



## OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

# Living out Pope Francis' Lenten message



Photo: Assisi Hospice

**D**uring this season of Lent, a time when Christians are called on to carry out acts of self-denial and help those less fortunate, Pope Francis has urged us, in his first Lenten message, to reach out and touch "the poverty of our brothers and sisters".

"We Christians are called to confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it," he wrote.

Reminding us that poverty is not only material, he went on to say: "No less a concern is moral destitution, which consists in slavery to vice and sin. How much pain is caused in families because one of their members – often a young person – is in thrall to alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography!"

"How many people no longer see meaning in life or prospects for the future, how many have lost hope! And how many are plunged into this destitution by unjust social conditions, by unemployment, which takes away their dignity as breadwinners, and by lack of equal access to education and health care. In such cases, moral destitution can be considered impending suicide."

He said this form of destitution which also cause financial ruin, "is invariably linked to the spiritual destitution which we experience when we turn away from God and reject his love".

How do we "confront" the poverty of those in our society?

Cardinal Robert Sarah, who heads the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, was part of a small group of people who presented Pope Francis' Lenten message on February 4 in the Vatican. He elaborated on the message, saying: "What the Pope is saying is that we shouldn't expect to set our bourgeois consciences at rest

by denouncing others' lack of resources or by denouncing poverty as a system."

The call to action is therefore not abstract or theoretical, but personal and practical.

55-year-old Jenny (not her real name) is among those in Singapore who have been helped by private and government organisations. A beneficiary of Montfort Care, a Catholic organisation under the umbrella of Caritas Singapore, she was struggling for a number of years as the main caregiver to her ill mother. Jenny herself has schizophrenia, anxiety and depression, and, as a fulltime caregiver, could not work. She said that her brother, whose household had previously cared for their mother, gave her \$300 a month for their mother's care and Jenny received some financial assistance from other sources at various times, such as \$150 from the ComCare government scheme.

Through Montfort Care, Jenny received counselling and food supplies, and was put in touch with student nurses who taught her how to care for her mother, whose needs meant Jenny sometimes had to wake every two hours at night. Volunteers also gave their home a new coat of paint.

Her mother died last September. Jenny said financial assistance is valued but it cannot help a person emotionally. "Montfort Care really gives you emotional support," she said. The staff helped her through her sometimes troubled relationship with her mother as well. "All along, I thought she loved my brother very much. She really loved me very much," Jenny said of her mother.

Jenny said she had attempted suicide after her father's death several years earlier and Montfort

Care staff feared she might do the same after her mother's death. Grateful for the care she received from social worker Micki Sim and other Montfort Care staff, she said: "They will accompany you throughout your journey of life, to help you and give you full support." She urged others in distress to seek help and not despair. "Don't suffer all by yourself, you're not alone," she said.

Jenny's experience is an example of how others made her poverty their own, as they helped her through her struggles.

In another major aspect of his message, Pope Francis explained that he took his inspiration from an expression used by St Paul in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Indeed, this year's Lenten message is entitled: "By his poverty you might become rich."

He went on to say: "What do these words of St Paul mean for us Christians today? What does this invitation to poverty, a life of evangelical poverty, mean to us

today?" He emphasised that "love makes us similar, it creates equality, it breaks down walls and eliminates distances", and said: "God did this with us ... God did not let our salvation drop down from heaven, like someone who gives alms from their abundance out of a sense of altruism and piety."

Dentist Marcia Ng has found her life enriched by the volunteer work she has done with marginalised persons. "As they say, you actually receive more than you give," said Marcia, who volunteers at Assisi Hospice, being with terminally ill patients. "During their last stage of life, you learn so much from their testimony, as well as from the caregivers ... I am so privileged to be part of their journey."

She often volunteers with her family, and has been on overseas missions too. She said she used to be a proud person, but volunteer work has helped her not to be judgmental and negative. It has also made her thirst more for the Word of God, and she calls the Bible "God's manual", telling us how to live.

May we all rediscover the riches of God as we confront the poverty in our midst during Lent.



Lent is a time of giving and Caritas Singapore is launching Charities Week 2014 to raise funds for our work and the work of our 23 member organisations and charities. Caritas Singapore is the social mission arm of the Catholic Church in Singapore and your generous donations will make a real difference in the lives of the more than 50,000 people served by our member organisations.

If you do not require tax deduction on your donation, this will allow Caritas Singapore more flexibility in allocating your donation to Catholic Charities without tax-exempt status.