



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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Civil society: Towards the Common Good

The principles of subsidiarity and the common good, as described in the Church's social teachings, are integral to the development of civil society.

FIVE hundred angry investors show up at Speakers' Corner to demand compensation for Lehman mini-bonds and other structured financial products they say were "mis-sold" to them.

Fifteen hundred residents of Serangoon Gardens sign a petition to lobby against a government plan to site a foreign workers' dormitory in their estate.

Those have been two recent, high-profile instances of Singaporeans coming together to try and influence the course of events which seemed to them to run counter to their interests.

Not all of us may agree with the cause of either group but most of us can probably sympathise with their plights.

Setting aside the rightness or wrongness of their causes, what is significant is that these citizens are able to launch such spontaneous grassroots movements. That the Church regards as a good thing because of the value she places on civil society.

What is civil society? It is the sum of relationships and resources that are relatively independent from both the government and the economic sector.

Civil society thus encompasses various communities of small or intermediate size such as families, neighbourhoods, churches, charities, labour unions, professional associations, volunteer organisations, cooperatives, universities and a host of other groupings.

Such groups enable persons to act together, and empower them to influence larger social institutions such as the state and the economy.

An essential characteristic of civil society groups is thus their independence, which the Church requires larger, more powerful institutions to respect.

The principle that must guide interactions between state and civil society is "subsidiarity". It relates to the way society is organised.

The word subsidiarity comes from "subsidius", which means to help. The principle of subsidiarity says that the natural associations that people form should be helped to flourish.

That includes supporting and letting them undertake what they can do for themselves, so that they can grow and develop. The opposite is to have a higher-level organisation take over every task,

which eventually reduces the autonomy and empowerment of the people.

So the Church teaches that government should provide help (subsidiarity) to members of civil society; it should never destroy or absorb them.

Here in Singapore, we are used to a dominant government whose reach extends into almost every aspect of people's lives. It is a situation that many of us have grown used to and are even comfortable with.

We also live in a modern, capitalist society in which market forces hold powerful sway.

Some of us may come together with other like-minded people to form small groups centred on what we enjoy doing, like chess, gardening or even Scripture study. Or we may start volunteer groups to do works of charity.

But we are less likely to come together to try and influence government policies

or challenge the fallout of market forces. Such forms of civil society activism and advocacy have traditionally been viewed with suspicion by the authorities and that has steered citizens away from involvement.

That is why the recent activism of Serangoon Gardens residents and Lehman mini-bond investors stands out.

The change was noticed even by outsiders such as news wire agency Agence France Presse ("Singaporeans find their voice in financial crisis", Oct 18, 2008). But the report also observed that to date, the protests have been "focused on protecting the investors' interests, rather than on larger social and political issues".

The current fuel for civil society activism is self interest, but it should ideally evolve to be the common good.

The Church defines the common good as the sum of conditions that allow for all persons involved to achieve

their potential as human beings. In this way, the Church challenges us to always seek the good of all – every person and the whole person.

In his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII wrote: "The purpose of civil society is universal, since it concerns the common good, to which each and every citizen has a right in due proportion."

But the Church also recognises the realities of civil society today, and how that falls short of the ideal.

The Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace observes in the *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church*: "Civil society is in fact multifaceted and irregular, it does not lack its ambiguities and contradictions. It is also the arena where different interests clash with one another, with the risk that the stronger will prevail over the weaker."

It is here that the Church sees a role for state intervention, where necessary and with

respect to the principle of subsidiarity, so that the "interplay between free associations and democratic life may be directed to the common good".

At the same time, the Church re-affirms the value of civil society and looks with hope to it as a place to rebuild a public ethic based on love of neighbour, cooperation and dialogue.

All are called, the Council on Justice and Peace writes, to look with confidence on the potential that thus present themselves and to lend their efforts for the good of the community in general and, in particular, for the good of the weakest and the neediest.

Every one of us is thus called to participate and be active in civil society, and to make the best use we can of the space it affords to citizen initiative. It is here that we are to put our knowledge, skills and gifts to work for the sake of our brothers and sisters, especially those most in need.



Volunteer Betty Tay shows the scale models of fetuses that she uses for counselling sessions at the Pregnancy Crisis Service centre at Highland Road. Behind her is Nancy Lim, a telephone helpline volunteer.

Unwanted pregnancies: Help is a phone call away

THE Pregnancy Crisis Service is more than a telephone helpline for those troubled by an unwanted pregnancy.

Its volunteers counsel those who need help and provide free counselling at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital for those who want to abort their babies.

Recently, it also started running a shelter for mums

who need a place to stay temporarily. These may include young unwed mums whose parents don't want their daughter to be expecting a baby.

Most of those who call the crisis centre are below 21 years old and some are still in school, said the service's co-ordinator, Rose Boon.

Ms Boon, 60, said of these young mums: "They just

want someone to accompany them on this painful journey."

She and her fellow volunteers help the pregnant youngsters explore the options, from giving up the baby for adoption to working out how to break the news to their families and teachers.

"We do everything we can to help these girls," said Ms Boon.

What is the Pregnancy Crisis Service

It is a 24-hour helpline run by trained volunteers, for girls and women struggling with unwanted pregnancies. The group was started in 1987. The hotline number is: 6339-9770.

Can you help?

The crisis centre needs volunteers to run its helpline and counselling services and other work.

Who to call

If you think you can help, call Rose Boon or May Yang at 6339-9770.