



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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Take your first step today to journey with the poor

Whose job is it to help the poor? Sure there are government schemes and charities, but the Church teaches that all of us must care and reach out to our less fortunate brothers and sisters.

Poverty is growing in Singapore. There is a widening income gap. And there are many who are getting poorer, and struggling to get by.

According to an analysis of statistics published by the Ministry of Manpower, the real median wages of cleaners and labourers fell by 35 per cent from 2000 to 2011, while those of service and sales workers declined by 15 per cent in the same period.

When some people are so poor that they and their children struggle to have three decent meals a day, it must give the rest of us discomfort. Can you imagine living on less than \$5 a day on food and transport? Yet about 387,000 Singaporeans from 105,000 families do.

How do we respond? Aren't there plenty of government schemes and charities to help the poor? Yes, there are. But what can we do, as people of God?

First, it is worthwhile learning from the social teachings of the Church.

The key principle of the Church's social teachings is the primacy of the human person. As we are made in the image of God, each person has equal dignity and equal importance in God's eyes. We also know God's desire that we all form one family and treat one another as brothers and sisters.

Secondly, the Church

recognises the universal destination of material goods. We can affirm each person's right to private property, but that right is subject to the basic right that everything belongs to everyone. Therefore, we are not making a gift of our possession in giving it to the poor but giving what belongs to him or her.

Jesus' teachings clearly warn us against greed too. In *Luke 12*, he tells us to guard against avarice of any kind, illustrating this point vividly with the parable of the rich fool. In *Luke 18*, Jesus laments: How hard it is for those who have riches to make their way into the kingdom of God.

Thirdly, the Church teaches us the principle of solidarity with the poor. The encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* tells us that the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus emphasises how we must treat the poor and the less advantaged in our midst. In *Matthew 25*, he tells us that whatever we do for the least of our brothers, we do for Him. Love of God and love of one's neighbours are the first and greatest commandments. It is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbour of every person, no matter who he

or she is. We therefore have no option but to act in the face of injustices.

The first necessary action is for us to care, and actively seek understanding of the day-to-day realities of the less fortunate.

If one listens to stories of the poor, one would find that in many cases, the poor do not deserve their plight. Life's circumstances seem to conspire to make their lives so hard that it's near impossible to get by. Many poor families face multiple challenges, perhaps having a father in jail, children with disabilities and serious health issues.

The poor are no different from the rest of society. They want the best for themselves and their families. They also want to count on themselves and their hard work. Most do not want to receive handouts because handouts can destroy self-respect and reinforce inadequacies.

Next, we have to be mindful that we do not take away the dignity of the person when we help families in need. We need to partner the poor in their

journey. We cannot simply dish out assistance like a painkiller that merely numbs the discomfort, but does not solve root issues. Instead, we must redesign the methods we use, to build on the strengths of those in need, leading to the recovery and empowerment of each poor person.

The poor do not want to be stigmatised as helpless victims. Those of us working with them are partners, and we are journeying with them, not taking a walk in the park. It won't be sunny and cool all the time. It will rain, it may pour, the path may turn wet and slippery. Time and again, they could fall, we may falter. That's when we have to remind ourselves that God is with us and with them for the long haul. Only with patience will we witness with wonder when and how they find the power and resources within themselves to speak for themselves and what they need to live with dignity.

We must also relook the way we live. It is not wrong to want to live better.

What is unacceptable is a hedonistic lifestyle that assumes that having more is more important than being more, and that the aim of life is the singular pursuit of individual material enjoyment.

What is also improper is people indulging in mounting excesses, while others are mired in poverty.

Instead of merely chasing the trendiest fashion, latest gadgets and most popular experiences in the name of creativity and innovation, can we not focus instead on spreading compassion and empathy, and showing solidarity for the less advantaged?

We ought to make more ethical and sustainable choices in purchasing, caring about the morality of the entire production chain, including the environmental impact and the compensation and treatment of workers. We should also demand more services that feed the soul.

With poverty in our midst, we are all called to act. It is not an option, but a chance to truly show our love for God.

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