



Newsletter – Feb. 2009

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The Family and Chinese New Year.

The Chinese New Year, or, the Spring Festival (as they now call it in China) was and still is, to the Chinese, a “family festival”. During this time, in Malaysia, most Chinese stop work, take their year’s entitlement of vacation leave and travel the few hundred kilometres back to their home town to reunite with their siblings, their parents, and old school/neighbourhood friends. In China this annual exodus of people from the Cities and towns back to their respective home provinces and villages for the Spring Festival is an annual logistical nightmare that boggles the imagination. Hundreds of millions take to the buses, boats, ferries, trains, planes, and any other mode of transportation so as to be home for a few days for this “celebration of the institution of the family”.

In the United States, their equivalent is the “Thanksgiving Holidays”. In most of Europe they use Christmas and the New Year Holidays for this purpose.

In Singapore, few of us need to travel more than 20 km to meet up with the members of our extended family for this, or any other family occasion. As a result we do not treasure such “family festivals” as much as those who are separated by greater distances. It is sad to note that nowadays more and more, younger Chinese Singaporeans are misusing these “holidays” as an opportunity to go away, to avoid meeting the extended family.

This is what my parents’ generation would lament as an act of - “bei zu” – turning your back on your ancestors, or, a betrayal of your ancestors/heritage.

The family is the most important institution of human society.

Without family there is no lasting community, and without family there will be no Nation.

Temporary Workers

In the old days, when a person was employed, both employee and employer started out on the basis that the employment would be long termed, - permanent. There was a tacit understanding. There was this underlying sense of mutual responsibility. The employee knew that if he worked hard and faithfully, the employer would look after him.

Large organisations were supposed to be better employers as they were deemed more stable, and the rights of the employees were better defined. However, employees in smaller organisations had the advantage that their contributions were more readily seen, and their financial rewards often grew exponentially with the Company.

Casual daily rated or piece rated work existed, but it was mainly for the unskilled. Certain skilled work in industries where “Project type” work was done under ad-hoc contracts eg. in the construction industry, also employed people on short term. Contract employment for educated or trained professionals on a fixed term or project basis was very rare.

Over the last few decades this has undergone a sea change. Businesses try to avoid the responsibilities of being a direct employer of their workers. They seek only to employ workers “on contract”, on daily rates, and/or even through an agency. This trend is now so widespread that even skilled employees working on complicated equipment in production lines, and/or with dangerous machinery, are employed only on a “temporary basis”. It had even extended to clerical and other support staff. Today, large organisations, and even Government Departments, readily hire “agency staff” for what used to be considered regular long-term type of work. Others go for “sub-contract workers”.

It is now the practice for employers to avoid commitment and responsibility towards the people who work with and for them. A reliable regular workforce, once considered an asset, is now looked upon as a liability.

This change in relationships between employers and employees is beginning to wreak havoc on many of the underlying social bonds that used to hold society together.

In Britain, there are widespread strikes and lockouts because some of the largest employers have taken to sub-contracting large work contracts to sub-contractors who employ cheaper “foreign workers” instead of unemployed locals.

In Japan and many other developed countries, on account of the current recession, “temporary workers” - some of whom have worked for many years as “temps” in the same Company, were the first to be fired.

In the other extreme, in France, the Government and the Trade Unions have so many rules on the conditions of employment of workers that it is virtually impossible to terminate the employment of an employee. As a result, no one, except for the Government Agencies, would recruit or employ anyone. Private sector employers resort to formal and informal contracts with part time and temporary employees, even for regular, long-term work. This has resulted not only in economic stagnation and high unemployment especially among the youth; it also contributes to much social unrest.

In Singapore we are very confused. We encouraged multi-nationals to come here with their cyclical “mass hire and fire practices”. These organisations claim that they will pay top dollar for the people they need when they are needed, and will fire just as quickly when situations change. We legislate recently for long maternity leave and other entitlements for women employees. As a result of this, many employers are now leery of offering employment to

young married women. We also attempt to protect the rights of some of our foreign employees, such as domestic help, but ignored migrant industrial workers. We blithely ignore the excesses of “foreign-labour” recruiters and contractors whose actions verge on “trafficking in human labour”. Then in the next breath, we discourage employers from retrenchment of their employees “during this recession”.

Society must think this through to its logical consequences. To build a stable society we need a happy long-termed relationship of co-operation between employees and employers for mutual economic benefit. Social cohesion, can only be built on mutual responsibility.

Short termed, antagonistic exploitation of one another’s weaknesses during each change of economic condition, is mutually destructive.

The Catholic Church has consistently taken the stand that human labour must not be treated as just another commodity to be traded, and, the relationship between employers and employees must not be based purely on economic profit, and exploitative use.

The CFSM Family Meetings.

A member of the CFSM once asked me

“Why does the CFSM not invite more experts to come and lecture us and tell us what to do?”

I tried to explain that although we do occasionally ask an expert to come and remind us of a few good principles of parenting, or of marriage relationships, we usually learn more and better from our peers in our CFSM Group meetings.

Gerald Foley explains this in this way.....

“Family Ministry is based on certain assumptions. One is that all families, no matter how hurting or fragmented, have tremendous strengths and power to help and support other families. Another is that individuals and families who have been through a certain experience have a quality of caring and support to offer others in a similar situation that is unique and healing.

From this concept follows the principle of *like to like* ministry. The real experts in marriage and family ministry are spouses and family members. There are times when specializes professional help is needed, but the basis ministry to families lie in the day to day support that family members and peers give to each other at the death of a parent or child, with questions about parenting, or during family and marital difficulties.”

Extracts From.... Family Centered Church by Gerald Foley.

CFSM Annual General Meeting

Date : 22 February 2009 Sunday

Time :1.30pm –5pm

Venue : Novena Church (Peter Donders Room)

Please note that family mass will follow after the AGM. You are welcomed to bring your children along as there will be separate activities organised for them.