



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Walk in the shoes of migrants

“Faith and hope are inseparable in the hearts of many migrants, who deeply desire a better life and not infrequently try to leave behind the hopelessness of an unpromising future. During their journey, many of them are sustained by the deep trust that God never abandons his children; this certainty makes the pain of their uprooting and separation more tolerable.”

— POPE BENEDICT XVI, MESSAGE FOR 99TH WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES, 2013.

I imagine for a moment that you have arrived in a foreign country. You have landed at the airport and are taken to the place where you will stay during your visit.

The first thing you notice is that this country is unlike your own. Everything seems bigger, the buildings are strange, there are so many people around, you can't understand the signage and everyone speaks an unfamiliar language. It all seems bewildering.

Before you left home, you were told what this country would be like, but none of that fits what you're seeing right now. You try and talk to someone but they don't understand you and glare at you instead.

Finally, you reach your destination. One comforting thought comes to mind — thank goodness you're staying for only a week! What a relief!

But imagine if it were a longer stay — say two years? Would that be bearable? Well, this is pretty much what many a migrant worker faces — a feeling of desolation and a fear of the unknown.

Granted, the stay becomes more bearable as days and weeks go by, as the worker makes acquaintances and gets to grips with the environment.

But migrant worker also faces a pretty arduous life. For a start, 12-hour work days as a domestic helper, construction or shipyard worker.

Respite comes in the form of a day off. But is there a day off?

In the case of the construction worker, he would have to pay off his loan, the equivalent of around six months' salary, and he would work overtime on his day off to quicken the repayment.

For the domestic worker, the law in Singapore stipulates a weekly day off but only for those with contracts signed after Jan 1, 2013. But in reality, many who get a “day off” really have only a couple of hours away from work. They leave their employers' homes in the late morning and rush back by dinner time — about eight hours at best.

What sort of day off is that? What if the shoe is on the other foot; would we, as employees, accept that?

Other domestic workers do not get a day off each week. Would we as employees think it fair to forgo our rest day?

Or are we fine with one set of rules for ourselves and another for migrant workers? Are we treating migrant workers fairly as Christ would have wanted us to? What should our contemporary response be?

As the 100th World Migrants and Refugees Day in January 2014 approaches, Pope Benedict XVI's message for the 99th World Day remains relevant and inspiring: “Where migrants and refugees are concerned, the Church and her various agencies ought to avoid offering charitable services alone; they are also called to promote real integration in a society where all are active members and responsible for one another's welfare, generously offering a creative contribution and rightfully sharing in the same rights and duties.”



Nelly uses her time off from work to help other migrant workers learn new skills in hairdressing. Asked why she does this, she said: “I was a product of ACMI. And I love the management, it's friendly.”

How Nelly spends her day off

Nelly Arnaz is a domestic worker in Singapore. Every Sunday, she gets a day off but unlike others, she chooses a special way to spend it. At about 9.00 am, she makes her way to the ACMI training centre run by the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI) for domestic workers. But Nelly isn't taking any courses. She is an instructor and a volunteer with ACMI.

Nelly first took a course in hairdressing back in 2001. After that, she began teaching hairdressing till today. It's been eleven years and she's still going strong. She teaches four to five hours each time and sometimes that would stretch to almost eight hours when necessary. Classes at ACMI run on only the first four Sundays of every month. In the months where there is a fifth Sunday, Nelly spends the day at the cinema with her friends who are also domestic workers and who also volunteer at ACMI as trainers.

In her years of training domestic workers at ACMI, Nelly has trained over two hundred women in the art of cutting, colouring, rebonding and perming hair. Nelly said: “My greatest reward is training this friend of mine who now works in a salon in Malaysia and has been there for one year. I'm so proud of her. She's Indonesian and married to a Malaysian Chinese.”

So why does she do this? She said: “I was a product of ACMI. And I love



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Nelly may be considered one of the more fortunate domestic workers in that she has a day off every Sunday.

Mr Timothy Karl, executive director of ACMI said: “It is indeed wonderful to see Nelly, who has benefitted from the training, come back and be a trainer herself. She spends her free time productively, helping her fellow domestic workers. That's what being Christ-like is all about. We are grateful to Nelly and other domestic workers like her who volunteer on their days off.”

The law requiring domestic workers to get a day off is effective for contracts

signed after Jan 1, 2013. However, the Today newspaper reported on Oct 7 that “it is likely that some 40,000 women at least will end up having to wait before the right to a weekly day off is written into their contracts.”

The Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI) was set up in 1998 to give migrants a sense of belonging and security. Programmes include skills training for domestic workers and foreign spouses, casework and counselling for all migrants, meal provision for foreign construction workers and support groups for foreign spouses.