

Leela's speech for International Women's Day 2014: Inspiring Change

Good afternoon, brothers and sisters. Today, around the world, people are observing IWD. The theme this year is **Inspiring Change**. Each of us is called to be a 'change agent', to inspire change. As Archbishop Harris says in his homily on Ash Wednesday (see Catholic News this weekend), "If you want change, then change...be the change TT needs. The nation will only change when all of us seek conversion seriously, a conversion of the heart. A transformation of the heart will ensure a transformation of the nation...Catholics, called to be agents of transformation by virtue of their baptism, would first have to work on themselves." Only then can we truly inspire change.

Each of us is made in God's image and likeness with an inherent dignity that is inviolable and inalienable – given to us by God. Yet, on a daily basis, the dignity of millions of women continues to be violated. We cannot afford to be silent bystanders. We have a duty to work for change.

We are put on this earth to make a difference; to live a purposeful life; to realise our potential; to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You and I are called to be holy, virtuous women; to strive to be perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect (Mt 5:48). There are key aspects of Proverbs 31 that we should note e.g. **the virtuous woman**:

20: holds out her hand to the poor, she opens her arms to the needy.

25: She is clothed in strength and dignity...

26: When she opens her mouth, she does so wisely; on her tongue is kindly instruction.

31: ...Let her works tell her praises at the city gates.

Let people know you and be inspired by you because of your works.

"Each year International Women's Day (IWD) is celebrated on March 8. The first International Women's Day was held in 1911. Thousands of events occur to mark the economic, political and social achievements of women. Organisations, governments, charities, educational institutions, women's groups, corporations and the media celebrate the day.

<http://www.internationalwomensday.com/theme.asp>

Why dedicate a day exclusively to focus on the world's "women"? In adopting its resolution on the observance of Women's Day, the General Assembly cited two reasons:

1. to recognize the fact that securing peace and social progress and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms require the active participation, equality and development of women; and
2. to acknowledge the contribution of women to the strengthening of international peace and security.

As the UN states: “For the women of the world, the Day's symbolism has a wider meaning: It is an occasion to review how far they have come in their struggle for equality, peace and development. It is also an opportunity to unite, network and mobilize for meaningful change... **is there really inequality between men and women?** In one word, yes.

“It is true, though, that recent decades have seen progress. Women's access to education and proper health care has increased; their participation in the paid labour force has grown; and legislation that promises equal opportunities for women and respect for their human rights has been adopted in many countries. The world now has a growing number of women as policy-makers.

“However, nowhere in the world can women claim to have the same rights and opportunities as men. They continue to be among the poorest overall: the majority of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor are women. On average, women receive between 30 and 40 per cent less pay than men earn for the same work. And everywhere women continue to be victims of violence, with rape and domestic violence listed as significant causes of disability and death among women ...worldwide.” (<http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/days/women/why.asp>)

Being a virtuous woman means being concerned to promote the dignity of each person; being concerned about justice for all. It was Martin Luther King Jr. who said: “Injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere.” We must act NOW to rid the world of injustice that stultifies the development of women and girls in our world. Now is the time to stand in solidarity with our sisters in their time of need. Here are some issues that need to be addressed urgently:

- **the lack of respect** for women and girls e.g. as shown in many advertisements in the media. (Also refer to lack of respect by some women for themselves – e.g. during the carnival season – lewd dancing etc. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit).
- **Poverty and social exclusion** (which is wider than poverty UK's Social Exclusion Task Force defines social exclusion as follows: “Social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas have a combination of problems, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing).
- the lack of access to **education generally or to quality education** for many women and girls: illiteracy, unemployment, organ selling, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, poor health, high crime environs, and family breakdown
- the many forms of **Domestic violence** e.g. psychological/emotional, verbal, sexual, financial/economic and physical abuse, which occurs across all communities regardless of social class, religion, ethnic background and age
- **child marriages**
- **forced marriages**
- **honour related violence e.g. honour killings**
- **bonded/forced labour**
- **dowry abuse/dowry killings**
- **suicide/depression**
- **gender selection** – pre-natal selection and selective abortion - link to

foeticide/abortion – some hospitals in UK have decided not to tell families the gender of the child after ultra sound

- **euthanasia** – see Belgium: children now
- **land rights**
- **inheritance and marriage laws**
- **discrimination against Indian widows**
- **incest**
- **human trafficking**
- **alcoholism**
- **drug abuse**
- **rape and rape within marriage**
- **HIV/AIDS etc.**

What can you and I do to effect change? You know the saying: Change the world, Lord, and start with me. Change begins with each of us. And, as the writer Jean Paul Richter said: “Do not wait for extraordinary circumstances to do good; try to use ordinary situations.”

Here in TT there are countless women and girls who have inspired change and who continue to work to build the common good. I urge you to be inspired by those women who have gone before you and who have attained their goals. Let them inspire you to forge ahead and set goals that do not put a ceiling on your potential. The sky is the limit in terms of what you can achieve. God made each of you with unique talents which He does not want you to hide under a bushell. Let your light shine like a beacon in the darkness that threatens to overwhelm us. Live your faith with pride and draw from it the values and virtues that will help you to realise your true vocation – which is to live holy, virtuous, full, productive lives.

Set yourself goals and keep a steady eye on them. Be prepared to work hard to achieve them. Nothing worth having is obtained easily. Remember the words of the US poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 – 1882)

“The heights by great men and women reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but they while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night.”

(For example, there are women like **Rhonda Maingot**, who was born into a rich family but who was so concerned about the social ills she saw around her that she gave it all up and founded, together with **Rose Jackman**, Living Water Community. Today, their work has spread not only in TT but in various Caribbean islands and further afield e.g.

LWC ministries include: Trinity Communications Network, Marion House, Drug Rehabilitation Centre, Food for the poor, Refugee Ministry, Family and trauma relief counselling, Visits to the sick, housebound, giving Holy Communion monthly as part of the Soufriere parish’s team of Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, Children’s Prayer Meeting, Teenagers’ Prayer Meeting: ‘*Living H₂O Youth*’, Soufriere and Fond St Jacques, Adult Prayer Meetings: Mondays with the Parish group H.O.P.E. , in Soufriere and Wednesdays at the parish of St Philip and St James, Fond St Jacques, A weekly

prayer session with the students of the Soufriere Special Education and Rehabilitation Institute. A daily, 90-minute radio Catholic programme, produced and presented by our Household members. As with our other ministries, we receive no fee for this, Service on various parish committees and the parish councils of the parish churches in Soufriere and Fond St Jacques. And there are women like **Deborah de Rosia** (Eternal Light Community) – Goshen House, Mary Care Centre etc. Women like Pat Bishop, the late Senator Corinne Baptiste, Folade Mutota (WINAD – Women’s Inst. For altern. Dev)

And what about your mothers? Sisters? Aunts? Etc?

What can you do to be a change agent? E.g.

- **Live by the tenets of you faith** – be an example, a mentor and role model that others will wish to emulate. See the pocket card that I have distributed: *Let your Christian values guide you in your decision-making*. Be a person of virtue. If you want change, work for justice. We are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Let your light shine in all your endeavours.
- **Anchor yourself in prayer**. We can do nothing without God’s grace, so we need to pray constantly for God’s grace. Pray for personal conversion and for conversion of hearts generally – that God’s children will do His will; and that we will use our God-given talents to build the common good.
- **Demonstrate your love for God and neighbour in a tangible way**: little things count – show that you care about others; Practice “*random acts of kindness*” every day (see poster). Simply saying good morning/afternoon/evening helps; helping the elderly; common courtesies matter. All that we have is GIFT from God, so share what you have with others. During Lent - and throughout the year, remember our focus: *Good works, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting*. Walk with the 2 feet of Christian service: *works of mercy and works of social action* (see poster). It is not enough to do charitable works, we must strive to remove the root causes of injustice.
- help to strengthen/transform your own **family life**
- play a part in **parish life** – don’t just go to Church on Sundays and rush home afterwards. Our parishes should be beehives of activity with various Ministries serving the needs of the community. To which Ministry(ies) do you belong? How is your parish reaching out to e.g. the differently abled, the poor and socially excluded, the sick etc?
- **Encourage others** e.g. your peers – to do good and avoid evil; support people who are going through difficult times – a kind word helps. Encourage people you know who abuse drugs/alcohol to seek help for their addiction. We have a duty to lead others to live holy, virtuous lives.
- **Challenge people to do better/to live better** e.g. to care for the environment; to be kind to the poor, lonely, shut-ins etc.

- Use the **parables in scriptures** to tell stories that will inspire others e.g. the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son etc.
- **Share ideas** that you have gleaned from books you have read

*St Joseph's Convent (SJCSF), San Fernando, UNESCO Club
in collaboration with the Pro-Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help
and the Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ)*

Present

Creating the Virtuous Woman - the Proverbs 31 model

Commemorating International Women's Day 2014

Date: *Saturday 8 March 2014*

Venue: *The Band Stand, Harris Promenade, San Fernando*

Time: *1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.*

Programme

<i>National Anthem</i>	<i>Pannist</i>
<i>Opening Prayer</i>	<i>Msgr Christian Pereira, Parish Priest, Our Lady of Perpetual Help</i>
<i>Welcome Remarks</i>	<i>Mrs Jennifer Manwaring Ag. Principal SJCSF</i>
<i>The Concept</i>	<i>Ms. Leela Ramdeen, Chair, CCSJ</i>
<i>Viewing of Displays</i>	
<i>Interactive Mural and Chalk Art Session</i>	<i>Mrs. Deborah Hutchinson,</i>

Ms. Sabrina Sinanan