GOD DOESN’T MAKE JUNK

SECOND READING
Phil 4:12-14; 19-20

“I know how to be poor and I know how to be rich too. I have been through my initiation and now I am ready for anything anywhere: full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty. There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength. All the same, it was good of you to share with me in my hardships. In return my God will fulfil all your needs, in Christ Jesus, as lavishly as only God can. Glory to God, our Father, for ever and ever. Amen.”

CARITAS SINGAPORE is a local Catholic charity formed in 2006. As an organisation focused upon addressing the concerns of the most vulnerable in society regardless of race or religion, it recognises a responsibility to fulfil the Church’s social mission for the benefit of the broader community.

In the area of adult formation, Caritas Singapore seeks to promote and facilitate a greater understanding of the Catholic social teaching through its various formation programmes, one aspect of which encompasses this monthly online publication.

This issue of FAITH+LIFE was edited by Nicholas Pang. Please email any queries to formation@caritas-singapore.org.
DO LESS, NOT MORE

It’s a philosophy that a group of social workers – working in one of Singapore’s oldest and poorest estates – is trying to abide by. Their approach goes against the instincts of most good-hearted people serving in the social service sector. Their aim is to create opportunities and generate motivation for self and mutual help. They believe in a strengths-based approach rather than a needs-based approach.

“The helping profession is about getting people to help themselves,” said their spokesman. “Ironically, the more ‘professional’ we appear to our service-users, the more unlikely they are going to step forward to help themselves. The more we appear to know about problem-solving, the less... people want to get involved. We must recognise this if we want people to be active participants in the creation of solutions. We must... talk less and listen more.” Another social worker said: “When we focus on... needs and deficits, we undermine and even inhibit their strengths. If we are not careful, our model of intervention can keep the poor poor.”

Reflect:
What are the differences between a strengths-based approach and a needs-based approach? Which do you think best serves and respects the dignity of the poor? Why?

What convictions lie behind a strengths-based approach?

HELPING PEOPLE TO HELP THEMSELVES

Mr Tan is a single father with five children, aged 4 to 11. They live in a two-room rental flat in central Singapore. He goes to work very early each morning and is unable to supervise his children. The eldest child has to take on that role. When the youngest sibling oversleeps, the eldest sibling has to stay home. When that happens, all five usually end up skipping school. On days when there is no food at home, they walk around their neighbourhood begging.

Social workers could have swooped in to fix what was wrong but they decided instead to tap on the community’s strengths. They encouraged other families living in the same rental block to participate in lending a hand. A small group of neighbours discussed the problem before deciding they would walk Mr Tan’s children to school and enrol them in before-and-after school programmes. They also asked their neighbourhood shopkeepers to provide meals for the children should they run out of food at home.

This strengths-based approach reaffirms that these families, who are often seen only as needy and even dysfunctional, know how to use their own resources to help each other.

Reflect:
What do you think enabled and empowered the neighbours in the above story, who were themselves poor, to step forward to help Mr Tan and his children?

In your parish or neighbourhood, does the wider community participate in helping the poor? Why or why not?

LIVING TRADITION

“No higher-level body should take over what a lower-level body can do for itself, so that people can develop and flourish.”


LIVING TRADITION

“All human persons have a right and duty to take action in what determines their well-being and future.”

THE VALUE OF THE HUMAN PERSON

God doesn’t make junk. This sentence encapsulates a fundamental principle of Catholic Social Teaching – every human person is of infinite dignity and has rights and duties by virtue of being human. Whether rich or poor, we are all of equal dignity, as the second reading affirms.

A social worker lamented over the pitfalls of over-professionalisation. “In Singapore, we tend to measure success materially. The poor are seen…as problems; they don’t contribute, yet they receive. In the current social service framework, the social worker says: I’m the expert, I tell you poor and uneducated what to do.” That approach can disempower those who receive aid. Instead, Catholic Social Teaching affirms that the poor themselves can and should be given the opportunity to contribute towards shaping their own well-being and future.

Another social worker commented, “We have this notion of deserving and undeserving poor. Social workers or social work assistants spend much of our time making assessments or doing means testing to make sure the poor don’t take advantage of help schemes. We unwittingly become the ‘social chain’ that protects and locks out the system rather than the catalyst that facilitates ‘social change’. That is perhaps why people experience the system as uncompassionate despite the plethora of help schemes.”

Reflect:
In Singapore, are the poor given the opportunity to contribute towards shaping their own well-being and future? Why or why not?

In your parish and neighbourhood, how can you help the poor in concrete ways that best serve and respect their dignity?

LIVING TRADITION

“Every human person is of infinite dignity. All of society must be directed towards the well-being of the human person.”


Look out for the next issue of Catholic News on 16 Oct for a more in-depth article on empowering the poor in Singapore. Questions or comments can be submitted via the Feedback button on page one.