



A REFLECTION BY THE CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE ON THE GENERAL ELECTIONS 2010

A TIME TO ACT

As we prepare for General Elections which will take place in Trinidad and Tobago on May 24, 2010, CCSJ urges the national community to reflect on the principles and values that are essential to build a just society.

The announcement of General Elections should arouse in all of us a new sense of responsibility to contribute to the welfare and well being of our country, through sober and thoughtful participation in the democratic process.

It is a time for us to cast aside cynicism and frustration, disinterest and disenchantment, in favour of participation in determining the leader's policies and values that will guide our nation.

As members of the Catholic Church and as members of the electorate, the basic starting point for our participation in the electoral process must be a clear moral code and value system. Pope John Paul II provided us with such a foundation when he stated as follows in the course of his visit to the United States of America in 1995:

"Democracy needs wisdom. Democracy needs virtue..... Democracy stands or falls with the truths and values which it embodies and promotes. Democracy serves what is true and right when it safeguards the dignity of every human person, when it respects inviolable and inalienable human rights, when it makes the common good the end and criterion regulating all public and social life." {John Paul II, Departure Statement, Baltimore, *Origins* 25:18 (October 19, 1995): 318.}

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

Trinidad and Tobago needs to stem and reject the growing culture of violence which is bedeviling our society. Violence in the society is fed by multiple forces which include the disintegration of family life, the prevalence of substance abuse, the availability of weapons and the prevalence of gangs.

Confronting this growing culture of violence in our country requires more effective action on a number of fronts: curbing the easy availability of drugs and deadly weapons; supporting community approaches to crime prevention and law enforcement; pursuing swift and effective justice without vengeance and effective reform of our criminal justice system; attacking the root

causes of violence including the lack of value and virtue formation, poverty and family disintegration.

The social doctrine of the Catholic Church recognizes that the human person is not only sacred but social and that the first and vital cell of the society is the family. Strong families build strong societies.

As we chart the course for developing and strengthening our society we need clear and practical answers to the question: How can our society better support families in transmitting to family members strong moral and ethical values and how can we assist them in their social responsibilities in finding and affording decent education, housing and health care?

Trinidad and Tobago is blessed with an extraordinary wealth of natural resources. Human development, the creation of sustainable livelihoods and the search for the common good are some of the fundamental criteria which must be used to guide and re-orient public policy and economic decision-making in the national interest.

THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON AND THE COMMON GOOD

We believe that every proposal and policy should be measured by how it touches the human person, whether it embraces or diminishes human life, human dignity, and human rights; and how it advances the common good. The key to a renewal of public life is re-orienting politics to reflect better the search for the common good (i.e. reconciling diverse interests for the well being of the whole human family in accordance with the natural law). If politics ignores this fundamental task, it can easily become little more than an arena for partisan gamesmanship, the search for power for its own sake, or interest group conflict.

We also ask the candidates to trust the people of Trinidad and Tobago enough to reveal to us their true values and vision, without resorting to empty rhetoric, futile criticism and polarizing tactics based on ethnicity.

FAITH AND POLITICS

The religious community has important responsibilities in political life. We believe our nation is enriched and our traditions of pluralism enhanced when religious groups join with others in the debate over policies and vision that ought to guide our nation.

The Church has a proper role and responsibility in public affairs flowing from its gospel mandate and its respect for the dignity of the human person. The challenge for the members of our Church is to be principled without being ideological, to be political without being partisan, to be civil without being weak, to be involved without being used.

We hope that this reflection can contribute to the political vitality in our country, both in terms of citizen participation in the election debate and the electoral process, and the integrity and accountability of those who seek and hold public office.

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION

We urge the Catholic community to engage in the electoral process and to promote a spirit of responsible political involvement and commitment to the common good. We urge all citizens to use their franchise by going to the polls. We encourage them to assess the campaigns as well as the media coverage and to take an informed stance on the candidates and the issues. If this election campaign is to engage the values of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the campaigners and voters alike must share the responsibility for making it happen. We urge each person to become involved in the campaign or party of their choice, to learn about the issues, and to inform their conscience. In the Catholic tradition, citizenship is a privilege; lay participation in the political process is an obligation. We are not a sect fleeing the world but a community of faith to renew the earth. Our call to political responsibility is neither a partisan nor a sectarian appeal, but a call to re-invigorate the democratic process as a place for debate about what kind of society we want to be, about values and priorities that should guide our nation. Pope Benedict XVI says:

"The Church cannot and must not replace the State yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rationale argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy, without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper." {Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), No.28a}

We invite all citizens to pray, to join with us to proclaim the Gospel of life, to protect the least among us and to pursue the common good. It is a time to act together for a better Trinidad and Tobago.

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