



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

HUMAN DIGNITY

How far we've come, how far we need to go

MR BARACK Obama's presidency is a poignant symbol of the great strides the world has made in its struggle to understand and value human dignity, as well as the immense distance it still has to go.

Just 60 years ago, blacks in America had no right to vote. They could not attend certain schools, eat in many restaurants or sit at the front of public buses because these were places reserved for whites. Today, the majority of Americans know that the colour of a man's skin has no bearing on his dignity. When Americans elected their first black president in November last year, people around the world celebrated the historic overturning of centuries of racism.

But on another front, Mr Obama's presidency marks the intensification of an assault on human dignity that has been gaining momentum in recent decades. He is pro-choice and has

pledged US federal government support and funds for abortion programmes.

Like him, many today fail to recognise the taking of human life – whether through abortion or euthanasia – for what it is: a most heinous attack on human dignity because it deprives a person of his most basic right, the right to life.

Why do societies that affirm the value and dignity of every human being, regardless of race, religion, nationality or social class, accept and at times even applaud the abortion of unborn children, and the putting to death of people in a comatose state?

Such contradictions arise from a confusion over the source of human dignity. If a mistake of the past was the assumption that darker-skinned people possessed less dignity, a mistake of the present is the belief that those who cannot think or make choices on their own do not qualify as persons. By that

measure, embryos and comatose patients are not fully human and therefore, to kill them is not to commit murder. But that is a dangerous fallacy.

The whole of the Church's Social Teachings is centred on the human person. In a series of talks last year, Father David Garcia posed this question: does a human being become a person when he can think, or can a person think because he is human? That question is akin to asking: does a kangaroo jump because it is a kangaroo or does it become a kangaroo because it jumps?

To pretend that humans become persons only when they are autonomous, or able to feel, is like pretending that kangaroos become kangaroos only when they can jump. To say that comatose humans are not persons with a right to life would amount to saying that kangaroos that cannot jump have stopped being

kangaroos.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that the human person is the only creature that God has willed for its own sake and he alone is called to share in God's own life. Being made in the image of God, the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, and that dignity must be recognised in every human being from conception to natural death.

"Something of the glory of God shines on the face of every person, the dignity of every person before God is the basis of the dignity of man before other men," says the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*.

In Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter on abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty in today's world, *Evangelium Vitae*, he decried the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity with the weak and vulnerable, and in many cases, takes the form of a culture of death.

"This culture is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency. Looking at the situation from this point of view, it is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden and is therefore

rejected in one way or another.

"A person because of illness, handicap, or more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life style of those who are more favoured tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated. In this way a kind of conspiracy against life is unleashed. This conspiracy involves not only individuals in their personal, family or group relationships, but goes far beyond, to the point of damaging and distorting, at the international level, relations between peoples and States," he wrote.

It is a sad irony that such attacks on life at the frontiers of birth and death take place in societies that boast of being champions of human rights. Pope John Paul II traced the roots of that contradiction to a notion of freedom which exalts the individual in an absolute way, and gives no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service of them.

"While it is true that the taking of life not yet born or in its final stages is sometimes marked by a mistaken sense of altruism and human compassion, it cannot be denied that such a culture of death, taken as a whole, betrays a completely individualistic concept of freedom which ends up by becoming the freedom of the strong against the weak, who have no choice but to submit," he wrote.

In Genesis 4:9, God asks Cain who has just murdered his brother Abel: "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain replies: "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

That question goes to the heart of all our relationships with one another. It is worth reflecting on our own understanding of human dignity, and whether we – like Cain – seek to distance ourselves from the wrong we commit against our brothers and sisters. Have we allowed ourselves to be influenced by the prejudices of our age? Who are the persons in our midst whom we consider to have less dignity than ourselves? How do we treat such persons?

All too often, we seek to exclude from the human family those who are weak and dependent on others for their most basic needs. In the eyes of the world, these people are little more than burdens.

That person could be a foreign maid struggling to learn how to do simple chores, or a grandparent who in his old age has forgotten how to feed or dress himself, or a mentally disabled person who speaks little sense, or an unborn child who is getting in the way of his mother's plans for herself.

Every single one of them is a human person made in the image and likeness of God. Justice requires us to preserve and defend their dignity. Pope John Paul II reminds us that "every man is his brother's keeper, because God entrusts us to one another".

Indeed, it is that responsibility that lies at the heart of our social mission.

A lifeline for troubled marriages

IN A world where divorce is commonplace and couples choose to call it quits rather than work out their problems, the Retrouvaille programme is proving to be a much-needed lifeline. It has brought together husbands and wives facing problems and seeking help. Some have drawn apart and no longer feel in love, others are angry or hurting, have separated or even divorced.



The remarkable thing is that for many who sign up for the Retrouvaille weekend and a series of follow-up sessions, the experience can make a huge difference in repairing the wounds and helping them start afresh. Convinced that the programme saved their marriage, one couple said afterwards: "Despite our past brokenness, Retrouvaille turned our marriage around by teaching us how to understand each other and our feelings."

Retrouvaille Singapore is part of an international effort to help troubled couples and arrived here in 1993 thanks to the late Redemptorist priest, Father Edmund

Dunne CSsR, who was then president of the Family Life Society. Through his efforts, a small, dedicated team of pioneers were trained to conduct the Retrouvaille programme and the first was held in 1994.

The programme comprises a live-in weekend, during which a team of three couples and a priest gives a series of presentations aimed mainly at providing couples the tools they need to rediscover a loving relationship.

It is neither a spiritual retreat nor marriage counselling. And for the non-Catholics who attend, it is not about converting them either. Participants are encouraged to put their hurts and pain behind them, and reflect on ways to turn their marriages around.

Follow-up sessions help the couples develop what they learnt and discuss other areas of the marriage relationship. The ultimate aim is to help them stay together and renew their marriage commitment.

Laurence Tan and his wife Christina, the current coordinating couple of Retrouvaille Singapore, know it takes courage to seek help. But they say the Retrouvaille weekend is for any couple experiencing problems that seem insurmountable.

"If you feel shy or awkward about turning up, be assured that confidentiality is utmost in our minds. Many have done it and are on the road to recovery," said Laurence.

"Couples come to the weekend very troubled and in pain. They are given tools to work out their painful experiences. With hard work and determination and by the grace of God, they find that they can overcome their difficulties and reclaim the hope that is theirs. Retrouvaille works."



ABOUT RETROUVAILLE SINGAPORE

Retrouvaille (which means "rediscovery" in French) is an affiliate of the Family Life Society. It is holding two weekend programmes from June 26 to 28 and August 28 to 30. The sessions are conducted in English and held at the ME House in Ponggol.

For more information, go to: www.helpourmarriage.sg
You can also call 67498861 or email info@helpourmarriage.sg

Can you help?

Retrouvaille Singapore needs your support. Please let your friends know about the weekend.

Who to contact

The registration couple are Michael and Lucy at 67498861

Who's Who at Retrouvaille Singapore
Father Andrew Wong - Coordinating Priest
Laurence & Christina - Coordinating Couple
Michael & Lucy - Registration Couple.