

Respect For Life Week (6-13 Oct, 2012)

Seminar at Immaculate Mary Queen of the Universe, Bourg Mulatresse on Sunday 14 Oct, 2012

Theme: Live the Faith and respect Life

Good afternoon brothers and sisters. I am happy to be here with you as we close Respect for Life Week 2012 and to focus on the Theme **Live the Faith and respect Life**. As you know, the theme for the week was: *Respect Life: Be living witnesses to our Faith*. Although RFLW ends, our work is ongoing. We can only truly respect life if we are witnesses to our Faith; if we integrate our faith into our daily lives.

Why have we been observing RFLW over the past 3 years?

During the 3rd sitting of Synod in our Archdiocese, one of the strategies that was suggested by those gathered as a way of achieving the mission of the Church, was that each year the Archdiocese should observe a week when the Faithful will focus on Respect for all Life. This is the 3rd year that the Archdiocese will be observing Respect for Life Week. While this is an initiative by the Catholic Church, it is significant that all citizens have been invited to focus during this week on ways in which we can all Respect Life. That is why CCSJ issued a Media Release asking all citizens to observe the Week.

Why have we chosen this particular week for RFLW?

It is timely that this week will be observed during the month of October when there will be a number of important events in the Catholic Church.

Pope Benedict XVI has called for a Year of Faith which will begin on Thursday October 11. It will conclude on November 24, 2013, the Solemnity of Christ the King. There has been one other Catholic commemoration of a Year for Faith. It was called by Pope Paul VI in 1967 on the occasion of the 19th centenary of the martyrdom of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

The Year of Faith which began on Thursday 11 October coincides with the anniversaries of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Also, the 13th Ordinary Assembly of the World Synod of Bishops will meet in Rome from 7 – 28 October to discuss the theme *“The new evangelization for the transmission of the Christian faith.”* Ahead of the Synod an introductory text has been written called “lineamenta.” Every Catholic is invited to read and study it. And remember; when we use the words “new evangelization”, we do not mean that there is a new Gospel message: “Jesus Christ, is the **same**yesterday, **today**, and tomorrow.” What we are called to do is to seek *new ways, new means and new methods* of sharing the eternal message of Christ in our daily lives.

It is important to place Respect for Life Week within the context of the Mission of the Archdiocese of Port of Spain which states:

“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.”

To achieve our mission as Catholics, we must commit ourselves to rediscover the vocation to be Catholic so that the practice of our faith and parish and community involvement will lead to a deeper discipleship and commitment to Church and to community. If we are to build “the civilization of love,” we must move from a culture of death to a culture of life which is underpinned by respect for all life from conception until natural death and for all God’s creation. We must create communities in which the sanctity of life and the dignity of each person are respected and promoted.

Blessed John Paul II reminded us in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life (1995): “The Gospel of Life is at the heart of Jesus’ message. Lovingly received day after day by the Church, it is to be preached with dauntless fidelity as ‘good news’ to the people of every age and culture... In giving life to man, God demands that he love, respect and promote life... A great prayer for life is urgently needed; a prayer which will rise up throughout the world...The Gospel of Life is for the whole of human society. To be actively pro-life is to contribute to the renewal of society through the promotion of the common good.” (The Gospel of Life (1995), #1, #52, #100, and #101)

This is our Faith; this is what we believe. Our Faith is a gift from God. Too often, in our busy lives, we fail to reflect on this precious gift. In his Apostolic Letter to declare The Year of Faith - ‘Porta fidei’ (“The door of faith” (Acts 14:27), the Holy Father tells us that The Year of Faith is a “summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the One Saviour of the world.” He reminds us of the need “to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ.”

At a time when the world faces a crisis of “faith”, it is significant that the Holy Father opens his Apostolic Letter, *Porta Fidei*, to declare The Year of Faith, with the powerful image of “the door of faith”, based on the Acts of the Apostles 14:27. He says:

“The ‘door of faith’ (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church. It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace. To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime” (Porta Fidei #1).

This door of faith opens for us at Baptism and takes us on a lifelong journey. If we are all to be living witnesses to our Faith, we must equip ourselves for this journey; we must deepen our knowledge and understanding our Faith; and we must nourish ourselves along the way through the Holy Eucharist, which is the “the source and summit of the Christian life” (Lumen gentium, no. 11; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1324). It is the Eucharist that will help us to maintain a personal encounter with the risen Christ as we journey through life.

We are living in an age in which, as the Holy Father says “a profound crisis of faith...has affected many people (Porta Fidei #2).” Across the world many people have moved away from God. But, as the Holy Father said in his 3rd Encyclical, *Charity in Truth*: “Without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is.”

A people without a spiritual foundation; a people who do not see themselves as having their origin in God will not be able to achieve their full potential. This is why, if we are to be prophetic witnesses to our Faith, we have a duty to do as the Holy Father says; we must “...set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance” (Porta Fidei #2).

We live in an era in which moral relativism, individualism, selfishness, and the negative aspects of globalization stand as obstacles to the promotion of the sanctity of life, the dignity of each human being and the promotion of the common good. The global economic crisis has led to growing inequalities around the world. Faced with these challenges, we must remember that Catholics are a people of “hope”, therefore, let us read the signs of the times and act responsibly as a people of “hope.”

The Holy Father's words of advice in *Charity in Truth* (#21) are sound. He said: “The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment... (it) thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future.”

However, if we are to discern situations from a Catholic perspective, we must constantly deepen our faith. It is not enough to say: “I believe”; there must be a synthesis between the faith we say we profess and the way in which we live our lives. As the Holy Father says: “...faith commits every one of us to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world. What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end” (*Porta Fidei* 15).

Many Catholics say they “believe” but this is not always evident by the way they live their lives. As is stated in a Vatican II document – *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the modern world): “This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.”

Our Catechism (1313) tells us that we are called and empowered to share and to defend our faith by virtue of our Baptism and Confirmation. It also states that “as followers of Christ, it is not enough to have faith; we must also proudly profess it and constantly bear witness to it.” (Catechism 1816).

To be credible witnesses we must use the opportunity during the Year of Faith

- “to intensify the celebration of the faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist” (*Porta Fidei* #9); and

- “to intensify the witness of charity. As Saint Paul reminds us: ‘So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love’ (1 Cor 13:13). With even stronger words... Saint James said: ‘What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled;’, without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But some one will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith’ (Jas 2:14-18).

“Faith without charity bears no fruit, while charity without faith would be a sentiment constantly at the mercy of doubt, Faith and charity each require the other, in such a way that each allows the other to set out along its respective path... Through faith, we can recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for our love. ‘As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40). These words are a warning that must not be forgotten and a perennial invitation to return the love by which he takes care of us. It is faith that enables us to recognize Christ and it is his love that impels us to assist him whenever he becomes our neighbour along the journey of life.”

There is an inextricable **link, therefore, between living our faith and respecting life** – all life, at all stages and in all circumstances – and we must also respect God's creation and promote environmental justice. If we read the various parables in our scriptures e.g. the Good Samaritan, Lazarus and Dives etc. we will understand that Jesus wants us to respect life. Indeed, our mandate for action comes from our scriptures e.g. Luke 4:18:

"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 Lord's year of favour."

Another of my favourite quotations which I used a lot when I was a teacher is taken from the words of Blessed John Henry Newman:

"God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons."

And then there are the powerful words in the Vatican II document The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts."

Each one of the encyclicals written by our Popes over the ages urges us to live our faith; to respect life. To demonstrate respect for life we must walk with the 2 feet of Christian service: **works of mercy** and **works of social action**. The new leaflet that is being distributed to all Catholics in the Archdiocese: "*This is our Faith*", reminds us of the various spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

We are called to be a light shining in the darkness. "You are the salt of the earth... the light of the world... No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven (Mt 5: 13-16). And, as is stated in James 2: 14-26, *Faith without good works is dead*. Some Christian denominations believe that faith alone will save us. Catholics believe that faith must be accompanied by good works if we are to be saved. Remember, the social justice principle of 'solidarity' – our Church tells us that we are all responsible for all and must stand in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable, the socially excluded, the voiceless such as babies in the womb etc.

In his encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, the Holy Father reminded us that we must promote authentic integral human development, that is, the development of each person and of every dimension of a person. Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical, *On the development of Peoples (1967)*, made it clear that authentic development involves "a transition from less human conditions to truly human ones" (#20). We cannot walk on the other side and ignore the plight of those who yearn for justice. Love of God and love of neighbour impels us to act if we are to build God's Kingdom of truth, justice, love, peace, and freedom.

To assist us during the Year of Faith, the Holy Father invited the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to draw up a *Note* "providing the Church and individual believers with some guidelines on how to live this Year of Faith in the most effective and appropriate ways, at the service of belief and evangelization" (Porta Fidei #12).

The Newsletter, *Parish Link*, produced by The Catholic Commission for Social Justice and distributed to parishes, schools, Catholic organizations and to you today, contains extracts

from *Note with Pastoral recommendations for the Year of Faith* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The Holy Father also encourages us during the Year of Faith to study the documents that were produced at the Second Vatican Council as well as the **Catechism** of the Catholic Church (Porta Fidei # 11).

CCSJ's Panel Discussion yesterday - Saturday 13 October - focused on various aspects of the Catechism: The Creed, The Sacraments, Moral Teaching and Prayer.

In Porta Fidei #13, the Holy Father also encourages us to learn about the great figures of our Faith e.g. **Mary, the Apostles, the saints, martyrs, and confessors.**

The *Note with Pastoral recommendations for the Year of Faith* makes some useful recommendations for action at various levels within the Church. It begins by reminding us that "the foundation of Christian faith is "the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." (Pope Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, 1)...

"In our days too **faith is a gift to rediscover, to cultivate and to bear witness to**" because the Lord "grants each one of us to live the beauty and joy of being Christians." (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Jan 2010).

The *Note* ends by reminding us, as the Holy Father does in Porta Fidei, that : "Faith is both a personal and a communal act: it is a gift from God that is lived in the communion of the Church and must be communicated to the world."

We do not journey through life alone but in community; therefore, let us, as Christians, "share that which is most dear to us: Christ Jesus, the Redeemer of mankind, Universal King, 'leader and perfecter of faith' (Hb 12:2)." (Note from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith).

These words call to mind the Holy Father's reminder to us in Porta Fidei #10 that "...faith implies **public** testimony and commitment. A Christian many never think of belief as a private act. Faith is choosing to stand with the Lord so as to live with him. This 'standing with him' points towards an understanding of the reasons for believing. Faith, precisely because it is a free act, also demands social responsibility for what one believes. The Church on the day of Pentecost demonstrates with utter clarity this public dimension of believing and proclaiming one's faith fearlessly to every person. **It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that makes us fit for mission** and strengthens our witness, making it frank and courageous."

So, what are some of the ways by which we can link living our faith and respecting life?

- See previous Newsletters (June 2012) – examples of Good practice: raising funds and renovating/building small homes for the elderly; computer literacy classes for the elderly, blood bank/donors, St Benedict's health fair, missionary work – Renessa Tang Pack, recycling projects, tree-planting, Eucharistic Celebration and breakfast with the elderly on the UN International Day of the Aged;
- Give example of woman died in flat in London – stayed undiscovered for months – adopt a granny/granddad project;
- St Theresa's – Woodbrook – building stairs for 'marooned' woman;

- Student whose mother had an ectopic pregnancy – Sangre Grande – parishioners helped;
- Forming groups in your parish or join existing groups such as SVP, LWC, Zion Community, ELC to visit: the sick, those in hospitals, the shut-ins etc.
- Being alert to signs of domestic violence; those suffering from depression etc. Too often, e.g. like in Roshan's case, neighbours heard the child crying from beatings and did nothing until it was too late. There have been other cases like that – e.g. the boy who was thrown out of a window by his stepfather and who died – he could not do his Maths homework. Neighbours used to hear him getting licks – and his mother. No one called the police – even anonymously. We cannot afford to walk on the other side. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. I don't expect you to endanger your lives but there are hotlines that one can call.
- Befriend your local Catholic school. Many of our schools are not performing as they should. I am a member of the Inner Wheel of St Augustine and the members go into schools and read to children who are having difficulty reading. Offer your services. Stewardship requires that we share our time, talent and treasure;
- Collecting clothes, books etc to give to SVP;
- Being prepared to lend a listening ear to those who need someone to talk to – sometimes that's all some people need. I recognise that you may not be a counsellor, but we should find time to listen to our brothers and sisters who are in pain;
- In your parish you could develop a list that can be circulated informing people of the telephone numbers and addresses of key places – I remember Sr Theresa Vialva, St Paul's, Couva parish, and a team developed such a database so that in an emergency people will be able to seek assistance – it should be localized so that local services can be accessed e.g. social services etc.

And to underpin all our work we must pray incessantly. Do not underestimate the power of prayer. Prayer, like the Eucharist, will nourish us for the journey and help us to discern how we should *See, Judge, and Act* as witnesses to our Faith. Prayer is essential if we are to build God's Kingdom of truth, justice, peace, love and freedom.

May we be led by the Holy Spirit to be true witnesses to our Faith; to proclaim our Faith with courage and conviction in our homes, in our communities, throughout Trinidad and Tobago and the world.

May God bless us all.