GOSPEL READING
MATT 11:25-30

Jesus exclaimed, ‘I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do. Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

‘Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light.’
GIVE ME A BREAK
I don’t have a domestic worker at home. My family and I don’t see a need to employ one at the moment. However, I can imagine how a domestic worker might become indispensable in the future should my parents require greater care as they grow older. In reality, we are becoming increasingly dependent upon domestic workers. We rely upon them to clean our homes and care for our young and elderly. It seems somewhat inevitable as Singaporeans begin forging careers and starting families.

Public debate has recently emerged surrounding the possibility of introducing laws to ensure that employers provide a day of rest for their domestic workers. Currently, domestic workers are not protected under the Employment Act. Consequently, their working conditions vary greatly, depending upon how their employers treat them. To put this into perspective, although most Singaporeans are accustomed to a 5 or 6 day work week, many domestic workers are on the clock 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Nevertheless, this lack of regulation does not absolve employers from the responsibility of treating their domestic workers justly and fairly.

Reflect:
What is your opinion towards current laws surrounding the employment of domestic workers in Singapore? Why?

Imagine yourself a migrant worker in a foreign country. What types of working rights would you expect to enjoy? Why?

Do you think domestic workers in Singapore currently receive adequate protection with regards to their working rights? Why or why not?

LIVING TRADITION
“[persons] working away from [their] native land, whether as a permanent emigrant or as a seasonal worker, should not be placed at a disadvantage in comparison with the other workers in that society in the matter of working rights. Emigration in search of work must in no way become an opportunity for financial or social exploitation… The value of work should be measured by the same standard and not according to the difference in nationality, religion or race.”


LIVING TRADITION
“Workers can often share in running businesses and in controlling their productivity, and in fact do so. Through appropriate associations, they exercise influence over conditions of work and pay, and also over social legislation. But at the same time various ideological or power systems…have allowed flagrant injustices to persist or have created new ones…the ‘poor’ appear under various forms; they appear in various places and at various times; in many cases they appear as a result of the violation of the dignity of human work: either because the opportunities for human work are limited as a result of the scourge of unemployment, or because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family.”


DIGNITY OF HUMAN WORK
This issue of legislating a day of rest for domestic workers is part of a wider reflection upon the dignity of human work. Work constitutes one dimension of the human person. It is not the only dimension. Neither is it the most important dimension. To put things into perspective, work is for the human person and not the human person for work. This implies that workers have the right to a safe working environment, just wages and social benefits, adequate rest, appropriate representation through unions, and the freedom to form associations to pursue their own well-being.

Yet, there are instances when work is turned against the good of people to exploit human labour and to oppress the human person. Examples of this are rampant everywhere, even in Singapore. Last Sunday’s Gospel reading offers relief to those who have laboured and are overburdened. God’s Word reminds us today that there is a higher standard of measurement for work that goes beyond the bottom line or the profit margin – the good of the human person.

Reflect:
How has your life and the lives of others benefited from your work? Why or why not?

What are your working conditions like? Do you think you are being justly treated and fairly rewarded for your work? Why?

Think of some individuals you encounter everyday whom are unjustly treated or unfairly rewarded for their work. What factors are contributing to these injustices?
WORK IN PROGRESS
The dignity of human work is a particularly important principle to grasp, especially in Singapore. The rapid development of Singapore's industry and economy was built upon the backs of countless workers – by the hands of our very own parents and grandparents. However, not all of them are able to enjoy the fruits of their labours today.

Workers today are paid according to several factors such as educational qualification, experience, and type of work done. These factors justify the pay scales for occupations ranging from a director to a driver. However, not all occupations are seen as equally valuable – a higher premium is given to mental labour as compared to physical labour. Many Singaporeans are unwilling to work in occupations that are commonly perceived as menial, such as cleaning or dishwashing in hawker centres. These labour intensive tasks are usually left to the aged or disadvantaged, who are paid unjustly for their hard work. Such perceptions and practices ignore the dignity of the human person and of human work.

As Singaporeans and citizens, perhaps one concrete way to foster greater recognition and respect for workers would be through wage adjustments that take into account current standards of living and what is reasonably required to support a worker’s livelihood. Perhaps it is also necessary to change the way we perceive different types of work by gauging their value not in isolation but with-in a wider context, comparing how society functions with and without them.

LIVING TRADITION

"In economically developed countries, relatively unimportant services, and services of doubtful value, frequently carry a disproportionately high rate of remuneration, while the diligent and profitable work of whole classes of honest, hardworking [people] gets scant reward. Their rate of pay is quite inadequate to meet the basic needs of life. It in no way corresponds to the contribution they make to the good of the community, to the profits of the company for which they work, and to the general national economy."

- Pope John XXIII, Mater et Magistra: On Christianity and Social Progress, paragraph 70.

Reflect:
What is your value as a worker? What criteria do you apply to determine this value?

Do you feel valued or under-valued by other people based upon their perceptions about your occupation?

Do you value or under-value other people based upon your perceptions about their occupations? How, and more importantly, why?