreign workers are constantly in the Singapore news, with numbers here tripling from 248,000 in 1990 to 756,000 in 2007 (The Straits Times, Nov 10 2007). More often than not, they appear in the news because of some unfortunate accident, complaints from local residents or discovery of illegal immigrants.

Perhaps instinctively, Singaporeans view foreign workers as being different from themselves.

But do we realise that foreign workers also need rest, relationship, hobbies and to feel welcome? Are we grateful that foreign workers sometimes carry on working in the rain so that construction projects can be completed on time? Are we bothered that many foreign workers live in squalid quarters?

God made each of us in His own image and each of us is given an infinite dignity as a human being. How do we honor this dignity in one another, especially among the foreigners in our midst? Or better still, serve them in the example of Christ?

First, there is much room for improvement in terms of the basic needs of foreign workers.

Housing

Housing arrangements for foreign workers range from bin centres and run-down factories to clean dormitories with high-tech security.

Such dormitories cost employers about \$160 per worker per month, but one employer said workers prefer not to live there, because of the curfew and alcohol restrictions, fights that occur occasionally, and because they must wake up earlier to be transported to worksites.

However, living in less clean sites exacts a toll. One in three dengue cases last year was a foreign worker (The Straits Times, June 30, 2007).

Transportation

The transportation of foreign workers is done mainly by goods lorries, exposing them to injury and death in road accidents. The Land Transport Authority has established rules to improve their safety but despite the rules, the number of foreign workers injured in accidents more than doubled from 76 in 2006 to 184 in 2007, and 7 died in the past 2 years (The Straits Times, Feb 22, 2008).

Food and healthcare

Singapore's work permit conditions require employers to bear the cost of their workers' upkeep, including food and medical treatment. But social workers say many employers don't do so.

The Humanitarian Organisation for Migrant Economics (HOME) says that every month, at least one foreign worker approaches it with medical bills the employer won't pay. Employers say the workers were injured because they did not follow safety rules, or were hurt while doing part-time work, or in fights.

Wages

There is no minimum wage in Singapore, so some foreign

workers can work as many as 12 hours a day and earn only \$16-20 a day.

One employer said her workers prefer not to have days off, except for Hari Raya, as they are Muslim, and they ask to work overtime so they can earn more. Indeed for many, the low wage often means working harder and longer to support their families back home.

Social needs

Some local residents complain about foreign workers urinating, littering and getting drunk in their neighborhoods. But others acknowledge the essential contribution foreign workers make to our society and call for their greater education, and for tolerance to facilitate better integration, not segregation. It includes providing them space to mingle on their days off.

Loving our neighbour

Foreign workers are no different than the rest of us, with virtues and weaknesses. We all need to be cared for, to be taught to care for others, nurture our aspirations and deal with our shortcomings. Jesus' exhortation to "love your neighbor as yourself" applies to every person, foreigner or citizen, rich or poor.

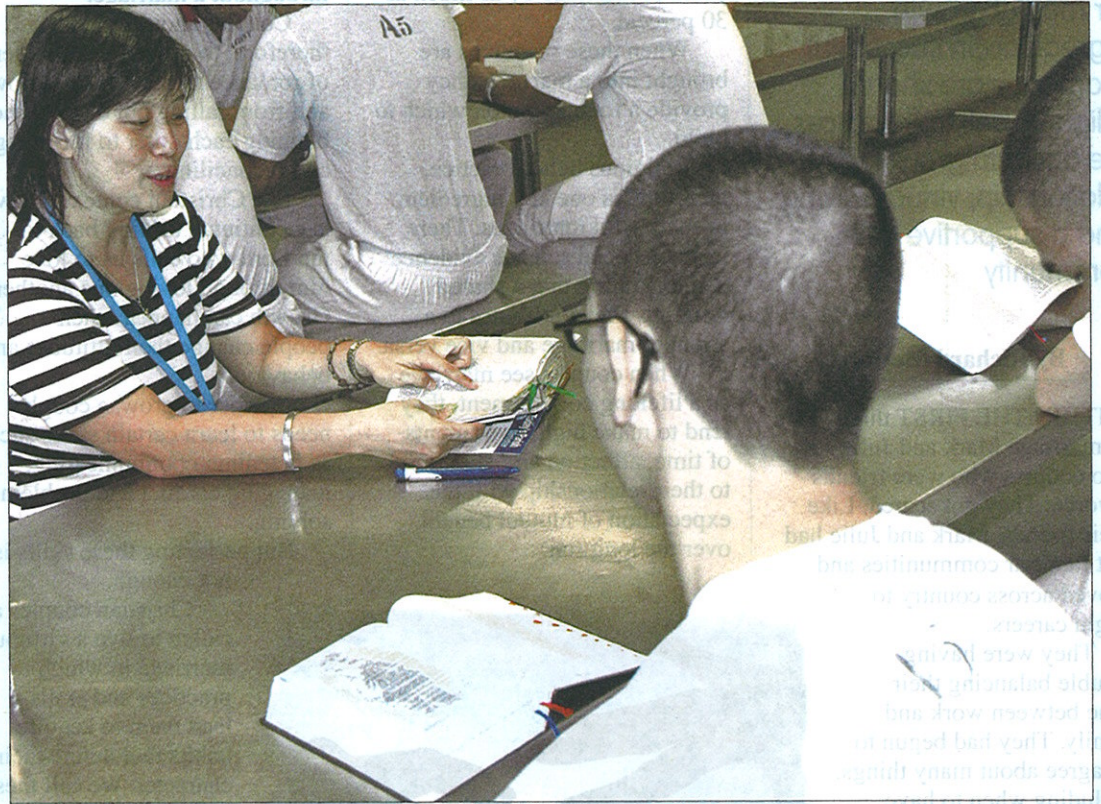
The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People reminds us that in migrants, the Church contemplates the image of Christ who said: "I was a stranger and you made me welcome." (Matthew 25:35)

The Bible reminds us that we are all foreigners on our way (Hebrews 13:14). And on this road, all are brothers and sisters. We are to identify with migrants and welcome them, as Abraham welcomed strangers. Migration brings together the "manifold components of the human family... (building) a more vast and varied society, already foreshadowed by the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost." (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2004).

The Church's teaching on the care of migrants is also reflected in various secular institutions. The United Nations has been promoting the International Convention of the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Among other things, the Convention states that migrant workers shall enjoy equal pay and medical benefits as citizens. Singapore is currently not a signatory to the Convention.

In Singapore, it is particularly poignant that many of our ancestors were immigrants, and much of the country has been built by the "foreign workers" of old such as the samsui women.

Thus, although migrant workers are often driven by poverty and suffer much, God seeks to draw good from this situation and invites us to take part in renewing humanity and proclaiming the gospel of peace and unity. With Christ's command to love our neighbour, Christians are called to outdo one another in this regard.



Touched by prisoners

TO JOURNEY with prisoners on their spiritual journey requires courage, compassion and commitment.

But volunteers with the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry (RCPM) say they are touched in unexpected ways. Listening to the struggles and temptations that prisoners face, some volunteers identify with their weaknesses. We all have spiritual battles to fight.

It can also be heartbreaking to see some prisoners leave jail only to fall back into crime and end up in prison again.

But volunteers persevere to show them God's love, strength and mercy.

RCPM Volunteers comprise men and women from different Catholic parishes, and a handful from other Christian churches. Many hold full-time jobs while others have committed themselves full-time to this ministry, responding to Christ's invitation: "I was in prison and you visited me." (Matt 25:36)

Volunteer Doris Tan, who corresponds with prisoners, said: "The inmates write inspiring letters. They are always asking for more prayers and seeking God's messages. They also look forward to meeting the counsellors to know more about God."

"Most of them feel very sorry for the mistakes they made, and for bringing pain to their families. They hope to be forgiven, to be accepted by society, Church and family."

Every week RCPM covers 13 prisons, conducting 30 counselling sessions for about 300 inmates, both men and women. They include non-Catholics and those who are exploring the Catholic faith.

During prison visits, volunteers and priests join the prisoners in mass, Bible sharing, faith development and intercessory prayer.

Priests also administer the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, reconciliation and anointing of the sick and those preparing for execution.

Outside prison, volunteers also provide practical and spiritual support to families of prisoners, and aftercare to newly-released prisoners.

Full-time volunteer Jimmy Yuen said:

"Journeying with those on death-row touched me the most. Over the months and years, we talk, joke, laugh and weep together, pray, sing God's praises and share holy communion and the scriptures."

"I have stood in awe and wonder to see the peace and joy with which they walk their final steps on earth. It is my ardent conviction that Jesus heals, transforms and saves the lost and sets prisoners free. I became Christ for them and in turn, I was rewarded to see and touch the Risen Christ in them. For this I am forever grateful to God."

About RCPM

The Roman Catholic Prison Ministry was commissioned in 1977 by then Archbishop Gregory Yong, with Fathers Brian Doro, CSsR (now in Perth) and Thomas O'Neill, SJ, and Sister Gerard Fernandez showing the way to provide help and support to men and women in prison. As of end-2007 there are 19 priests in this ministry.

Can you help?

The ministry needs volunteers, especially Mandarin-speakers, able to commit to a two-hour visit with prisoners at least once a week. Volunteers should lead a prayerful life, have a good working knowledge of the Bible and basic Catholicism. New volunteers undergo orientation and on-going training.

Contact RCPM

Tel: 6100-RCPM (6100-7276)

Fax: 6354-2628

Mailing Address: Tanglin Post Office

P O Box 509

Singapore 912417

Pro-Tem Executive Committee

Spiritual Director:	Father Paul Pang, CSsR
Chairman:	Matthew Tay
Secretary:	Melvyn Sum
Treasurer:	Kevin Yap
Volunteers Resource:	Agnes Ee
Resource & Programme:	Edward Choo
Practice & Compliance:	Brian Campos
Admin, Office & Log.:	Joselyn Chan