

*Address by His Excellency Professor George Maxwell Richards TC, CMT, Ph. D, President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 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 His Excellency.*

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Mr. Raymond Edwards  
His Grace Archbishop Edward Gilbert  
Former President Sir Ellis Clarke  
Ambassador Christopher Thomas  
Ms. Leela Ramdeen, Episcopal Delegate/Chair, Catholic Commission for Social Justice  
Other Members of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice  
Members of the Media  
Other Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very pleased to be with you this evening at your fundraising dinner. The theme that you have chosen for this gathering, “Building a Fraternal Society”, resonates with me as you have brought to the fore a subject that needs to be considered with sincerity and truth, particularly at this juncture in our nation’s development.

I say this because we would be burying our heads in the sand if we were to say that we have, at this time, a cohesive society. In fact over the last few years, there have emerged, from certain quarters, positions and attitudes to the contrary that have sounded alarm signals in many quarters.

The word “fraternal” seems hardly descriptive of the overall picture of our society that is presented for public scrutiny. I have no doubt, however, that the discord that makes headlines is not the whole picture. I am convinced that, by and large, the majority of our people live together in relative harmony, which, incidentally, is not newsworthy.

We take these relations for granted and make no effort to advertise them. And one might well ask “Why should we? This is how we live”. Those of us who regard one another simply as compatriots without agendas that are suspect, live our lives in community, peaceably and do not see one another as threats. But there is a kind of frenzy that threatens to catapult us unto another stage, a stage of war with one another that will do none of us any good.

This we must resist with every fibre of our being. We must determine to eliminate the forces that would push us in that direction come off that path, if we have already set foot there and mobilize our resources in building a society together.

We have seen enough of the horrors of ethnic wars in other countries which have left an indelible scar on the twentieth century. This century must redeem the last and certainly, we, in Trinidad and Tobago, must not provide such or other evidence of man’s inhumanity to man. We ought not to say, smugly, that it cannot happen here, rather that

it should not. Unfortunately, even as we are scandalized by internal strife in other countries, we are faced with criminal activity of an order unprecedented, from which our country must be rescued, by all of us, working together.

We must be careful not to throw our hands up in despair. Instead, we must do whatever we can, each one of us, to turn things around. We have the ability to do so and this is where building together can have impact. The answers to the challenges that we face do not lie in one quarter. Activity on every front is necessary and a pooling of human resources, of gifts and talents as well as financial resources will certainly help.

But first of all, we must have a common purpose. If we are agreed that this is the country that we must build, if this is where we wish to settle and leave a legacy to our progeny, then we must eschew division. That is not to be regarded as *carte blanche* to deny our several cultural expressions based on ethnic background. Our diversity can and must enhance.

In whatever we do, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is important that we build standards of excellence that will last. However, while doing all that we can to improve the groups to which we are affiliated, our concern must go beyond our particular interests to those who may not be a part of our immediate circle. Such competition as there must be, should not degenerate into unseemly rivalry, but should serve instead as iron sharpening iron, raising the bar always, to attain the best that we can possibly give to our country.

Tribal instincts, not only in the context of race, must not be allowed to determine our course, because, in the final analysis, they can limit our possibilities. What must arrest our consciousness is that every person touches another life in some way, but we cannot give what we do not have. That being so, those of us who can make a positive difference in any life must seize the opportunities presented or seek opportunity to impact other lives. We must impart to others so that they, in their turn, can do the same.

In a family, while there are similarities among siblings, so there are distinguishing characteristics that set each one apart. They have no choice in determining brother or sister, nevertheless they are family and if they choose to work together, they can build reputation or gain notoriety.

So it is too in societies. We can sometimes choose our neighbours, but generally we can hardly determine the composition of the population of our countries. Sadly, though history, even very recent history, records some of the most heinous atrocities committed in attempts to do just that, in ethnic wars to which I referred earlier.

This is not our portion in Trinidad and Tobago. The cards are stacked, so to speak, in our favour. The challenge is to mobilize and so direct our resources that we shape a society that embraces the population at all levels and demonstrably takes care of the concerns and makes provision for the welfare of all its citizens.

In this Herculean task, official policy is quite properly expected to take the lead. Outside of official circles, others must play their part. Captains of industry, nongovernmental and community based organizations, clubs or societies and ordinary folk, all have something to contribute. Many will discover what resides within them and how much they have to offer.

In the process, dignity will be restored to some, discovered by others and we will come to know that we are all givers and we are all takers, in varying circumstances.

Let me make it clear, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am not suggesting that we are embarking on a new task. Far from it! We have made considerable gains since achieving independent status, building on what we inherited from colonial times. My concern is that we should secure those gains and guard against being distracted by discordant voices seeking to tear us apart because of myopic self interest.

The Catholic Commission for Social Justice, according to its mission, seeks to “awaken the social conscience of all citizens and create an empowered population so that all can be active participants in bringing about the Kingdom of God here on earth”. Your promotion of people-centred development in fulfillment of your mission is very much in step with what is required in our country.

I am sure that you are ever conscious of the wisdom of these words of Pope John Paul II: “when you are anguished about the sufferings of other peoples and you make an effort to alleviate the great need for help, you help your own peoples to abandon the smallness of egoism, the asphyxia of abundance and the emptiness of ways of behaviour that at times are unworthy of human beings”.

Those words were directed at Pontifical Mission Societies, but bear relevance to our own internal circumstances. It is my hope that you of the Commission will be guided by the ideas put forward through John Paul II, as you do all that you can to build a fraternal society here in Trinidad and Tobago, living up to your own motto “The way forward together”.

May God bless your efforts. May God bless our nation.

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen for the courtesy of your attention.