

*Presentation given by **Leela Ramdeen**, Chair of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice at the sod turning ceremony for the **Anthony Pantin Reintegration Centre** on Tuesday February 21, 2005.*

Friends in Christ, CCSJ is delighted that you could be here with us today. Your presence is a sure sign that you too are concerned to assist former prisoners to reform their lives. Our response to crime in TT is a moral test for our nation and a challenge for our Church. Crime and fear of crime touch all our lives.

The status quo is not really working as far as our response to crime and violence is concerned. 56% recidivism rate is too high. Our society seems to prefer punishment to rehabilitation and retribution to restoration, thereby indicating a failure to recognize prisoners as human beings. Punishment must have a constructive and redemptive purpose – it must be coupled with treatment.

As some of the Bishops in the Catholic Church have said: “We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and to control it effectively so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, to offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society. If all those in some way involved in the problem tried to . . . develop this line of thought, perhaps humanity as a whole could take a great step forward in creating a more serene and peaceful society.” (US Bishops - 2000)

Just as God never abandons us, so too we must be in covenant with one another. Our response to crime should not be abandonment and despair, but rather justice, contrition, reparation, reconciliation, and return or reintegration of all into the community.

If we do not seek to rehabilitate offenders and help to reintegrate them into society so that they can live productive lives, then our communities will continue to feel unsafe and insecure. There is a sense of urgency in the air.

Careful reviews of the literature on rehabilitation have concluded that treatment does reduce recidivism/re-offending. Not all offenders are open to treatment, but all deserve to be challenged and encouraged to turn their lives around. As a people of faith, we believe that grace can transform even the most hardened and cruel human beings.

No single type of treatment or rehabilitation program, however, works for every offender. One-size-fits-all solutions are often inadequate. The effectiveness of programs depends on many things, including type of offence, the quality of the program, and family, and community support as well as support from faith communities.

It is time for a new national dialogue in TT about how we deal with crime and violence; how we restore our respect for law and life; how we protect and rebuild communities, and how we help offenders to redeem themselves. The proposed centre must be seen as part of a holistic approach to restore a sense of civility and responsibility to everyday life, and to promote crime prevention and genuine rehabilitation.

We believe a Catholic vision of crime and criminal justice can offer some alternatives. A Catholic approach leads us to encourage models of restorative justice that seek to address crime in terms of the harm done to victims and communities, not simply as a violation of law.

As Catholics we believe that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender. We cannot and will not tolerate behavior that threatens lives and violates the rights of others. We believe in responsibility, accountability, and legitimate punishment. Those who harm others or damage property must be held accountable for the hurt they have caused. The community has a right to establish and enforce laws to protect people and to advance the common good.

At the same time, a Catholic approach does not give up on those who violate these laws. We believe that both victims and offenders are children of God. Despite their very different claims on society, their lives and dignity should be protected and respected. We seek justice, not vengeance. We believe punishment must have clear purposes: protecting society and rehabilitating those who violate the law.

Thus, while we recognise that the common good is undermined by criminal behavior that threatens the lives and dignity of others, the common good is also undermined by policies that seem to give up on those who have broken the law. We cannot afford to give up on those who have offended; we cannot afford to throw our hands up in the air and say: "What can we do?"

There is much that we can do to restore a sense of community and resist the violence that has engulfed so much of our culture. However, in order to develop new approaches we need to start thinking outside the 'box'.

We are convinced that Centres such as the one that CCSJ proposes to establish in this area, offer better alternatives as a way of challenging ex-prisoners to change their lives.

We see this Centre as a sign of hope for sustainable development in TT. For CCSJ, crime and the destruction it brings raise fundamental questions about the nature of personal responsibility, community, sin, and redemption through a restorative justice approach.

Since the causes of crime are complex, our response to meet the needs of those who will be based at this facility, must be comprehensive and carefully thought through. That is why CCSJ will be drawing on the services and support of individuals in various fields of endeavour – psychologists, social workers, therapists, other treatment personnel etc. so that we can address the spiritual, social, physical, psychological, mental and other needs of those who will access this facility.

We will be failing in our duty as a nation if our anti-crime strategies fail to address certain risk factors that contribute to crime e.g. poverty, urban decay and social exclusion, family disintegration, lack of quality education and employment, poor housing, the proliferation of guns and drugs in TT. These all contribute to crime and unless our strategies address them, we will be spinning top in mud as the saying goes.

We call on all of you present here today to join us in a new commitment to prevent/reduce crime and to rebuild lives and communities. Our Walk Tall Programme which seeks to start the rehabilitation process while offenders are still in prison, is CCSJ's way of addressing the challenge of Matthew 25: "For I was . . . in prison and you visited me."

Since nearly all inmates will return to society, prisons must be places where offenders are challenged, encouraged, and rewarded for efforts to change their behaviors and attitudes, and where they learn the skills needed for employment and life in community. Our society must develop better and more effective programmes aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, and programs of probation, parole, and reintegration. I am a member of the Cabinet appointed Parole Introduction Committee. This is an

important initiative in TT's attempts to reduce crime in our communities. Prisons should not be warehouses where people grow old, without hope, and where they waste their lives.

The proposed TT Reintegration Foundation/Anthony Pantin Reintegration Centre will enable us to stand in solidarity and with compassion to heal those who have gone off the rails and to bring them back into the fold of humanity. Yes, we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. And who is our brother and sister, everyone – irrespective of their ethnic background or status in life.

An analysis of the characteristics of the inmate population in our prisons shows that a high proportion of those incarcerated are of African origin from poor families. Many are illiterate and were unemployed or underemployed before their incarceration. Some may still need rehabilitation from drug and alcohol abuse as it appears that drugs and alcohol are available in our prisons.

We thank you most sincerely for your attendance here today and hope that you will continue to lend support to this and other similar initiatives. I am certain that you will, since our aims are the same, that is, to create conditions in TT that will enable each individual to realize his/her potential. Together, we can enhance the quality of life for our people. Please pray for the success of this initiative.

I thank you.