



Newsletter – September 2009

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To Serve with Gratitude

When I was living in a small town in Illinois in the 1990s, I had lots of time on my hands. Responding to an appeal for volunteers to help at the Parish's Soup Kitchen, I bravely signed up with high expectations of fulfilling my Christian duty to perform some corporal works of mercy. Besides, it would give me a chance to mingle with ordinary Americans.

My first time at the Soup Kitchen was an eye opener. I reached there in the morning, feeling very excited. When I stepped into the kitchen, a kind old man introduced himself as Frank, the coordinator. Being new, I was not required to help with the cooking that day. He pointed to a sumptuous spread at the kitchen counter and my eyes widened in amazement. There were four plump and nicely browned cooked turkeys plus cranberry sauce, ready to be served. I was about to comment that the needy in the U.S were very well fed when Frank quickly added that the turkeys were donated to the Soup Kitchen after the Thanksgiving Day celebrations. Lunch that day was not a typical Soup Kitchen meal.

The people who came to the Soup Kitchen were mainly black males. It was my first encounter with so many of them and at such close proximity too. I was a bit intimidated by their size as well as their heavily accented English. I avoided them by washing dishes in the kitchen rather than going to the dining room to help serve them their meals.

After a few weeks, I mustered enough courage to serve at the dining room. It was not as scary as I had thought. Besides the predominantly black males, there were some white families who came with children in tow. There was even a middle aged Asian lady who visited the Soup Kitchen daily. She was not of sound mind and was often heard muttering to herself.

Once, while I was serving, a black man asked me for a roll. When I placed it in front of him, he threw his temper and demanded for a warm roll. In all the weeks of volunteering, I had never seen any volunteer warm up rolls before serving so I was naturally very stupefied by his complaint. I brought the roll into the kitchen and very loudly, remarked sarcastically to Frank that some people, given their situations in life, just did not know how to be grateful. Frank looked at me and in his very gentle voice, told me that in his years of service as a volunteer, he had learnt one lesson ie do not expect gratitude from those you serve, just serve them with a grateful heart. It was a lesson that I had yet to fully grasp.

Now, after 16 years, I was given an opportunity to work in a soup kitchen again. I had never imagined that my "wealth" of experience, working in that Illinois Soup Kitchen for 2 years was going to put me in good stead working with the poor multicultural foreign workers in Singapore.

After the furore over the conversion of a disused school to a dormitory for the foreign workers in Serangoon Gardens a year ago, I wanted to reach out to these ostracised workers.

Sometime in October 2008, I met an old IJ sister, Sister Dodo as she is affectionately called, who lives in the convent next to our parish. She was on her way to collect day-old bread from a nearby bakery, which she would then distribute to the foreign workers working at the construction sites near the convent. In the midst of all the uproar kicked up by the residents of Serangoon Gardens and the press, here was this unassuming and compassionate woman already doing her bit to reach out to them.

I got another friend to join me, and with the convenience of a car, we not only got more bread from the bakery but we were able to drive around the estate, reaching out to more of these foreign workers. We, together with Sister Dodo, committed ourselves to deliver bread weekly and hence, our Tuesday Bread Run was initiated.

After about 3 months, God affirmed our work. On one of the Bread Run, an Indian foreign worker asked us, in his halting English, for the “Christian book”. We knew what he meant. He told us that he is Hindu but when his fellow workers found out that some “church women” were giving him bread, they had asked him to request for a Bible on their behalf. His friends turned out to be Catholic Indian foreign workers, working in another part of the estate.

In order to give ourselves an identity, we went to see our parish priest to inform him about our outreach and our intention to use the Parish’s name. He gave us his blessings, so to speak. And, to our surprise, he mooted the idea of starting a soup kitchen to provide lunch for the foreign workers, in addition to the Tuesday Bread Run.

Since our parish canteen was not equipped with cooking facilities, he suggested that we liaised with Willing Hearts or Matthew 25 (at Church of the Nativity), organisations which were already running soup kitchens. We then made contact with Willing Hearts.



We officially launched our Soup Kitchen on the Friday after Easter, in April this year. We essentially function as a distribution centre of Willing Hearts. Every Friday, we cook rice while Willing Hearts provides us with the accompanying dishes. We also pack and distribute them to the foreign workers whom we have become familiar with on the Tuesday Bread Run. We cater lunch for up to 100 foreign workers each time.

God has blessed us abundantly. Besides cooked food, Willing Hearts also supplies us with fresh vegetables, raw fish heads, dried provisions, toiletries and clothes to be distributed to the foreign workers. All these are given by generous donors! Best of all, He supplies us with labourers for His vineyard. Some of our parishioners, mainly housewives, have also come forward and volunteered for this outreach program.

The foreign workers we come into contact with come from different countries, have varied religious beliefs and speak different languages. But, in God's work, there is no barrier of communication between them and us. The language that God has endowed on us in our work is the common language of Love. The initial hesitation and suspicion that greeted us when we first started are now replaced by smiles, acknowledgement and gratitude.

Where once, we used to harbour fear and prejudices towards these foreign workers, the Holy Spirit has filled our hearts with courage and love. Where once, we looked at these foreign workers with the eyes of indifference, we have to contend with the stares from our own local people when we deliver food to them. Where once, we used our own standard of living as a yardstick to serve them, we now humble ourselves to meet them at even ground, just as Christ did when He came to be like one of us. In the spirit of humility and solidarity, we, too, eat the same food as them when there are any leftovers.

To the outsider, it may appear that our actions are merely to help the foreign workers save a couple of dollars per meal. Some may wonder why we even bother when they are gainfully employed, though poorly compensated.

A month ago, 2 Indian foreign workers from a nearby construction site came to our church canteen to collect their lunch boxes and provisions. It happened that the items were placed near a statue of St Francis Xavier. Upon seeing the statue, one of them made the Sign of the Cross and blew a kiss towards the statue. A volunteer who saw his act of reverence, asked if he is Catholic. He is Hindu but he recognised the man (St Francis Xavier) because as a boy, he had attended a school where the man was made known to him. The other worker also recognised the same man because he, the Saint, had been to India, their home country.

While they may not have recognised Jesus as yet, they have already recognised His Saint in their home country and in this foreign land that they are working in. The familiar sight of Saint Francis Xavier must have somehow warmed their hearts and provided the link that connects them to us.

I now understand what Frank meant when he said that we must serve with a grateful heart; grateful for the chance to see Jesus in our brothers-in-need; grateful for the opportunity to be an instrument to radiate Jesus' love to them; grateful to be able to follow Christ's example to reach out to the disadvantaged and the marginalised in our society today, especially to a group of people with whom we normally would have no association with as we go about our daily lives.

.....by Joanna

Extract from article 39 of the Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (Social Concern) Pope John Paul II 1987

Solidarity helps us to see the "other"-whether a person, people or nation-not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our "neighbor," a "helper" (cf. Gen 2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.

“Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving” Act 20:35