



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## Catholic charities: What makes us different

Only a small number of the 1,900 registered charities in Singapore are Catholic. In this second of two articles, we look at what are the main practical differences between Catholic and secular charities.

**F**OR Catholics, the fundamental reason for giving is to respond to Christ's commandment to "love one another as I have loved you". Apart from this important rationale, there are exterior differences between Catholic and non-Catholic charities. Based on an informal poll of Catholics involved with both Catholic and non-Catholic causes, there are four main practical differences between the two:

- Spirituality.
- Who and what is helped.
- How they are helped.
- How resources are used.

### Spirituality

Many of those involved with Catholic charities attest to an environment of pervasive spirituality in which they function. That is to be expected as our work is rooted in our faith, and should therefore reflect as well as reinforce our faith.

For example, the mission trips organised by the Archdiocesan Crisis Coordination Team (ACCT) to help victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami leverage on house-building projects organised by a non-Catholic charity, the Habitat for Humanity. In fact, Habitat provides much of the coordination and logistics for the trips on ACCT's behalf.

However, for the ACCT trips, there are formation sessions before, during and after the mission trips that would not be typical in a purely secular trip organised by Habitat. During these formation sessions, participants reflect and share on the project work and the meaning of the work.

Beyond spirituality in the work itself, there are many Catholic groups that deepen their spirituality through additional faith formation sessions for that purpose.

Most Catholic groups would have regular spiritual retreats to recharge their members. Some groups such as the Marriage Preparation Course and Choice – both affiliates of the Family Life Society – have weekly or fortnightly prayer and reflection sessions for their volunteers.

### Who and what is helped

The secular definition of charity is broad. From a legal standpoint, charitable causes include relief of poverty, advancement of education, advancement of religion, or other purposes beneficial to the community. The last has been broadened over time to include a wide range of beneficiaries including animals, arts, sports, the environment and so on.

Catholic charities, on the other hand, are focused more narrowly on the human person, the whole person. We promote the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person. We have a "preferential option for the poor", where there is special concern and treatment for the poor.

In our focus on the human person, we are broad in one sense – we serve people of all faiths, creed and colour. This is a surprise to some who expect that a Catholic charity would help Catholics.

In fact, many of our Catholic charities do not even keep statistics of the religious affiliation of those receiving help. This reflects the intention of Catholic charities to serve the entire community, something which dates back to the



Volunteers of the Archdiocesan Crisis Coordination Team (ACCT) work on house-building projects together with the non-Catholic Habitat for Humanity. Here, they are at work on a November 2008 mission to Jogjakarta, Indonesia. ACCT's Catholic roots are reflected in the formation sessions held before, during and after the mission trips, allowing volunteers to think about their project and what it means in terms of Jesus' call to "love one another as I have loved you".

beginning of charity work by the Church.

But while we serve people of all faiths, the work and content of Catholic charities are firmly rooted in our Catholic ethos and values, where applicable.

For example, the content of our family programmes are based on concepts such as the indissolubility of marriage, sex only in the context of a valid marriage and the sanctity of life. So no Catholic charity would advise a single mother to abort her baby, even if abortion is legal and acceptable by society.

We make no more apologies about these teachings.

### How they are helped

There are many ways to help those in need. Given the large number of charities, it is hard to say that there is any specific approach that the Church is taking which would not be practised or used elsewhere.

However, on a collective basis, there are some distinguishing characteristics of the Catholic approach that may not be seen in many other secular charities.

For example, our focus is on the whole human person, not just his economic needs. The dignity of the human person is the first principle of our social teachings and this requires us to look holistically at the needs of those being helped – their mental, emotional, social and spiritual needs beyond the physical and the financial.

Our focus is not just on immediate needs, but also the long-term needs. The latter calls for advocacy and programmes that put in place the right set of relationships and structures. The church sees social justice as going hand-in-hand with almsgiving.

The Church is collaborative. In helping others, we seek to work hand-in-hand with other religions and other people of good will to serve community needs.

While our approach is broad-based,

foremost in our minds is to walk the talk of our Catholic values and social teachings. For example, we should not, directly cooperate with activities that engage in tobacco, gambling, arms dealing and unethical conduct such as exploitation of child labour.

Recently, Caritas Singapore developed an overarching set of guidelines in identifying how the Church should respond in meeting community needs in Singapore (see box). This provides a good summary of the approach taken by Catholic charities in helping those in need.

### How resources are used

In the charity world, financial prudence and care are expected. Most charities seek to live judiciously. Those that do not face community outrage when the facts are disclosed.

But many have observed that the Church operates more tightly and sometimes on a more than bare-bones basis. There is a heavy, if not, over-reliance on volunteers. Staff – if any – are paid a living wage. Catholic charities are typically housed in modest premises. Our conservatism in spending is without question.

Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity are a personification of this approach in their service to humankind. Each sister has no more than three sets of clothes which are mended until the material is too bare to patch. They live the life of those they serve – the poorest of the poor.

This approach largely reflects the ethos of the Church and our reliance on God's Providence. "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." (Matthew 6:33-34)

In confidence with the Word of God, Catholic charities are usually more conserva-

tive than secular charities in spending. We run a tight ship and usually maintain the bare minimum in terms of reserves, trusting in God's providence.

In summary, while both secular and Catholic charities are common in their service to those in need, there are sometimes key differences in why we do it, who we help, and how we help. And this is because we are inspired by the teachings and example of Christ and by His attention to the poor and those in need.

### The Church's role in meeting community needs

The Church should leverage on its strengths in responding to community needs that are not adequately met by other bodies. Its role in meeting society's social needs is as follows:

- Church as a model in promoting the dignity of the human person: We treat each human being as an end, not a means. We focus on those most in need – socially isolated and neglected, voiceless, poorest, sickest and dying. We take a leading role in addressing non-mainstream social problems, but focused on human services.
- Church as provider of needs holistically: We look at each person holistically, and not just take care of the physical and financial needs of each person. In Singapore, social, mental and spiritual needs receive insufficient focus. We provide programmes with the Catholic ethos.
- Church as experimenter: The Church is a leader, not a follower, in social service provision. We continue to experiment with new models of social intervention, while also leveraging on the Church's resources. Initiatives should not just be top down, from Caritas Singapore, but bottom up, from the parishes, its member organisations and Catholic individuals.
- Church as advocate for the cause: Advocacy, empowerment and work for justice are intrinsic parts of our mission to care for people in need. We should research, track and analyse issues and formulate policy positions. We focus on long-term solutions that address root causes.

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CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL