



*Dear Friends,*

National Day is a celebration not of a territory but of a people. As August arrives we think of the good people who make Singapore a successful society. Despite being a cultural melting pot we are a thriving cosmopolitan nation of diverse ethnicities flourishing together as one.

Social harmony is important not only for our country, but is a priority for Christians as well. However, a Christian understanding admits that harmony is not achieved in society only by mere coexistence – separate groups insulated from one another and tolerating one another’s presence. True harmony creates a new and richer social reality through good interrelationship among different parties while maintaining fidelity to one’s self identity. Although it is easier to stay among our own kind, we eventually need to acknowledge the presence of others and make choices about how to relate with them.

In response to the great diversity of people that have emerged in our global village, the Catholic

community always affirms charitable dialogue as the means towards greater social harmony. This commitment is rooted in our deep belief about the Trinitarian Mystery. We choose harmonious relationship primarily because we imitate our God, who is in God’s self harmonious relationship of the three-in-one. A move towards interrelationship is a move towards holiness.

At the recent Social Mission Conference, convened by our esteemed colleagues at the Catholic Social and Community Council (CSCC), we gathered to analyze the church’s contribution to Singapore society by including in our care the welfare of our nation’s poorest. Fr. Henry Siew, Sr. Maria Lau, and other members of the Inter-Religious and Ecumenical Dialogue group (IRED) are making rounds conducting talks on understanding the various neighbouring faith traditions. The parish of St. Mary of the Angels invited Archimandrite Daniel Toyne of Holy Resurrection church to help parishioners learn more about the Orthodox church. Effort is made within our small Christian communities to lend compassionate hands and

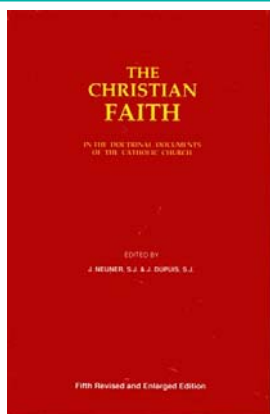
listening ears to people around who may not be Catholic but are nonetheless in need. Our commitment to building social harmony is manifest in many different quarters.

Social harmony is *symbiosis*, “a living together of unlike organisms.” But finding life together with and in one other is not our natural impulse – we have to consciously overcome our exclusivist tendency, want real harmony, and strive hard to recognize good in others.

The Pastoral Institute joins in this valuable work of forming a Catholic community that is capable of nation building; true to our nation’s creed and also faithful to the Gospel. We want our church to help Singapore towards being **one united people**, never giving up on relationships **regardless of race, language or religion**, forging a truly **democratic society, based on justice and equality**, so as to achieve **happiness, prosperity and progress** for all.

God bless you Singapore and happy birthday!

**AG**



## Book Alert! A Catechetical Resource

*“The Christian Faith in the documents of the Catholic Church” by J. Neuner SJ, and J. Dupuis SJ. Alba House: New York, 2001. 7<sup>th</sup> revised and enlarged edition. Also published by TPI (Theological Publications India).*

Whether you are a student of theology, a faith educator, or just someone interested in the historical development of Catholic teachings, this book is

a valuable resource. We all know the Nicene Creed by heart (well at least the gist of it!) but do we know the struggles of the early thinkers in formulating the words we have come to repeat for granted at every Eucharistic celebration?

“The Christian Faith” is a reference text, it is not meant to be read from cover to cover. Instead it is an archive of carefully selected collections of church documents through the ages. Each collection is categorized according to doctrinal topic and the documents are presented in chronological order, making it very user friendly – extremely helpful for readers wishing to trace the historical thought

process of any of the principal Catholic dogmas: revelation; tradition & scripture; the Triune God; the Church; Christology; Mary; and other topics that constitute the basis of Catholic belief. To add even more value, each collection is preceded by short prefaces providing historical data and helpful overviews that set the framework for understanding the documents.

If you have ever opened up the Catechism of the Catholic Church and wondered how the theological expressions of our faith have come to be as they are, wonder no further and start with “The Christian Faith”.

Available in the Pastoral Institute Library [230CHR]

# SCC – a group, a ministry or an organization?

In the parish of St. Justin, the administrative office was in the process of compiling their first parish directory. While the parish organization structure was being drawn up, Susan the parish secretary stumbled upon a problem: "Where can we fit the Small Christian Communities? Do they go into liturgical groups, or do they belong under the category of faith formation? What do we do?"

This problem was brought to Father TJ, the parish priest. Father TJ wisely saw an opportunity for some catechesis, and recommended to Susan that in order to understand what SCCs do, she should meet some of the members and ask them herself. Richard, Laura, and Nick responded to Susan's call for enquiry.

Susan: "Thanks for helping me out! I'm putting together our parish directory and I need to know what is it that you do in an SCC?"

Laura: "In the SCC, we gather together to share the Word of God."

Susan: "So, you should be classified under prayer groups?"

Laura: "No, wait! Besides sharing the Word of God, we visit the sick on occasion."

Susan: "Umm, so SCC is a ministry to the sick too?"

Richard: "There's more, we attend wakes and minister to the bereaved families."

Susan: "Okay then, SCC is a ministry for the sick and bereaved?"

Nick: "Not quite. You see, some of my SCC members help to mind the children in our neighbourhood from time to time."

Susan: "So SCC is a ministry to the sick, bereaved and children?!"

Richard: "We also visit new parishioners who move into our area."

Nick: "Frequently, my group likes to explore aspects of church teaching as well."

Susan: "Okay! SCCs really can multitask!

What else?"

Laura: "Some young parents in our group also come together to do catechism for the pre-school children."

At this point, Susan is really confused.

Nick: "Sorry to confuse you, but sometimes our group not only helps our Catholic neighbours, but we try to reach out to neighbours of other faiths too."

By now, Susan is utterly lost. She said: "An SCC is clearly not a ministry as I understand it, nor is it a parish organization. What is it???"

At this point Marcus, the SCC coordinator from the parish small communities promotion team joined in the conversation. "Sorry I'm late! What did I miss?"

After being filled in on the discussion so far, Marcus went on to explain:

"The Small Christian Communities are meant to be basic church communities. Some say that the SCC is a microcosm of the Church. To put it simply, an SCC is a 'micro-church' in a particular neighbourhood.

"But why do we need small churches when we have our parish already?" Susan asked.

Marcus replied: "SCCs make little sense unless we first understand what 'Church' is. The bishops of Vatican II taught us that the Church is a People of God inaugurated by Christ. Each and every baptized member of this Church is called to continue the work of Jesus. We find this work outlined in Luke 4:18-19, Jesus preached good news to the poor, proclaimed liberty to the captives, gave sight to the blind, and set free the oppressed. All baptized Christians share in the responsibility to do this work; Jesus called all believers to act as 'leaven' and transform our world to be like God's kingdom."

Susan: "Don't our parish ministries already do this work in church?"

Nick: "Our parish ministries service our own community, it is important work. I

myself am a lector."

Laura: "And I'm a catechist. But my way of being 'leaven' is not just confined to my work in the parish. Jesus invites us to practice our faith outside the walls of the church as well."

Susan: "I am so busy in the parish that sometimes it's easy to become preoccupied only with what goes on inside. It's quite obvious that SCCs can't be classified just by its activity. Can't other groups be considered SCCs as well; bible study groups, or rosary groups, and so on?"

Marcus: "You've partially answered your own question Susan; as you observed the SCC is not defined only by what it does, as it is with many other church groups. Because of this, you do not need any special skill or interest to join one. There is no other qualification for membership other than a willingness to be a disciple of Jesus."

Richard: "I find it helpful to think that we in the SCCs are the parish's ambassadors to our neighbourhoods where we do Christ's work. We represent the parish out there at the grass-root level to reach out to the needy, the poor, the marginalized and to make a difference in the society where we are – the small 'church' on the ground."

Susan: "Thank you all! That has been very helpful for my understanding of the SCC. But I still have my problem with the organization chart, where do I put the SCC?"

Laura: "I think you can add a new category and call it "Small Christian Communities" where all the SCCs of our parish can be grouped under."

Susan: "Sounds good, I'll check with Father TJ to see if he agrees with this."

Marcus: "He ought to as it's his suggestion after all. Father TJ called earlier to say you'd be contacting us."

Everyone laughs.



# Where Angels Choose to Tread

## *Reading the Tea Leaves for Good Religious Choice*

*This faith reflection was presented by Arthur Goh on 26 July 2008 at the Social Mission Conference organized by the Catholic Social and Community Council (CSCC).*

Several sayings in spoken English acknowledge our nature to copy one other: Monkey see monkey do; Imitation is the best form of flattery; When in Rome do as the Romans do. Imitation tends to run in larger supply than innovation – it is popular because it has benefit. Imitation enables us to adapt to new cultures and practices without risk. The safest way to learn something unfamiliar is to look at what others have been doing and follow.

My point for this reflection is that our individual tendency to imitate one another has consequences on the shape of our collective association. In other words when I choose to follow other people, my choice influences the social norms of my community. One affects the many, many affects the all, becoming the norm which in turn conditions the one. What society are we creating here? Is the Catholic faithful conscious of who, what, or how they choose to follow?

Let us examine a little further our tendency to imitate. In an attempt to trace the roots of violence, French philosopher René Girard proposed that people do not have their own desires. According to him, that BMW 6 series you've been eyeing; if society did not want it, neither would you. We interiorize the desires and ambitions of our significant community and learn to want what other people want. This social behavior of imitating desire Girard called "mimesis." Place two children in a room full of playthings, and they end up fighting over the same toy. Two alpha males compete for territory or mating rights: it is a familiar scene not only on National Geographic but also HBO and, unfortunately, CNN as well.

Imitation of desire where material resources are limited logically leads to competition, sometimes of a kind where

all civility goes out the window. There are no rules: all is fair in love and war. Girard claims that mimesis is the seed of tragedy. Pick a current conflict, and you can likely distill its cause to competition over a particular desired "interest". Victory usually goes to the one who shouts loudest, hits hardest, has the biggest guns, or the most cash. History shows us that rational people have been willing to spill blood – their own or others' – and empty their humanity in the process in order to win a prize. Classical literature abounds with such stories, and even our oldest religious narratives are not exempt. A man murders his brother in anger for failing to obtain the greater share of his God's favor; a king schemes the death of his general in order to possess the man's wife; religious elites fearful for their own security engineer the crucifixion of their opponent. Check your bible, it is all there.

Mimesis provides an insight into the violence people use to settle competitions of desire: from ceremonial combat in sports, to domestic abuse, crime, political crackdown, and even total war. We have learnt to speak the language of violence so well that history is littered with human casualty – few win, many lose. Our religious tradition of peacemaking asks: how do we prevent this destructive behavior? We need to read the tea leaves. They seem to accuse us of nurturing in our people an uncritical imitation of desire; our brand of Catholicism is producing a peculiar kind of Christian.

You have heard the joke about Singaporeans willingly joining a queue without knowing what they are standing in line for. Singaporeans are not that dumb, but there is a hidden truth in this humor. We no longer exercise total control over our own desires. It is far easier to follow the trends of the majority. Advertising agencies and

political incumbents stake their careers on this fact. Now join this phenomenon of mass-desire with the symptoms identified in our previous presentations this morning: declining birth rate, dual working parents, divorce, changing family relations, low voluntarism, gambling addiction, domestic violence. We have now a partial formulation to our equation.

Singapore as a workplace is unabashedly meritocratic, where high performance and productivity are rewarded. We train our children to thrive in its competitiveness. It is our X factor. As a people, we have taken this Darwinian reality in stride and now ascribe to a philosophy of material pragmatism. Survival of the fittest means that we have to win – and needing to win instills in us a great "fear of losing." But we have neutered this attitude of all negativity by tagging it with a Hokkien phrase and a cute comic strip character. Now we feel it is normal to be "kiasu."

The tea leaves begin to speak: our context, for lack of a better phrase, is "overeconomics." In a real but implicit way, our ultimate prize is the dollar and our rules for life are that of the free market. Overeconomics happens when we transfer the standards governing our economic life into all other aspects of our life:

Look at public policy. It is often couched in terms of economic incentive and disincentive: the baby bonus can be the prime determinant for having the next child; punitive ERP and COE costs influence transport habits; a whole array of fines checks people's consciousness whenever they chew gum, speed, smoke, or dispose their trash. Fiscal measures are used to condition national behavior. One naturally imitates others thinking in cost, profit, and loss because that is how majority of Singaporeans operate.

Look at family life. Domestic

relationships are becoming frighteningly similar to financial transactions where persons become objects. Children are bred like performing animals with the sole purpose of outdoing others. Kids in turn are learning the fine art of bargaining and exchange in order to get what they want. One naturally dehumanizes people into assets and liabilities, not out of ill intention but merely in imitation of how one's parents, spouse, siblings treat one another.

Look at religion. The connection between worship and ministry is warped into what can be done for God in return for divine favors. God becomes the benevolent CEO and religious experience is privatized. Parents outsource their children's faith education to the experts; preferring not to get involved. On Sunday, Mass is like cinema where people go out of habit even if the plot seems to be the same. Religious symbols and teachings are consumed like a buffet, received with a high degree of selectivity according to personal taste and convenience. Free market religion is a loose collection of individuals with scarcely any communal consciousness. One imitates the people that are found in church in order to do what Christians today do.

Make no mistake; the church has many good things to learn from the corporate world, and economic wellbeing is a fundamental need for a

decent quality of life. But when overeconomics becomes normative in my community, and by default I unquestioningly desire what my society desires, then I arrive at the critical juncture where I stand to abdicate my freedom. The way of the dollar erodes my responsibility to decide what I need: I listen to the masses, to advertisements and commercial propaganda. Unconsciously I allow these voices to determine for me what is meaningful, how I form and keep relationships, how I measure my ambition and calculate other people's worth. It even makes me hear the gospel in a certain way and behave differently as a Christian.

We now have the equation: Mimesis plus overeconomics equals a peculiar kind of church. Many of our faithful no longer understand the social mission as intrinsic to individual Catholic faith; they have been powerfully educated through silence. Justice and charity become measured in monetary value, are devoid of human compassion, and left to the expertise of institutions. No wonder our recent census indicates a high level of satisfaction with our charity organizations: they are doing a wonderful job on behalf of a passive Catholic population.

What kingdom of God do we proclaim? Is it the same one that earned our Lord his fate on the cross? Can we even speak for the poor if Catholicism is disconnected from advocacy? Twenty one years ago, the social message did come through strongly in the church's

catechesis and apostolate. Now it must re-establish a foothold in our religious consciousness through re-evangelization. But who are our evangelists and do we welcome their prophetic voices?

Children imitate their parents; catechumens imitate our faithful; seminarians imitate our priests. I do not question the presence of grace, but I worry over the presence of will. Will the Catholic church in Singapore be worth imitating or is it already passé? Will Catholics choose repentance and sincere dialogue with others as the way to spiritual renewal, or are we stuck forever in an insulated and private faith? Will Catholics choose to critique social norms with the uncompromised gospel? Will Catholics choose to imitate Christ our true master? The stakes are pretty high. If we forgo rehabilitating the social mission of Catholicism in our country we risk losing the ability to preach Christ's gospel at all. When that time comes our people will know no other way to envision the future but in imitation of everyone else – a destiny measured in Rubles, Rupees, and Renminbi. Without faith education that helps people to become critically conscious of whom and what they choose to imitate it will be the case of monkey see, monkey do, monkey get in trouble too.



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