

The Practice of Respect for Life and the Promotion of Truth and Justice: Strategies for Acting on behalf of Life, Truth & Justice in Our Times

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“A consistent practice of respect will decrease the severity of conflicts among people of different races, religious beliefs, or gender. Respect is a transformative principle. So often it is “the other” or the “stranger” who is disrespected merely for being “other” or “stranger.” When we show respect to all persons, we undermine the tendency to dehumanize or demonize another.” (Catholic, Benedictine Values in an Educational Environment by John Klassen, OSB; Emmanuel Renner, OSB and Mary Reuter, OSB, May 1, 2001).

Good afternoon, brothers and sisters in Christ. It is indeed a pleasure to be with you today at the close of Respect For Life Week. The theme on which I have been asked to focus is: The practice of Respect for Life and the promotion of truth and justice: Strategies for acting on behalf of life, truth, and justice in our times.

Firstly, as I said in my column in Catholic News this weekend, when the Archdiocese celebrates Respect for Life Week, this does not mean that we only demonstrate respect for life during one week of the year. We must demonstrate respect for all life and for all God’s creation (including our environment) 24/7, 365/6 days per year.

This month the Church marks the 40th Anniversary of the 1971 Synod of Bishops document: Justice in the World which clearly states that: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (6).

We cannot evangelize, therefore, without acting for justice. Why should we respect life?

- Our scriptures tell us e.g. Deuteronomy 30:19, to choose life so that we and our children may live;
- John 10:10 tells us that Jesus came so that we may have life and have it more abundantly;
- Micah 6:8 tells us what God asks of us: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with our God – all 3 of these require us to love God and our neighbour; to respect all life, including our environment and all of God’s creation;
- In the Gospel of Life, Pope John Paul II emphasizes that “We must respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life from conception until natural death” ;
- Para 1931 of our Catechism reminds us that: “Respect for the human person proceeds by way of respect for the principle that “everyone should look upon his/her neighbour (without any exception) as ‘another self’, above all bearing in mind his/her life and the means necessary for living it with dignity” ;
- Our AEC Bishops made it clear in their 2008 Pastoral Letter, The Gift of Life, that “The Church is to announce with great vigour, by word and deed, that human life is sacred and inviolable. This proclamation demands the promotion and the renewal of a culture of life.

All Catholics, including bishops, priests, religious, laity, theologians, catechists, parents and teachers have a role to play in promoting a culture of life.” Building a culture of life also involves promoting environmental/ecological justice. As Pope John Paul II said (24 July, 2007): “Our earth speaks to us, and we must listen if we want to survive.”

The Holy Spirit is calling all of us to be counter-cultural; to swim against the tide of the culture of death that threatens us; to demonstrate that we are a people of life and for life – in all circumstances and at all stages.

Today, 20 November, the world is observing

- World Remembrance Day for Road Traffic Victims. It is important to pray not only for those who have died or who have been injured on our roads, but also for those who grieve and for our emergency services; and
- Children’s Rights Day. This year marks the 22nd anniversary of the United Nations adopting its Convention on the Rights of the Child. As the UN states, “This international convention covers different aspects of rights and freedoms for children and young people up to the age of 18 years. These include the right to express and have their views taken into account on all matters that affect them; the right to play, rest and leisure and the right to be free from all forms of violence. Some groups of children and young people, for example those living away from home, and young disabled people, have additional rights.”

CCSJ issued a media release on Friday on this issue. Inter alia, we said:

**MEDIA RELEASE CHILDREN’S RIGHTS’ DAY (20 Nov. 2011):
THE CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE (CCSJ) CALLS FOR
ACTION TO BUILD A ‘CHILD-FRIENDLY’ SOCIETY**

As TT prepares to observe Children’s Rights Day on Sunday 20 Nov, CCSJ calls for action to build a child-friendly society for our children. TT ratified The Convention on the Rights of the Child on 5 December 1991 after signing it on 30 Sept 1990.

Every child is a gift to us from God. It is said that the basic moral test of a nation is how it treats its most vulnerable. Many of our children are vulnerable. In spite of cries over the years by many in our country, we still do not have a fully functioning Children’s Authority, or a National Child Protection Policy, or a National Child Abuse Register.

Our society is not ‘child friendly’. So called ‘barrel children’ and socially displaced children roam our streets seeking to eke out a living. Some fall prey to child-abusers. Many children are parenting children. Where are the mentors or role models whom they can emulate? Many of our children continue to live with their families in squats, without the wherewithal to live their lives in dignity in our land of plenty.

The Preamble of our Constitution and international Human Rights instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, must inform TT's vision for our society.

All children have the same rights. However, in TT many children face discrimination and their rights are violated because of e.g. poverty and social exclusion. If we are to level the playing field for all children, then we must address issues affecting their parents/guardians/families e.g. unemployment/underemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, and family breakdown. Issues adversely affecting children in rural and urban areas must be identified and addressed. Some children face discrimination because of the area in which they live and because of perceptions about the kind of persons who live in these areas.

Too many of our children are dropping out of schools and no one seems to know why or where they are. The education system is not geared to meet the needs of our children. Chalk and talk cannot be the order of the day in the 21st Century. We will not build a knowledge-based society if our education system is not overhauled and updated to meet the requirements of our technological society/world.

Too many of our children go missing and we carry on with our lives as though we don't care. The names of Akiel Chambers, Amy Anamunthodo, Sean Luke, Hope Arismandez and others are indelibly printed in the hearts and minds of many citizens who still mourn their passing and the injustices done to them.

Too many of our children are at the receiving end of child abuse, incest, domestic violence and other crimes. Are we concerned about rehabilitating young offenders so that they can live productive lives? Why is it that we still do not have adequate Young Offenders Institutions or a genuine Restorative Justice approach to our criminal justice system? Some female minors continue to be housed on the site of the Women's Prison sleeping separately but mingling freely with adult female prisoners during the day. Why is there no YTC in Tobago? This situation is unacceptable.

CCSJ understands that there are times when some of our juveniles are held in holding bays with adults. This also is unacceptable. We need special units in our Police Service to meet the needs of children who are in conflict with the law. Community policing will assist in this area.

We must devise better strategies to address school-based violence to 'nip' violence among our youths in the bud. How are we meeting the needs of our differently abled children? It is time to move from policy to practice. Too often we fail at the levels of implementation and evaluation of

our policies.

CCSJ calls on all faith communities, NGOs, CBOs and FBOs to work with our Government to create conditions in TT that will enable each child to realise his/her potential. Let us get our priorities right - protect our children, create safe environments in which they can grow, and enhance their lives. Let's build a better TT for ALL our children."

* We live in a country in which there is daily assault on life because of a crisis of love; a crisis of culture; a crisis of community. CCSJ produced a 10 page document and submitted it at a Civil Society Consultation in June 2011 to the AG to be used when he was preparing TT's report for the Universal Periodic Review. At that meeting I Chaired the group that focused on Children's rights. A 7 page report of the group's concerns and recommendations can be read, along with the aforementioned 10 page report, on CCSJ's website (see Speeches and Presentations). These 2 reports focus on human rights issues in our country. (Refer to the documents).

It is significant to note that Respect For Life Week ended shortly before the Feast of Christ the King, today, the last Sunday in the Church's Liturgical Year. Last week, through CCSJ's various activities and those planned e.g. at parish and school levels, we all had an opportunity to reflect on ways in which we are promoting, protecting and enhancing life at all stages and in all circumstances, and ways in which we are acting as good stewards of God's creation.

Is prayer alone sufficient to demonstrate that we respect life? After CCSJ's TV programme on Tuesday night during which a panel focused on the theme: RFL, a Catholic woman rang me and said that as far as she is concerned, this country is beyond redemption so she will continue to say her prayers and look after her family. I failed to convince her that we have a duty to do more as Catholics.

His Grace, Archbishop Gilbert, has repeatedly reminded us that we must not only have a vertical relationship with God, but also a horizontal relationship with our neighbour. The greatest Commandment that Jesus gave to us is to love God and to love our neighbour. And love for our neighbour has global dimensions.

We must be concerned when we learn e.g. that a mini-bus that was coming from a funeral in part of St Lucia, went over a cliff and plunged into the sea killing the driver and passengers – 17 persons died in the accident – the worst in St Lucia's history. As Archbishop Robert Rivas reminds us: "We are called to be our brothers' and our sisters' keepers, to comfort, strengthen and to stand in the gap interceding for them." He called on the nation to pray, to support and to comfort our grieving friends. He also praised the heroic acts of those who witnessed the accident and responded immediately by trying to save lives.

By our baptism, we are called to live as Christ lived. He came so that we may have life and have it more abundantly. But whatever that Catholic woman who spoke to me believes, Jesus did not

come so that we may become armchair Christians and do-nothing-until-judgement day. Today's Gospel, in fact, reminds us most powerfully, about how we will be asked to account for our actions on Judgement Day.

In the Gospel readings of the last two weeks we discerned the meaning of the parable of the 10 bridesmaids and the parable of the talents. In today's Gospel, however, Jesus speaks to us clearly. He "pulls no punches", as the saying goes. At the last judgement we will be judged by our good works; by our love for Him and for one another.

Ask yourself when you read Matthew 25:31-46: "Am I living my life in such a way that will lead me to be placed by Jesus among the sheep or among the goats? Will I be on His right hand or on His left hand?" Please note that the "virtuous" will be on His right hand.

We should not wait until it's too late to realise that Luke 4:18-19 is our mandate:

"The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

By our baptism we became members of an Easter People; a Beatitudes People. By our baptism and through Sacraments such as First Communion and Confirmation, we committed ourselves to being salt of the earth and light of the world. In Mt 5:13 – 16, Jesus' words are pertinent to us, His followers, today:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men and women.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men and women, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

If we are not to lose our taste, we must SEE-JUDGE-ACT to transform the world so that it will reflect Gospel values. To do this, we ourselves must be true witnesses by the way in which we live our lives.

We live in a time of selfish individualism, secularism, moral relativism where anything goes. The mantra seems to be: "If it feels good, just do it". Many have lost their moral compass; their sense of right and wrong. We need more role models and mentors. In my early childhood in TT, I could not bring home from school anything that my parents knew did not belong to me. Today, in fact, many parents are benefiting from the spoils of their children's crimes. I saw a video on TV that showed male individuals in TT stealing from passersby and from people driving in cars along the street. They then passed the stolen items to women – wives, mothers etc who took them inside their homes and returned to their doorsteps waiting for more. My cousin came from London to play Mas last year. A man next to him in the band pulled the chain from his neck and continued jumping up next to him watching him as if to say: "Do something nah!"

My sister accompanied my father to an Interfaith Service in Woodford Square a few months ago. My father's car was parked immediately outside Woodford Square. As my sister walked to the car with my father after the event, a young man grabbed her hand and twisted her bracelet off her hand. It was my grandmother's bracelet. He sprained her wrist in twisting it off. Passersby tried to catch the young man but he was too swift. Who helped to form his conscience?

And then there was the young man I heard on a radio station who told the story of how he became a bandit. He said that when he was young his mother went to America to "make a better life for herself". She left him in the care of her brother, his uncle, who lived in a squat. Every now and then she would send him barrels of goodies. On mornings, his uncle would ask him:

"What do you want for breakfast?" They would then proceed to mug the first person they met to get money to buy breakfast. Naturally, having been moulded in this way, he continued to commit more and more crimes and was eventually caught and sent to YTC, where, he admitted, he received no form of rehabilitation. Our prisons are full of people – about 6,000 plus – many of whom are poor, illiterate; who grew up without proper parenting etc. Many come out not having had meaningful opportunities for rehabilitation either inside of prison or after they leave. And we wonder why our recidivism/reoffending rate is about 65%. The revolving door will keep turning until we take seriously as a nation our responsibility to promote integral human development of all dimensions of a person and of each person (see Pope Benedict XVI's words in *Charity in Truth*).

In His Grace's column this week, he shares his presentation that he made at the launch of Respect For Life Week. He rightly says that: "Because we have been created in the image and likeness of God, we have the capacity to search for truth and understand the truth... One of the serious pastoral responsibilities of the Catholic Church is to help individuals and groups of individuals form their consciences... The experience of the Church is that if conscience formation is not done regularly, people tend either not to think about important issues or they begin to absorb uncritically secular values about the important issues of life... Human beings have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity lies in observing this law and by it they will be judged. Their conscience is their most secret core and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God... If conscience is not properly formed, it has little influence on a person's values and actions... The education of conscience is a life-long task. It teaches virtue, identifies vice, facilitates healing and contributes to personal peace... The more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons become guided by the objective standards of moral conduct... The Church must help (people) grow spiritually."

On Friday Winston Garcia, Chair of the Youth Commission, and I were speaking in my office and agreed that in order to practice respect for life, each of us must have a personal relationship with Christ. The Youth Commission is rightly focusing on a three-pronged approach to youth formation: Developing in our youths a personal relationship with Christ, Formation, and Mission. If we don't form our youths and ground them in their faith, they will not know that there are objective moral truths. They will know that it is wrong to say: "It is my body, I can do what I like with it." Catholics must understand the message of Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* and in his encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*. Only then can they respond to the pro-choice

groups in TT and worldwide who believe that what is growing in a pregnant woman's body is not a human being and so can be aborted. The Gospel of Life makes it clear that life begins at conception and that we should promote, protect and enhance life from conception until natural death.

To practise RFL, we Catholics must develop our awareness of what is known as the Church's best kept secret, as our speaker from the Netherlands, Victor Scheffers, said at the launch of RFLW – that is, the Church's social teaching. As the US Bishops said:

“The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about **building a just society** and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents. The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents. In these brief reflections, we highlight several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition.” Here are some of the social justice themes that should inform our daily lives if we are to act for justice; if we are to build a world in which justice, peace, truth, love and forgiveness can become a reality. This year, CCSJ's Calendar, which we use as an educational tool, is entitled: “Pillars of Peace”. It states:

“In his 1963 encyclical, Peace on Earth, Pope John XXIII , stated that there are four (4) pillars of peace: truth, justice, love and freedom. In his Message for World Day of Peace in January 2002, Pope John Paul II added another “pillar”, “forgiveness”. He said: “My reasoned conviction, confirmed in turn by biblical revelation, is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true peace are justice and that form of love which is forgiveness.”

In his Peace Message for 2003, he said that truth “will build peace, if every individual sincerely acknowledges not only his/her rights, but also his/her own duties toward others.

“Justice will build peace if in practice everyone respects the rights of others and actually fulfils his/her duties toward them.

“Love will build peace if people feel the needs of others as their own and share what they have with others, the values of mind and spirit that they possess.

“Freedom will build peace and make it thrive if, in the choice of the means to that end, people act according to reason and assume responsibility for their own actions... peace lies in the defence and promotion of basic human rights, which every human being enjoys, not as a benefit given by a different social class or conceded by the state, but simply because of our humanity.”

The pillars of peace are based on the social doctrine of our Church and on our scriptures. Here are some of the themes on which we need to focus if we are to practise RFL are:

1. The Sanctity of Life and the Dignity of the Human Person

2. Common Good, family and Community
3. Option for the Poor and vulnerable
4. Rights and Responsibilities
5. Role of Government and Subsidiarity
6. Economic Justice : The economy must serve people, not the other way around.
7. Stewardship of God's Creation
8. Promotion of Peace and Disarmament
9. Participation: “All people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society. It is a fundamental demand of justice and a requirement for human dignity that all people be assured a minimum level of participation in the community.”
10. Global Solidarity and Development – we do not journey alone
11. The dignity of work and the rights of workers
12. The universal destination of goods.

I don't have time to go into each in detail. However, I urge you to access information on CCSJ's website and you will find my weekly articles and speeches which focus on the various themes. You will also be able to access our Newsletter, some of which include many examples of good practice in our Archdiocese. There is much good work being undertaken in our parishes and we need to share such work. Before I share some areas of good practice here, I want to share a poem written by my 10 year old niece, Cherisse, who lives in London. I have uploaded it on CCSJ's website and we have created a special page entitled: Catholics Making A Difference, inviting readers to share examples of ways in which they have made a difference. It is important to note what prompted the poem. Cherisse goes to a Catholic School which is located in a privileged area of London. Her teacher took the class to visit Westminster Cathedral – the Catholic Cathedral. All around the Cathedral, which is in the heart of an area called Victoria, near the Houses of Parliament, there are socially displaced persons/street dwellers/vagrants. Some are very young. The children from her school had never seen so many socially displaced persons in real life. Some were traumatized by the experience as they were approached for money by those living on the street.

On their return to their school, the teacher asked them to write about how they could made a difference to the lives of those they encountered outside the Cathedral. Here is Cherisse's poem:

How I made a difference

by Cherisse Hawkins (10 years old) (May 2011)

Somewhere in London
there's a child all alone.
A shade of grey outside;
a world of colour in her heart.

Where is her mother?
Where is her father?
Nobody knows.

When did she have her last plate of food?

Question existing.

Innocent creature
unknown danger.

A purple envelope on the floor.

She picks it up with
delicate fingers,
wishing she could read
the writing on it.

Cautiously she opens it.
Money! There is money in it
and a note that spells:
“F-o-r y-o-u”.

Tears roll down her cheeks.
She can afford to buy food.
World of pure colour in her heart.
Money from a donor.
She is safe... for now.

When I read it, I asked Cherisse why, in her poem, she did not give the girl the envelope with the money herself or speak to the girl. She replied that she was afraid. See at what a young age we can distance ourselves from people who are seen as “the other”, “strangers” etc. I remember that Princess Diana used to take her 2 young sons, Princes William and Harry, to visit the Sanctuary, a Catholic refuge for the poor – which was located near the very Cathedral which Cherisse and her class visited. Princess Diana said that she wanted her sons to have a balanced view of life.

Here in TT, there are people who are wealthy who don't have a clue of how the poor live. The gap between the rich and the poor grows daily and those who have continue to build stronger burglar proof protection in their homes or to move into gated communities to protect themselves from “the other”.

I remember the reaction I got some years ago when I asked members of a particular community to assist some poor children who attended one of our prestige schools. The aim was to share the gifts that God has given to us. And Remember, all we have is “Gift” from God. I asked if each family could allow one of the poor children to use their computer for an hour a week so that they could do research for their projects. Not a single person was prepared to allow any child in their house. Fear of crime seems to have caused many to lose their humanity. Fear has caused us to forget that we are all God’s children; that each of us is of worth; that each of us is endowed with inherent, inviolable and inalienable dignity. And you know, I allowed a couple of children into my home to use my computer and raised money to buy them computers when they entered University. At each stage when they passed exams, their families just showered me with fruits and vegetables from their farms. These were poor families who demonstrated that if one is poor one does not necessarily have to turn to a life of crime to survive. TT’s watchwords are: Discipline, Tolerance and Production. Although we are not as intolerant as people are in some parts of the world, we must do more to promote tolerance among citizens. We need to promote education in citizenship. Our education system leaves much to be desired. It is not geared to foster critical thinking, innovation or creativity. Chalk and talk remain the order of the day. We will not promote integral human development in this way – particularly if we agree with Howard Gardner’s Multiple intelligences:

1. Naturalist Intelligence (“Nature Smart”)
2. Musical Intelligence (“Musical Smart”)
3. Logical-Mathematical Intelligence (Number/Reasoning Smart)
4. Existential Intelligence
5. Interpersonal Intelligence (People Smart”)
6. Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence (“Body Smart”)
7. Linguistic Intelligence (Word Smart)
8. Intra-personal Intelligence (Self Smart”)
9. Spatial Intelligence (“Picture Smart”)

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE RE RESPECT FOR LIFE:

There are many good examples of ways in which we can practice RFL, thus promoting justice and truth e.g. on Friday I spoke to the son of CCSJ’s Admin Asst., Mark. He told me about a Project in which members of staff at his Company are involved. The business community has a duty to promote Corporate Social Responsibility to build the common good. Mark’s Company is

working with *Habitat for Humanity* to build a house for a mother of 5 children who lives with them in Sangre Grande. Every Saturday for a period of about 1 month, between 25 to 30 members of the firm will be working with professional builders to build the house for the family. The Army is clearing the land before the building work commences.

I am an honorary member of Inner Wheel, the female arm of Rotary Club. The women on Inner Wheel continue to do great work e.g. they built a house for 6 children on the grounds of their grandparents' home. Both their parents had died in a car crash and they were left homeless. Their grandparents were willing to help look after them, but had no room in their small 1 room house. I remember seeing the joy on the faces of the 6 little children – the eldest was 12 – at a ceremony we held to hand over the keys. Our task is to strengthen family life – not to break up families.

There are many NGOs, CBOs and FBOs in TT that are doing sterling work that demonstrates respect for life – e.g. St Vincent de Paul Society, Living Water Community, Eternal Light Community, Emmanuel Community, Zion Community, GANG (God's Anointed New Generation – led by Kyle Dardaine and Mikkel Trestrail), People of Praise Community (Winston Garcia) etc.

You can access **CCSJ's Newsletter** e.g. of July 2011. In it we share examples of Catholics who are making a difference in our land e.g. Holy Cross Church, Princess Town – Soup Kitchen Project; Soup Kitchen project also in Santa Rosa, Arima; St Patrick Joachim, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel – Cedros Parish – action against the Smelter Plant; Assumption and St Thomas More – South Oropouche Parish – feeding the needy, protecting animals, solidarity with accident victims – joining the march with Arrive Alive in November 2010; Sacred Heart – La Brea Parish: where 16 children of Sacred Heart Sunday School and their teachers brought Christmas cheer to “shut-ins” in the community; St Theresa's RC Church – Rio Claro Parish – Building a house for a 43 year old single mother who is an active member of the parish. She damaged her back at her workplace and became housebound – unable to walk. Parishioners decided to help improve her living conditions. A piece of land was donated by her brother and the Parish took on the project as its Lenten act of almsgiving. From the financial contributions received from parishioners, a 30 x 24 ft concrete structure was built for the parishioner, Cathy; Santa Rita parishioners, Rio Claro, raised \$12,000 (sales from a barbeque) to share between 4 parishioners who needed money for health care which was not readily available. Thus, while we must advocate for a health care system that meets the needs of citizens, we must meet the challenge of standing in solidarity with those in need; St Charles, Tunapuna - took action to fight against Cancer – Cancer mobile unit.

And then there was the great work done by Bishop Jason Gordon, and continued now by Fr Clyde Harvey in Gonzales, Belmont i.e. the Pride in Gonzales and Community Intervention Transforming Youth (CITY) programme which commenced in 2003. Bishop Jason won the regional Motorola prize for his work on this Programme. The objective of the Project was “to

empower youths so that they will develop into better integrated adolescents and acquire emotional stability and skills required to access better education and jobs. This should ultimately alleviate poverty and the temptation to turn to crime.”

This Programme provides an excellent model that could be used across the Archdiocese. But for it to succeed, all key stakeholders need to come together and sustain their efforts to build the community.

We must look beyond the efforts of parishioners and the Church itself. We have a duty to advocate for our Government to play its part to develop short term, medium term and long term plans to promote sustainable development/ integral human development. Make-work programmes and 3 month jobs will not, on their own, develop our people or our nation. The US Bishops said, in their document Economic Justice for All, that the economy should work for the people. Too little of the nation’s resources is filtering down to the poor. We need to diversify our economy and stop depending so much on our finite oil and gas/energy resources. Since the 1970s we have been talking about diversifying our economy yet we still have a \$4 billion US bill annually for importing food. Agriculture, manufacturing, tourism are all areas that could be developed to promote sustainable development. At a time of economic downturn, we must learn e.g. to feed ourselves.

2005 statistics show that 16.7% of our population i.e. about 210,000 persons, live in **poverty**. This figure is much higher today. One Government Minister said it’s now 20% and another says it’s as high as 30% living in poverty in TT. The Church is committed to the poor. It is said that the moral test of a nation is how it treats the poor and vulnerable. A key strategy is for parishes to reach out to the poor and those hurting/grieving as a result of crime and violence which is so rampant in TT.

Sadly, we don’t always reach out to victims of crime. In my column in last week’s Catholic News, I tell the story of someone who was raped by 3 young men. She was tending to her garden when they attacked and raped her. Instead of reaching out to her, people in her community shunned her and she became a recluse and died a few years later. And there is the report in Friday’s Express Newspapers about the 23 year old woman who was allegedly raped and who, when saved from further rape by the 2nd person in the car in which she had been travelling, and taken to the Police Station, was allegedly told that because she was naked, she could not come into the Police Station (refer to article). I was a member of the PSC for 4 years. The motto of the PS is “To protect and serve”. We need Officers who will serve with integrity and professionalism. Sadly, because the wheels of justice grind so slowly in TT, it may be a long while before justice is served in cases such as this.

As I said in my column this weekend: What are we doing for the “least” of our brothers and sisters? The greatest Commandment Jesus gave us was to love Him and to love our neighbour. And remember, love of neighbour has global dimensions. We have to see Jesus in the face of our neighbours and respond to their needs now. As St John of the Cross said: “In the evening of life we will be judged on love alone.”

Look around our country and our world today and tell me if you can ask Jesus with a clear conscience: “*Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help?*”

As people of the Beatitudes we are expected to *act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God* (Micah 6:8). To “love tenderly” requires us to develop meaningful, genuine relationships with God and within our family, workplace, community, country and further afield.

Our Archdiocesan Mission statement talks about “building the civilization of love.” Let us play our part in building that civilization of love. Each of us can make a difference. As Martin Luther King Jr. said: “Our lives begin to end when we remain silent about things that matter.” We must not walk on the other side and ignore the plight of our brothers and sisters - as those who did so in the parable of the Good Samaritan. I end with the Mission statement of our Archdiocese:

We are the people of God in Trinidad and Tobago, building the Civilization of love – reconciliation with God, neighbour, creation and self – through:

- The New Evangelization
- Revitalizing Catholic Culture and Identity
- Regenerating the Moral and Spiritual Values of our Society.

Let’s continue to work tirelessly in God’s vineyard to build His Kingdom here on earth and pray that God will strengthen us for the journey.

I thank you and may God bless us all.