



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## Love your neighbour: Easier said than done

When asked what is most essential for the true believer, Jesus produced the classic distillation: Love God, Love neighbour (*Mark 12:28-31*). Your neighbour, as Jesus explains in the parable of the Good Samaritan, is just about anyone you may come across. Friend, foe, fellow citizen or foreigner, your neighbour is to expect from Christians not just love, but agapeic love that is unconditional and selfless. This is the bedrock of the Church's Social Teachings.

Many of us in Singapore may have difficulty embracing this teaching of Jesus, not because we are bad Christians but because we are part of a culture where people do not know their neighbours. In fact, we even arrange it so that we do not have to see or hear them, and have grown accustomed to living within an environment of "insulatedness".

Look at how privacy is often the dominant criterion in house-hunting. Distance from the next house? Further please. Windows? They should face away from other homes. Walls? Thicker is better. And make sure we can put on a couple more locks on that door. Gone is the spirit of the kampung where boundaries between village homes were more permeable. Contemporary urban homes are fortified inner sanctums in which we are insulated from those who may disrupt our lives. Loving our neighbour can become quite abstract when our neighbours are out of sight and out of mind.

We extend our "insulatedness" when we are on the move as well. Many of us commute in the seclusion of our cars, cozy little mobile rooms with the radio being our only company. Driving is seldom associated with neighbourliness – we know that the most even-tempered souls can be transformed once they get behind the steering wheel. Even on the bus or train, we opt to plug into our iPods to cut ourselves off from the others surrounding us. We cannot act quickly enough to make them vanish as we head into our own space. When youngsters fail to give up their seats on the MRT to an old person or pregnant woman, they are simply oblivious to the need of others. Missing opportunities to love our neighbour becomes normal behaviour when we remain unaware that our neighbour is present.

"Insulatedness" appears in the way we order our social life as well. We form multiple associations with different clusters of people: friends (both real and the Facebook



*In a world that is shrinking, thanks to globalisation and the use of technology, are we getting closer to our neighbours? ARTHUR GOH, Director of the Singapore Pastoral Institute, examines this question in relation to our Catholic Social Teachings.*

variety), family, colleagues, hobby club members, church ministry groups, and so on. Our membership in these communities is usually voluntary, focused on a particular function or activity.

To maintain a clear sense of definition in our relationships with these groups, we rarely allow the different circles to overlap. It is not hard to treat like-minded folk in our chosen groups as "neighbours" to be loved, but what about the people who live next door? We have no choice about who moves in, and may have close to nothing in common with them. Yet, Jesus chose the two unlikeliest characters in the Jew and the Samaritan to illustrate his concept of being a neighbour: no difference is wide enough to excuse us from behaving like followers of Jesus.

The concern with "insulatedness" lies in the way it is gradually

becoming our state of mind in Singapore. "Insulatedness" deadens our awareness by turning our concerns inward and prompting us to retreat from wider engagement, mirroring our tendency for physical isolation. In a society where "insulatedness" is the catchword, children will learn self-centeredness, mutual suspicion, calculativeness and duplicity. Over time, we develop a narrowness of spirit and an entrenched inability to make sense of that command to "love your neighbour".

When Jesus issued both commandments - Love God, Love neighbour - in a single breath, it was to stress that true worship and social concern are inseparable. As Catholics, we need to consciously seek to live His commandments. We can start by acknowledging and loving those neighbours we come into contact with.

### Live life to the full at Advent

WHAT does it mean to live life to the full? Does it mean accumulating, storing and then splurging or spending on something you have been eyeing? Is it about eating, making merry and enjoying yourself to the maximum?

Pope Benedict XVI in his latest encyclical stressed that the complete development or total integral development of the human person must include not just material growth but also spiritual growth, since the human person is a "unity of body and soul", born of God's creative love and destined for eternal life (*Caritas in Veritate*, 76).

While we feed and nurture our physical body, we must not forget to nourish ourselves spiritually.

To help us get there, the Singapore Pastoral Institute and Caritas Singapore Community Council have prepared an Advent Booklet entitled "That they may have life to the full!"

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, our preparation will remind us not to forget to invite Christ into our busy lives and to be concerned and in communion with humanity.

As we live towards the fullness of life at this Advent, we not only invite Christ into our lives, we also commemorate His birth and anticipate His glorious second coming at the end of the world.

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## THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE TO THE FULL!

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