

## Clarity BRAVE Conference – Catholic Youth Mental Health Festival 2020

### Caritas in Mission: Serving our Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

Good morning Fred and our distinguished speakers, Christopher and Peter, and all participants today.

I want to begin by saying that Clarity Singapore is a very important part of the Caritas Singapore family. In Singapore, and I believe almost everywhere else, there is still too little understanding about the ailments that trouble the mind. This translates to insufficient help and support being given to people who suffer from mental wellness issues. Clarity helps to fill this gap. It is a Catholic charity that helps persons with mental health issues live meaningful lives through support, therapy, acceptance and recovery. Clarity's mission is to help people struggling with mental health conditions that have arisen from anxiety and depression including trauma, pre and post-natal stress, bereavement and loss, relationship and other emotional issues. The work that Fred and his team does is a wonderful reflection of God's love in action and I would like to take this opportunity to affirm their work and express, on behalf of the Church, our grateful thanks for the selfless work that they do.

The Church teaches that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen: 1:27) regardless of whether they suffer any ailments physical or psychological. All are His creation and worthy of love and care. This was demonstrated vividly through Jesus, the Son of God made man, whose public life included healing all those he encountered that we sick. This healing ministry of Jesus signifies the love of God for all human beings and how God desires that everyone may live life more fully according to what God gives them. It also speaks to the mission of the Church, as the Body of Christ, to continue the saving mission of Jesus which includes ministering to those who suffer from illness.

Accordingly, Pope Saint John Paul II said on 30 November 1996 in an international conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers that the Church looks upon mentally ill persons "with special concern, as she looks on any other human being affected by illness." He reminded us that Jesus' compassion led him to identify with all who suffered from affliction for Jesus said: "I was sick and you visited me" (Mt 25:36). As such, it is everyone's duty to make an active response. Our actions must show that mental illness does not create insurmountable distances, nor prevent relations of true Christian charity with those who are its victims. Indeed, it should inspire a particularly attentive attitude towards these people who are fully entitled to belong to the category of the poor to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs (Mt 5:3).

Similarly, Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit*, [149] reminds us that even though young people with physical, mental and sensory disabilities may not always be able to have the same experiences as others, they possess amazing resources and abilities that are often above average. The Lord Jesus grants them other gifts, which the community is called to recognize and appreciate, so that they can discover his plan of love for each of them.

All of us as Christians are called upon to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. We therefore have a sacred duty to understand those within our community whose mental make-ups are slightly different. Not only are we called to understand, we are also called to respond to them as God has made them, just as we expect others to respond to us as God has made us. Everyone who is made in the image of God rightly deserves from us the understanding, respect and consideration that we individually expect from other people around us. And as part of the Body of Christ, the duty on us as Catholic Christians is a deep and solemn one.

There is much more that all of us can do. But it begins with the need for a better understanding of mental wellness conditions. There is still too little of this and it adds to the burden that those with mental illness already face. When we encounter a person with physical disabilities, we understand their condition, the limits of science as it stands for certain physical disabilities, the difficulties that these disabilities bring, and we try to offer practical help to the extent we are able. Such persons are often surrounded by a community of care that helps them to deal with their condition and lead fuller lives.

The reality is that people with mental disabilities often do not have such support. Many people still do not have a good understanding of mental wellness issues. As such, unlike their attitude towards those with physical disabilities, they may feel that someone who is suffering from a mental illness is not doing enough to overcome the condition. They think that if a person has such a condition, it should be possible to overcome it if only such person tries harder. Therefore, they may think that the mentally ill person is partly responsible for his or her condition as such person is not robust enough. This lack of understanding makes it worse for our brothers and sisters who have to cope with an already difficult condition. They do not receive as much support and understanding as those with physical disabilities. Often what well-meaning people say makes them feel worse.

In addition, there is still a stigma attached to mental illness. This makes it difficult for sufferers to talk about it and family members also prefer not to do so. This compounds the difficult circumstances that those with mental health issues find themselves in. As Pope Benedict said in his message for the 14<sup>th</sup> World Day of the Sick on 8 December 2005, the social context does not always accept the mentally ill with their limitations, and this is one reason for the difficulty that such people encounter.

This has to change. Mental wellness is a serious issue. I remember attending a Caritas event three or four years ago when a speaker on mental health said that one in ten Singaporeans suffers from some mental health issue. While the condition of many such Singaporeans may be on the milder side of the spectrum, such a percentage should cause us to pause. We need more understanding about mental health matters. And we need to talk about it more so that greater understanding can come about.

Therefore I want to congratulate Clarity for organizing this mental health festival with a series of sessions on mental wellness issues of which today's session is only the beginning. In other sessions, topics such as stigma, finding hope, suicide, OCD, parenting, a theological reflection on being loved by God amongst others will be discussed. All are valuable topics and I hope people will attend them to learn more.

The Church can certainly do more and Caritas, as the Church's social arm, has a duty to do so. We hope that our parishes can increasingly be places that residents, Catholic or otherwise, can look to when they are in need, including when they are sad or depressed. Our parishes must be beacons of light when a person is going through a dark phase of life as everyone does. We are therefore piloting a program with St Mary of the Angels and if this program is successful, we hope it will be a possible model that we can use to work with other interested parishes.

In conclusion, I would like to recall the words of Pope Benedict for the 14<sup>th</sup> World Day of the Sick. On that day, his Holiness made a call to reflect "on the situation of the mentally ill in the world and to call for the commitment of Ecclesial Communities to bear witness to the tender mercy of God towards them." Pope Benedict expressed his encouragement to those who strive to ensure that all mentally ill people are given access to necessary forms of care and treatment while acknowledging that in many parts of the world, services for these sick people are lacking, inadequate or in a state of decay. There must be both appropriate therapy and "new sensitivity" toward them.

Finally, I leave you with the words of Jesus: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Mt 25:45). May all of us Catholic Christians come together as a community to better care for the spiritually, mentally, physically and economically poor among us.

I wish all of you an enlightening day ahead, thank you.