



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## Skills of engagement in the secular space

Following up on his previous article on the rules of engagement between secular and religious ideas, Father David Garcia explains the importance of maintaining a dialogue with truth and hope.

During the recent episode concerning the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), the religious were requested not to use the pulpit "to canvass for or against the matter". Is this fear of debating well-founded or just plain panic?

To be sure, there were reasons for fear. Emotions were high on both sides of the conflict and authorities feared that this may affect national cohesion.

But what causes tension is not the debate but the way it is debated. It is important to separate the content of the debate from how it is conducted.

For example, the scientific community does not seem to be threatened by an irreversible schism for or against the possibility of finding water in Mars. And we can quite easily imagine two scientists of opposite opinions debating the issue while sipping coffee amicably.

Rules of engagement are important. People have a right to express their reasonable opinions

and act on them. This is what both groups in the AWARE episode did. They had irreconcilable opinions about a variety of issues, including sexuality education, but both acted legitimately to achieve what they believed in. In other words, the rules were observed.

This is why rules alone do not suffice. If you want to learn to play tennis, you can learn the rules in few minutes, but it will take you years to master the skills of playing tennis well. Rules do not make tennis players better players. Skills do.

Thus, integrating dialogue between faiths and secular societies needs more than just rules of engagement, it needs skills.

So, what are the skills of engagement? Many: sympathy, dialogue, truth seeking, etc. Today, we are specially challenged about one of them: dialogue.

### Dialogue with truth

Dialogue is a nice word. It sounds as enticing as the friendship that dialogue fosters. But many have

wrong ideas of what dialogue is.

To start, constructive dialogue is in pursuit of the truth. If there is no truth that we are collectively pursuing, then dialogue simply means, "I want to know your stand, so that I do not step on it."

Dialogue without truth is merely information about the other's opinions to live and let live. In other words: indifference. Of course, indifference is not a nice word, so we call it tolerance and peace. And we esteem it a necessary condition for civilised life in a democratic society.

Dialogue with truth, on the other hand, tries to understand the other side. True dialogue is a skill because it demands that one listens carefully to what the other has to say. If there is truth, then I, or the other party, or both can be wrong. I need to pay close attention to what I hold true as well as to what others hold true.

True dialogue requires that I consider that I could be wrong and how the other might be right. After all, if others hold a different view, there must be something that makes them believe what they believe.

We do not only need to know the difference of opinions, we need to understand why the other thinks differently.

The truth about the shape of the

earth is not simply that "flat is wrong" and "round is true". The truth is that the roundness of earth is so vast that it looks flat. Flat-earth believers were able to embrace the truth not because they were slapped with the facts, but because they were able to reconcile their "belief" with the "truth". This truth did not satisfy one side of the debate only; it satisfied both.

Dialogue with truth moves people in the same direction; without truth, it makes people draw "untouchable boundaries" between each other. Tolerance without truth promotes a kind of indifference where the opponent is just an obstacle to overcome, rather than a companion to move along with.

### Truth with Hope

But truth alone is not enough. Truth without hope creates desperate fighters who figure that without their "truth", the world will surely collapse. Dialogue, in this case, becomes a confrontation. It seeks to overpower the opponent. It often has recourse to caricaturing the adversary, distorting the weakness and then attacking the distortion they themselves have created in the enemy.

I would say that we suffer more from a crisis of hope than from a

crisis of truth. Jesus mastered the skill of dialogue based on hope.

This may be what was lacking in the AWARE case. In the story painted in the media, the ex-guard believed they had the truth and took over the leadership of AWARE to stop people from teaching the wrong sexual values.

The question that many asked was: was the takeover done appropriately? It was legal, licit and respected the "rules of engagement" between the secular and the religious. But, was it done with the skills of engagement consistent with the gospel they believed in? Did they exercise the evangelical cunning of serpents for the sake of the kingdom or did they fail to present the values of the gospel with the evangelical simplicity of doves?

Jesus did not impose his way. He proposed it. God does not force his way into man's lives. He invites himself to be invited. Only a fool or a hopeful person would do that. A fool can do nothing in the face of evil. A hopeful person will know that forcing people to do well is not a durable solution.

The truth is that only a genuine change of heart in freedom and truth can solve the evils of the world. It is not about shouting louder than the abortionist, or even about forcing paedophiles into chastity. We certainly must do what we can to prevent crime and evil. But, the ultimate goal is to move people into being willing to do good.

Often we are tempted to stop evil no matter what it takes. Jesus' approach is surprisingly different. In the parable of the kernel and the wheat (Mt 13:18ff), Jesus suggests that in a world where good and evil are intertwined, what matter most is not to be involved in uprooting the good, even at the cost of letting evil grow. Imposed truth is not the way of truth. It needs to be proposed. This is why the Church as well "proposes, she imposes nothing. She respects individual and cultures, and she honours the sanctuary of conscience" (Redemptoris Missio, 39).

The father of the Prodigal Son could have run after his son and nagged him to conversion, but he chose to wait for his son's conversion in freedom. God's truth must be proposed in God's gentle, respectful ways.

Good and evil will continue to co-exist. Evil fights. Good, on the other hand, prefers to be crucified before forcing his way. God has the last word and we must hope in it.

Training in the simplicity of doves is a key skill of engagement. As Blessed Mother Teresa put it: "God does not ask us to be effective. He asks us to be faithful". The media is the message, even for God.

If we should move on from the conflicts between the religious and secular realm, we need to remember this crucial lesson: dialogue is needed.

It is up to us to engage each other in a dialogue with truth and hope, and not to just move away from any risk of tensions pretending that absence of confrontation is real peace. And we all need to learn to dialogue, rather than assume that everyone has already mastered the skill.

## Learn about the Catholic Social Teachings in Chinese

CHINESE-speaking Catholics can soon participate in the learning and sharing of the Catholic Social Teachings.

Come July 2009, Caritas Singapore will roll out the Salt of the Earth in Chinese.

The English programme was launched in August 2008 and so far, about 2,000 participants have attended sessions to learn about the Church's Social Teachings.

The study guide in Chinese will help Chinese-speaking Catholics to relate their faith to the real-life challenges in the world and show them ways to respond better to the needs of others in a charitable and harmonious way.

The Chinese Apostolate Ministry will conduct the programme in Chinese, kicking off with five Thursday evening sessions in July and August. Each session will be an in-depth study of a particular principle of the Social Teachings.

Sign up for the Chinese programme WHEN: Thursdays, July 9, 16, 23 and 30, and August 6, 2009 TIME: 7.45pm - 9.45pm WHERE: Caritas Singapore Community Council (CSCC) Office, 55 Waterloo Street, #09-03 WHO TO CALL: Christina Cheong at 9695-9287 or Wang Jing Hao at 9683-0231

Attend the English sessions To find out about the Salt of the Earth programme in English, sign up for any of the briefing sessions to be held on Thursday, August 13; Wednesday, October 14 or Thursday, December 10, 2009

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Call Caritas Singapore at 6337-3711 or email salt@caritas-singapore.org



### What I learnt from the Salt of the Earth programme



It made me more aware that we do not exist just for ourselves and our loved ones, but that we have to consider how our decisions also affect the well being of the community.

- Allen Kooi, 57, Church of the Holy Family.

I am more convinced that the Social Teachings are a light to the world, helping us to live out our faith and show by our example.

- Longinus Chew, 36, Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

Understanding the Social Teachings helps us to be more aware of our true calling and what it really means to be followers and disciples of Christ.

- Margaret Tan, 61, Church of the Holy Family.

I realised that the Social Teachings are actually the teachings of Jesus, expressed in modern-day language.

- Lawrence Joseph, 52, Church of St Bernadette.