

Address by His Grace Edward J Gilbert, Archbishop of Port of Spain on the Occasion of a Fundraising Dinner on Friday September 9, 2005, at The Crowne Plaza at 7.00 p.m., hosted by the Catholic Commission for Social Justice, under the Distinguished Patronage of President George Maxwell Richards.

I want to introduce this address with a statement of affirmation for and gratitude to the members of the Social Justice Commission. What the Commission has achieved since the Synod session in 2003 is simply astounding. It's efforts have attracted the attention of not only leadership at various levels in Trinidad and Tobago but also of the Cardinal Chairman of the Justice and Peace Commission at the Vatican, Cardinal Martino, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, officials at UNESCO and the approximately 3000 people each month who use the website of the Commission for information on justice issues.

The outreach and availability of the Commission and its standing committees to the Archdiocese has raised consciousness about race, violence, crime, capital punishment, restorative justice and prison reform. It is about to build restorative justice centre with a half way house for ex-prisoners that is to be named: The Anthony Pantin Reintegration Centre. It has developed a LINK program connecting the parishes of the Archdiocese with the Commission. It has helped parishes and the Regional Seminary reflect on the spirituality of justice.

The list of achievements is not complete but what has been stated is significant. I asked the Chairperson of the Commission, Leela Ramdeen, to express my pride and my gratitude to each member of the Commission for their commitment to justice.

Building a Fraternal Society

I have been asked to share some thoughts on the theme of the evening: Building a Fraternal Society. Let us begin to reflect on the issues from the viewpoint of theology. It is axiomatic in the world of theology that God has chosen people to understand, to explain, to apply and to communicate the values of God's plan for creation. We are some of those people. The values of justice, love, community, and peace are the values that form the foundation of a fraternal society.

From a pastoral perspective, the challenge of building a fraternal society is complicated enormously by lack of trust among people that produces either systematic suspicion or overt hostility. From a pastoral perspective, the principal way to confront the challenge is to create opportunities for collaboration through which trust can develop.

When collaborative experiences produce positive results, then those who took the risk of trusting others can then invite 'their people' to do the same. The dynamic can be repeated until a trusting community emerges. Only when that dynamic becomes rooted in the lives of people can the substantive reasoning for building a fraternal society be presented to the people for consideration in a progressive and persevering manner.

The Formula for Building

What am I saying? I am saying that building a fraternal society is not just an intellectual endeavor or a head trip. In fact, I am saying that, in my opinion, it is a mistake to try to deal with the challenge of building a fraternal society from an exclusively intellectual base e.g. by distributing documents or an exclusively spiritual base e.g. by recommending prayer.

Each of those elements must certainly be a part of the response. However, they must follow experiential contact based on trust that brings relatively small numbers of people together to work on specific projects. From that experiential interaction small successes can be achieved that can motivate additional collaboration and a deepening of the cycle.

Just in case what I have already said sounds overly theoretic, I want to offer two examples of initiatives in Trinidad and Tobago over the last two years that have had positive results. They are showing potential for broader application.

1) The Community Intervention Transforming Youth Program (CITY)

This program was an initiative of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice and the St. Martin de Porres Parish in response to the tensions and violence present in the Gonzales Community. The goal of the program is to promote justice where the people live. The program began with individuals that were soon formed into groups. It now involves a substantial part of the community. The process is now called Pride in Gonzales.

The concrete results, to mention just a few examples, of internet cafes, new patterns of community policing and community participation in community planning has been so successful that it is now ready to be transplanted to other areas where personal trust is low and human need is high. The experience of being together has led to the experience of talking together and then to the experience of risking trust and working together.

2) The Principles of Fairness Movement.

Obviously, the Principles of Fairness Movement is a much broader issue. It is an issue with enormous national implications. I mention the Principles of Fairness program second because in my opinion it must follow the pattern of the CITY program: individuals to groups to the national community. Why do I make that proposal?

Because the Principles of Fairness Movement must deal with the same obstacle that the CITY program had to deal with in the beginning: people do not trust each other. The trust issue must be confronted first. Providing opportunities for relatively small gatherings of people to confront the trust issue can lead to a willingness to deal with specific projects which will help establish, in the minds of the people, what the Principles of Fairness can achieve in and for the Nation.

The Principles of Fairness cannot be just an intellectual outreach nor can piety be its exclusive foundation. The academic community and the various religious traditions must be active participants in the process, but **its success will depend on enabling trust and convincing the hearts of the people.** The process must be ‘individuals to groups to the national community.’ As that process is facilitated – and it is being facilitated – the possibilities for building a fraternal society, a just and fair society increase dramatically.

Conclusion

Tonight this ballroom is filled with intelligent, caring, experienced and influential people. I thank you for supporting the Catholic Social Justice Commission. I invite you to continue your support for the efforts of the Commission as it tries to build a fraternal society. I encourage you also to support the Principles of Fairness Movement as it tries to build a just and fair society.

I want to close this address as I opened it with a reference to theology. I said: “it is axiomatic in theology that God has chosen people to understand, to explain, to apply and to communicate God’s values for creation.” We are some of those people. I truly hope that each person here tonight will accept the challenge. The quality of life of the Nation needs your sustained commitment to justice.