

## **The role of the family in nation-building**

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Good afternoon, my brothers and sisters. It is an honour to have been asked to address you at your AGM on this important topic. It is timely, as we mark the occasion of TT's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence that we stop and take stock of how our families, and by extension, our nation, are doing. Are we moving in the right direction?

French thinker Ernest Renan in his book, *What Is A Nation?*, says: "The soil provides substratum, the field for struggle and labour: man/woman provides the soul. Man/woman is everything in the formation of this sacred thing that we call a people. Nothing that is material suffices here. A nation is a spiritual principle, the result of the intricate workings of history, a spiritual family and not groups determined by the configuration of the earth."

There are many people in TT who have the vital ingredients for nation building and for promoting peace and prosperity: morals, values, spirituality, respect for the rule of law and so on. Territory alone cannot make a nation; it is people that make a nation. We must nurture our people/families to be responsible citizens with character who will put their shoulders to the proverbial wheel to build our nation. The secret to nation building is unity. Let us embrace the concept of unity in diversity. This is OUR motherland which we must build together.

Proverbs 29:18 tells us that "Where there is no vision, the people perish." What kind of vision do we have for our families in TT? Are we building strong families? Do our families have an opportunity to participate in the social, economic, physical and cultural activities of our nation – indeed, in nation-building?

There is no doubt that many of our families in TT are faring well – notwithstanding all the challenges they face. There are many homes in which mother and father recognise that marriage and family are not matters of contract and convenience but matters of commitment and integrity. Their homes are places of holiness and happiness for all who enter; places for growing and for sharing, for music and for laughter; for prayer and most importantly, for love; homes where children are constantly enriched and inspired by the beauty and the bounty of their parents unconditional love for each other. This is not to say that many single/divorced/widowed parents, grandparents or guardians who have children in their care are not enriching, inspiring and nurturing them. However, our vision must be for a world in which all children can grow up with a mother and a father.

Sadly, our world has moved far away from this ideal. On Father's Day in 2010 President Obama said that "Nurturing families come in many forms, and children may be raised by a father and mother, a single father, two fathers, a step father, a grandfather, or caring guardian."

I agree with the writer Jim Daly who responded to the President's comments stating that "the fatherhood "effect" is not cumulative—two daddies are not better than one; nor is a mother dispensable or replaceable. Instead of expending precious (and finite) energy and resources on selling the merits of two- father or two-mother families, the administration would be wise to invest and encourage the loving presence of both a mom and a dad."

**(See Catholic Catechism: 2207 – 2211: THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY**

**“2207** The family is the *original cell of social life*. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability, and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honour God, and make good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society.

**2208** The family should live in such a way that its members learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor. There are many families who are at times incapable of providing this help. It devolves then on other persons, other families, and, in a subsidiary way, society to provide for their needs: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world."<sup>12</sup>

**2209** The family must be helped and defended by appropriate social measures. Where families cannot fulfill their responsibilities, other social bodies have the duty of helping them and of supporting the institution of the family. Following the principle of subsidiarity, larger communities should take care not to usurp the family's prerogatives or interfere in its life.

**2210** The importance of the family for the life and well-being of society entails a particular responsibility for society to support and strengthen marriage and the family. Civil authority should consider it a grave duty "to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family, to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality, and promote domestic prosperity."

**2211** The political community has a duty to honor the family, to assist it, and to ensure especially:

- the freedom to establish a family, have children, and bring them up in keeping with the family's own moral and religious convictions;
- the protection of the stability of the marriage bond and the institution of the family;
- the freedom to profess one's faith, to hand it on, and raise one's children in it, with the necessary means and institutions;

- the right to private property, to free enterprise, to obtain work and housing, and the right to emigrate;

- in keeping with the country's institutions, the right to medical care, assistance for the aged, and family benefits;

- the protection of security and health, especially with respect to dangers like drugs, pornography, alcoholism, etc.;

- the freedom to form associations with other families and so to have representation before civil authority.”

**If we read the signs of the times**, we will know that all is not well for a significant number of our families. Here in TT, over the last few decades the TT family has been undergoing a profound and far-reaching transformation. In many ways, family structure and family values have been changing. The extended family is eroding rapidly. Also, there appears to be an anti-family mentality that is sweeping our world. This is all part of the throw-away society that threatens our stability. Human life and human dignity are being compromised daily. Family life and family values are often debased. Yet we must not give up. Now is the time to strengthen our resolve to stand by our families.

As is stated in the Project Building Strong Families (<http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info/>): “The importance of strong families and the impact they have on the quality of life in communities and the nation are becoming more obvious every day. The home sets up a pattern that spills over into all other aspects of our society. On Tues 12 June, Carl Anderson, grand knight of the Knights of Columbus, reminded an international gathering in Dublin, Ireland, at the 50<sup>th</sup> Eucharistic Congress, that “The family is the primordial school of love.”

The family is the bedrock of our society. In his Independence Day address to the nation on 31 Aug 1962, Dr Eric Williams stated clearly that **“the strength of the Nation depends on the strength of its citizens.”**

Citizens don’t just fall out of trees; they belong to families, so we need to strengthen family life. Strong families build strong communities which in turn will build a strong nation. A strong family is one in which:

- There are good communication/interaction skills and members know how to talk and listen to each other.
- There is mutual love, care and respect for each other.

- Parents set an example of ethical and moral behaviour and consistency of values. The “do as I say, not as I do” brigade will always fail to build a strong family (see boy and porn)
- There is mutual help among family members for human growth and growth in faith, values and morals.
- Parents take an interest in their children’s lives and seek to guide and counsel them – always remembering to praise and reward good behaviour and to reprimand bad behaviour in a manner that does not break a child’s spirit or spawn violent behaviour in the child e.g. Some time ago I was in a Supermarket and I heard a woman tell her young child who wanted her to buy a pack of biscuits for him: “Put it back or I will buss two wood in yuh tail!” We must remember that children learn what they live.

It is in the family that our young people first learn moral and spiritual values and virtues which give meaning to their lives. Blessed John Paul II reminded us years ago that: “The future of humanity passes by way of the family.” He referred to the family as “a society in its own original right”, and the “first and vital cell of society.”

It is in the family that we will develop a culture of life; a spirit of nation-building. To love one’s nation, one must have love in one’s heart. Love for God, love for neighbour and, indeed, love for oneself. The Mission Statement of the Catholic Church in TT since our Synod, states that we are building the *Civilization of Love*. When we take God out of our lives, we take *love* out of our lives because God IS love.

The challenge for nation-building is to ensure that you as religious leaders, strive to assist families to instill in the hearts and minds of our individuals, families and communities the kind of love that will propel us to see God in our neighbour and motivate us to build a nation based on God’s love, justice, peace, truth, and freedom. Some time ago Mother Teresa replied in response to a question: “What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family.” How do we demonstrate our love for our families?

Dr. Nick Stinnet, expert in family life who retired from the University of Nebraska, identified **characteristics of successful families** in his *Family Strengths Research Project*. The patterns found to be important included **mutual appreciation, quality time, effective communication, commitment, and religious orientation** (<http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info/>).

In 1981 Pope John Paul II wrote an Apostolic Exhortation entitled: “**The Family in the Modern World**” ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-)

[ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](#)) in which he highlights the importance of family love:

“...the essence and the role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has as its mission to guard, reveal and communicate love...” It is parents who are charged with communicating this love of God and of neighbour to their children. It is only through love that that community of people called “the family” can promote the full development of personhood in each member. In his **Letter to Families** (1994), Pope John Paul II rightly stated that the family “remains a social institution that neither can nor should be replaced: it is the ‘sanctuary of life.’ He said that marriage and family life find themselves “at the centre of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love.”

At the beginning of June Pope Benedict XVI delivered a speech in Milan where he went to open the 7<sup>th</sup> World Meeting of Families. The theme was: “The family, work and celebration”. He concluded his address by highlighting the importance of faith and the family in today’s society. Although he speaks from a Catholic perspective, his words are of significance to members of various faith communities. Inter alia, he said that the family is humanity’s “principal asset.” On 6 June he reviewed his trip to Milan and focused once again on the ‘family’. He said “the future of humanity absolutely depends on the family, which he says is humanity's "principle patrimony," the "community of life and love which God Himself has willed for man and for woman...It is within the family that we experience for the first time that the human person is not created to live enclosed within himself, but in relationships with others; and it is in the family that the light of peace is first set aflame in our hearts so that it might illumine our world.” He referred to the identity of the ‘family’ as “a communion of love, founded on marriage and called to be a sanctuary of life, a domestic Church, a cell of society.”

In Milan he highlighted “the importance of legislation and the work of state institutions being ordered to the service and protection of the person in his various aspects, beginning with the right to life, the deliberate suppression of which can never be allowed, and the acknowledgement of the proper identity of the family, founded on marriage between one man and one woman.”

He emphasized his call for a defense of family time, "threatened by a kind of “overbearance” of work commitments." He said we should make time for God and time for family.

The Pope also recalled his appeal for Church communities that are more and more family oriented. He said: "The 'triad' of family, work and celebration [are] three dimensions of our lives that must find a harmonious equilibrium in order to build a society with a human face."

"From Milan," he concluded, "a message of hope was sent out to all the world, substantiated by

lived experience: **it is possible** and joyous, even if demanding, **to live faithful love 'for ever'** which is open to life; it is possible to participate as a family in the mission of the Church and in the building up of society."

We should use this opportunity today to pay tribute to the thousands of families that have helped to build our blessed nation over the past 50 years and longer – from whichever part of the world they originated (read poem – My Agi who crossed the Kalapani).

We must thank God, first of all, for creating and bringing together on these twin-islands so many wonderfully talented ethnic groups and religions.

In spite of all our challenges and difficulties, we have much to be thankful for. Many see TT as a model in harmonious living; of the ways in which the world can truly build unity in diversity. While we acknowledge that we still have a long way to go to bring all our talents to bear on nation-building, we live, to a great extent, in peace with each other.

It was **Winston Churchill** who said: *"There is no doubt that it is around the family and the home that all the greatest virtues, the most dominating virtues of human society, are created, strengthened and maintained."*

And it is these virtues that a nation needs if it is to be built on strong foundations. At a recent regional conference organized by UNESCO – Management of Social Transformation – for Ministers of Social Development in the region, **Prof Karl Theodore**, UWI, presented a paper on "The role of Values in Development."

I agree with him that "values are important because it is values which determine the problems that will be given priority and it is values that substantially determine how we respond to problems. Having the facts about a problem is crucial but the decision to do something about it, and the way we choose to respond to it reflect what values we hold dear. There is no question that when faced with choices it is our values that guide what we do. Our attitudes are also value driven...

"values are often linked to ethics: precisely because of what values are they will always lead us to judgements about human behaviour. We routinely make judgements about standards such as honesty, truthfulness, and compassion...*development is primarily a matter of values.*"

Our former Archbishop Edward Gilbert, C.S.Sp., used to say: "Virtues inform values and values influence behaviour."

(The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that: *"Virtue is a **habitual** and firm disposition to*

*do good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself/herself ... 'The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.'* (St Gregory of Nyssa)" (no. 1803).

The New Zealand Education Office Ltd. has produced a very helpful document entitled: Taking the high ground: Virtues and Values in Catholic Schools (see: <http://www.nzceo.catholic.org.nz/media/resources/publications/schools-valuesvirtues.pdf>). In this document Values and Virtues are defined as follows:

**“Values** are internalised sets of beliefs or principles of behaviour. Not all values are consonant with moral or ethical behaviour, even though they may be strongly upheld. Nor do people necessarily act in accordance with the values they hold.

**“Virtues** are qualities of moral goodness or excellence. Many virtues can be derived from universally accepted principles. To be effective, they need to be nurtured and practised so that individuals live by them, not merely believe in them.)

**It’s important to note that children must have opportunities to practise virtues and values – at home, at school, in the community, so that they will become a ‘habit’.**

As Archbishop Joe Harris said to members of CCSJ at our retreat last year: “We are all creatures of custom; we do what we are accustomed to do. Good customs are virtues; bad customs are sins. The predominant custom in your life defines you e.g. if you have a habit of lying, you are a liar. If you have a habit of stealing, you are a thief. It is important to find out what the predominant custom is in your life.” As religious leaders, your task is to nurture in members of your respective faith communities the predominant custom in the life of a member of your faith community. For a Christian, the predominant custom, His Grace reminded us, is to love God above all things and secondly, to love our neighbour.

And while we strive to build families within our various faith communities, the State has a duty to do so also. The first of our Government’s 7 interconnected pillars for sustainable development is people-centred development. I agree with our President, His Excellency, **Prof George Maxwell Richards**, though, who said in his Divali address on 31 May that "we are not all that we can be. Indeed, it seems that we are some considerable distance from that state. Moreover, it is difficult to dispute that some of our hard won gains have been eroded and perhaps we cannot all plead innocence.”

He warned that "The part that family values and customs have played, in this regard cannot be set aside and we ignore it at our peril. The family as a bulwark against the ills of the demeaning conditions in which Indian immigrants found themselves, played a seminal role in the survival and flourishing of Indian norms and cultural expression. These, in turn, have contributed many positives to our growth as a nation."

"We may ask whether the security of strong family ties, which stood out as a good example, is under threat today. Are the traditions of respect, particularly for elders, of thrift and of industry still alive, or are they being eroded by the pull of contemporary existence which sometimes makes no room for these attributes? To what extent are these positive characteristics, rooted in family, still available as an important element in the cultural mix that distinguishes us?" he asked.

The same could be said about certain other ethnic communities in TT.

People-centred development must be based on sound values which human beings usually develop within families – whether it's in single parent homes, the nuclear family, or the extended family (which has all but eroded today). But parents cannot inculcate in the hearts and minds of their children values such as love, integrity, honesty, fairness, justice, peace, truth, forgiveness, and so on, if no one nurtured these in them in the first place.

The old people used to have a saying: "Show them you were brought up, not dragged up." There is deep meaning in these old time sayings. Sadly, today, with more and more socially displaced children/street children and barrel children on our streets, they have to "drag" themselves up without any guidance, mentors or role models.

(Tell story of Radio interview with boy just out of YTC – how did you become a bandit... barrel child). I am a Board Member of Credo Foundation for Justice....)

Family life is under constant attack today from various social ills. A few months ago I met a 22 year-old man in a take-away restaurant. He was limping and his foot was bandaged. He told me he had been shot in the foot. He asked if I would give him some money if he sang me a song.

I agreed. His song struck a chord in my heart. He sang about his life; a life of trials and tribulations.

He sang about holding on to Jesus as the only one who could save him. And as we talked he received a call on his cell phone. It was his 6 year-old son whom he had left at home alone. "Doh worry bout he, man, he cool!" he said, as I expressed my concern for the welfare of his son.

There are many families in T&T that are hurting and need healing. We live in a country in which many young children are left on their own. Leaving a cell phone with a young child so you can keep in touch while you're out will not cut it as far as good parenting is concerned.

There are a number of issues relating to males in our society that we continue to ignore e.g. the lack of male role models at home, in schools, in communities; the emasculation of some of our



men; the prevalence of gangs and gang warfare – these gangs mainly comprise males; the fact that about 80% of students at UWI are female – where are our young men?

Archbishop Edward Gilbert said in his New Year's Eve homily a couple of years ago: "The nature of the family is to form people, to train them to learn values, help them to learn virtues so they know how to live their lives...I ask the grandparents to teach the grandchildren if you see the parents not teaching them. Parent, teach your children, if you do not teach them how are they going to learn?"

Sadly, for a variety of reasons, many grandparents are not part of their grandchildren's lives. Indeed, if we are to focus on family life, we need to look at how we treat the older generation in our families; we must focus on intergenerational justice also. We are called to respect all life. You will have read Dr Fuad Khan's statement on 4 June about the number of our elderly citizens whose families "willfully" abandon them in hospitals where they remain as they have no where else to go. E.g. he said that "out of 800 elderly patients admitted to St Ann's Hospital, 600 were what he described as "social cases" — people left to fend for themselves... There may be legitimate instances, among the hundreds of elderly people left behind in local hospitals, of families who are genuinely unable to care for their aged, but it's possible that the public healthcare system, with the best of intentions, may be abetting scams to cheat infirm citizens out of their pensions and property.

Shaliza Hassanali's report in The Guardian on 3 June states that "the same problem of abandonment exists at the Port-of-Spain General Hospital, the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex (EWMSC), the San Fernando General Hospital and at the gerontology unit at the St James Medical Complex.

"Health Minister Dr Fuad Khan on Thursday confirmed that the dumping of senior citizens is on the rise. Senior citizens are being dumped at public hospitals by relatives—some heading off on holidays, others unable to cope with the pressure and stress of being full-time caregivers.

"Khan said some patients at St James have been living there between 20 and 30 years. "People are just living at St James. They have free room and board. People come and take their pensions and everybody happy except the taxpayers. "St James has been a dumping ground over the years for elderly people. These people have families who do not want to take care of them. They leave them in St James and disappear."

He said the management at St James was also at fault for turning a blind eye. Khan said it was time the relatives of the elderly live up to their responsibilities."

As the Guardian Editorial on 4 June states: "It's also clear that there is a need for formalised public-sector geriatric care and residency. Director of the Division of Ageing Dr Jennifer Rouse

notes that the population is greying and the **156,000 people now listed as elderly** will rise by one percent each year.

“Dr Rouse anticipates a need for greater capacity in residential care. Of the 131 **homes for the elderly** in Trinidad and Tobago, **85 are functioning** and there is a need for greater capacity to manage the needs of the growing elder population. Dr Rouse envisions government and private-sector collaboration on residence-care model homes and more growth in the elder-care sector over the next few years.

“These new facilities might be purpose-built or adapted from existing structures and offer a real home for older, infirm citizens who find themselves without the support systems necessary to continue a dignified life. The window for creating these improved facilities and for establishing a viable, well-monitored geriatric-care sector in both the public and private sectors is rapidly closing as the numbers of elderly people who will need care steadily increase beyond existing capacity. What’s clear is that the current situation is intolerable...”

**\*\*\*Sadly**, there appears to be no regulatory systems to monitor the quality of care in homes for the elderly. A significant number of senior citizens in some of these homes have had one of their legs amputated because they have diabetes and it appears that the necessary care is not forthcoming in some of these homes. According to Dr Kenwyn Nicholls who is working with CCSJ on a Project entitled: *Diabetes: Prevention and Management*, we have one of the highest levels of amputations in the Western hemisphere per capita due to diabetes.

Recently (12 March 2012), Director of the Diabetes Outreach Programme with the Trinidad and Tobago Health Sciences Initiatives (TTHSI), Dr Paul Ladenson named diabetes as possibly the leading cause of blindness and foot amputations in Trinidad. Dr Ladenson is Professor of Endocrinology, Medicine, Pathology, Oncology, Radiology and Radiological Science at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Maryland, USA. According to the Express Newspaper, “he emphasised that this country faces an epidemic that if left unchecked has significant economic, human and health consequences.

“President of the Academy of Diabetes Clinicians of T&T, Dr Claude Khan, stressed that there is an explosion of diabetes in this country and called for more resources to be invested in the primary care settings for diabetes care, to prevent serious complications from the disease.”

Diabetes is not the only challenge facing our families in TT. Many are being buffeted and blown by winds of darkness and death. We must be firm in our resolve not to give in but to hold fast to our belief that God made us, His children, and our families for a noble purpose. Your task as religious leaders, and indeed, of all of us, is even more important in the face of moral relativism,

individualism, greed, selfishness and secularism which seek to push religion off the public stage and relegate it to the private realm.

**Attempts to redefine terms such as “gender” and “family” are being pushed by the very people who wish to push religion off the public stage.** Archbishop Harris’ words are instructive. He said to the media recently (10 June) that “The world has progressed in all sorts of ways. Men have gone to the moon. But now people have begun to think that we can do without God. That is the problem, we cannot do without God.”

Now is the time for faith communities to speak out and reject policies that are anti marriage between a man and a woman and against the family. (Refer to Draft Gender Policy – which religious groups believe is seeking, inter alia, to redefine the term ‘gender’ which will pave the way to legalise same-sex relationships. The Minister of Gender, Youth and Child Development has also made it clear that she supports homosexuality and abortion).

As Archbishop Joseph Harris said to the media when he was speaking out against homosexuality and same-sex unions on 10 June: “If we facilitate sinful structures, which are against God’s law, we are teaching our young people that it’s okay to lead a sinful life. We must turn back to God.” He made it clear that the Catholic Church does not consider sexual orientation a sin. It is when one acts on that orientation that it becomes a sin. It is the act that is a sin. He warned that TT would be going down “a dangerous path” if same-sex marriages were made legal.

If we are to nurture families who can build our nation, we must understand that God imprinted in the hearts of humankind a moral order; a natural law. Our Catholic Catechism (1954) states that “This law has as its first and general principle ‘to do good and to avoid evil’...No law made by man can override the norm written by the Creator without society becoming dramatically wounded in what constitutes its basic foundation.”

You will have read about the Press Conference on Friday 8 June, organised by **Lawyers for Jesus and Caribbean Advocates**, which was supported by many faith communities. Those of us who were present expressed our concern about statements made by senior Cabinet officials about issues relating to abortion and homosexuality.

**Pope Benedict XVI** warned on 9 March 2012 about “the powerful political and cultural currents seeking to alter the legal definition of marriage... marriage and the family are institutions that must be promoted and defended from every possible misrepresentation of their true nature. The contemporary crisis of marriage and the family, has led to grave societal problems bearing an immense human and economic cost.”

The Catholic Church makes it clear, though, that marriage is between a man and a woman. Pope Benedict stressed that "sexual difference cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the definition of marriage,"

"Threats to freedom of conscience, religion and worship" in the United States, he said, "need to be addressed urgently." ([www.religionnews.com](http://www.religionnews.com))

**(Professor Robert George** of Princeton University said: "Marriage is the community formed by a man and a woman who publicly consent to share their whole lives, in a type of relationship oriented toward the begetting, nurturing and educating of children together. This openness to procreation, as the community's natural fulfilment, distinguishes this community from other types.

As **Archbishop George Pell**, Sydney Australia, said: "Marriage between a man and a woman always has an inherent capacity for, and orientation towards, the generation of children, whether that capacity is actualized or not. Marriage makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution to society because a stable, loving marriage provides the best conditions for raising children. Through marriage, children are able to grow up knowing that they were created through an act of intimate love and with the knowledge that their mother and father have committed to each other for life. Marriage also contributes uniquely to society in modelling the way women and men live interdependently, recognising the equal dignity, beauty and value of the other, and committing to seek the good of each other. The family based on marriage is also the best social framework for the promotion of inter and intra-generational biological connectivity, which is an important and vital social good. "The right to marry and found a family" is affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). International law has always understood and affirmed the enduring, unchanging truth that marriage is a life-giving union of a man and a woman.)

**\*\*\*Do not underestimate** the battle for the souls of our family members. The lure of moral relativism is real. Edward Sri says:

"According to a relativist, all truth claims are subjective, merely reflecting one's own feelings, opinions, or desires. A relativist might say, "You can have '*your* truth' and I can have '*my* truth', but there is no '*the* truth' to which we are all accountable... Morality is not up for grabs. And in striving for excellence we must always seek to embody *the* truth, which, for Christians, above all reflects Jesus Christ – who is the same today, yesterday, and forever."

As we move into our 51<sup>st</sup> year as a nation, we would do well to heed the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who said: "**Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.**"

Let us start treating families as if they are truly families so that we will help them to become what they are capable of being – mothers, fathers, sons, daughters and so on. If we are to “become” what we are, children of God, made in His image and likeness, we have to do as **Archbishop Joseph Harris** says, and move from veneration to imitation – for Christians this means imitation of Christ. To “become” what we are, Christians must walk in the footsteps of Christ; we must “live” Christ - which means we must love as Christ loves us.

I would hazard a guess that the main reason for many of the problems in our families is a lack of agape love (self- sacrifice; selflessly serving to build the common good). As Pope Benedict XXI said in his encyclical: “God is Love”, “love is probably the most misunderstood subject in history.” We need a new vision of love – the love that God provides.

In a world of selfishness, greed, individualism, moral relativism; in a world in which attempts are being made to push God off the public stage and into the private realm, it is little wonder that our families are in crisis.

We will only build a strong nation if religious leaders lead by example showing those in their particular faith community how to live their faith in the marketplace.

The IRO can and must do more to help our people live their faith in community because God has made us all “family”. The challenge for us is to move from a vertical relationship with God to a horizontal relationship with Him as we see Him in our family members and in the community at large.

Our parents need to develop life skills and parenting skills. Schools and faith communities could do more to support parents in this regard. Families face myriad challenges and we need to acknowledge the lived situation of individuals/families (single parents families etc), reach out to assist them and seek to empower them. (Give example of single mothers in part of TT who could not use an ATM and who were being exploited by youths who took a third of their wages to get the money out of the ATM for them).

We need all hands on deck to address the many social ills that pervade our land: incest, domestic violence, crime, corruption, human trafficking and so on.

As people of faith, we cannot afford to watch silently as the gap between the rich and the poor widens into a yawning gap. Our poverty level was 16.7% in 2005. Recently, Minister Ramadharsingh said at a Regional Meeting of Ministers of Social Development (UNESCO MOST meeting), that the figure now stands at 21.8%. Yes, 21.8% of our people (and it could be higher when the 2011 figures of the Survey of Living Conditions are published), live in poverty.

Christians will know of the parable of Dives and Lazarus. Well, right here in TT there are many families living like Lazarus waiting for the crumbs to fall from the table of rich people like Dives.

My father is Hindu. He tells us of a story in Hinduism. A poor man came to the house of a King seeking something to eat. The King threw him a blade of grass saying: "Eat that!" The poor man died clutching the blade of grass. Before the King died, he was sure that he would achieve Moksha and return to the Godhead as he had been a very good King. However, when he died this was not the case. He was reminded of his mealy mouthed response to the needs of the poor man. The blade of grass had grown into a field and he had to eat the grass of the entire field before he could attain Moksha. Our neighbour is he/she who has need of us.

I am sure that in each of our religions there are similar stories that exist to remind us of how to live righteous lives.

Our nation is only as strong as our families and the individuals within our families. Many of our families are socially excluded. There is a sense of urgency in the air. Sociologists see strong links between crime and social exclusion. Social exclusion has been defined in a number of different ways. For example,

"Dr. Lynn Todman, director of the Institute on Social Exclusion at the Adler School of Professional Psychology, suggests that social exclusion refers to processes in which individuals and entire communities of people are systematically blocked from rights, opportunities and resources (e.g. housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation and due process) that are normally available to members of society and which are key to social integration.

The outcome of multiple deprivations that prevent individuals or groups from participating fully in the economic, social, and political life of the society in which they live.

The sociologist, Hilary Silver (associate professor of sociology and urban studies at Brown University, Providence, USA) provides another definition of this sociological term: "Social exclusion is a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal, normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live" (Wikipedia).

The Social Exclusion Unit (1997) in England defines social exclusion as follows: "Social exclusion is a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown"

These different dimensions of social exclusion are mutually reinforcing. Unless we address these issues, our nation will not make much progress. In their Pastoral Letter on Crime and Violence, the Catholic Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference highlighted the risk factors that impact on family life. We would do well to address these.

And what about the education of our families? We cannot say that we have free education when there is no level playing field and some children are denied education because their parents do not have the money to pay taxis to take them out of areas in which the roads are so bad that taxis hike up the price to e.g. \$10 per person or if students miss schools to help their parents sell in markets etc.

Our forebears saw education as the way out of poverty. However, our education system leaves much to be desired. Each year we celebrate the achievement of the top 100 SEA students while the system continues to fail thousands. At a recent Conference, Mr Arthur McShine read some of ALTA's statistics on illiteracy in TT which are at variance with the official statistics which are outdated. Families cannot help to build our nation if many of them are illiterate. Pope Paul VI called illiterate people: "**Starved spirits**". Sadly, there are untold numbers of starved spirits in our land.

Our PM said on her return from a CARICOM meeting a few months ago that she is determined to build TT as an innovative, creative, technologically driven knowledge-economy. But the economy cannot build itself. We need people to build it; creative, innovative thinkers? Are our educational institutions churning out such individuals? And how many of those who exit our system are staying in TT or in the region? At the 26th Dr Eric Williams Memorial Lecture held at Central Bank, Sir Shridath Ramphal delivered a scholarly paper entitled: Labouring in the Vineyard. His paper is included in his recently published book entitled: "Caribbean Challenges." Inter alia, he recounts the history of our region in terms of our inability to establish a regional Federation. He raised some pertinent questions. For example, he asked: "Could we not have done better in keeping at home the over 60% of our tertiary educated people who now live in the OECD countries?" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)) The mission of the OECD is to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

(OECD - 34 member countries span the globe, from North and South America to Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. They include many of the world's most advanced countries but also emerging countries like Mexico, Chile and Turkey. We also work closely with emerging giants like China, India and Brazil and developing economies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Together, our goal continues to be to build a stronger, cleaner, fairer world).

We don't seem to have a plan as a nation to motivate our people to stay and help build the country. Even some of the gains we have made are being eroded because of the scourge of crime and violence, corruption etc.

Good governance is about so many things, including using the resources of the nation for the benefit of the people. The Catholic Church believes that the economy should work for the people. The people are the object; people are more important than things. What is the use of having tall imposing buildings when so many of our people go hungry daily, when the differently-abled face endless hurdles to accomplish even simple tasks, when our health care system remains deficient in so many ways, when so many families are dysfunctional and there are no real safety-nets for them. You know the saying about giving a man a fish. Well, we keep giving our men and women fish and are not teaching them how to fish.

- Tell the story of the babies down the river. You, our religious leaders, are the ones to help with the analysis of our situation and to help find solutions.

And then there are issues facing our single mothers from particular communities who feel that in order to 'hold' on to their man, they will do 'what it takes' to survive. So, they have a child or two with a man, who sometimes leaves and they move to another to help feed their children, have more children for the new person in their life and that person moves on after the child is born. Often, the children feel the brunt of domestic violence at the hands of their stepfathers. As we have seen, sometimes this has been fatal. As George Herbert said: "One good father is worth more than a hundred school principals." Tomorrow is Father's Day. I wish you all Happy Father's Day. Spare a prayer and a thought for the thousands of our children who have no fathers in their lives.

The mental health and well-being of children are dependent on the presence or absence of a number of variables that have a powerful impact on their lives. The presence/involvement of fathers, just like mothers, is one variable that always matters. Parenting roles should complement each other. Committed fathers are essential to the growth and development of families. Fathers can be important contributors to their children's lives. According to psychotherapist Will Schutz, a good relationship between father and child needs 3 things: involvement, respect and influence, and affection. Involved fathers contribute to children's confidence, competence, and emotional, intellectual, and social well-being. It is important that a child comes to understand that his/her father is available and trustworthy in a variety of different situations.

Members of the IRO must do more to promote responsible fatherhood e.g. by establishing community/faith-based fatherhood programmes. Encourage fathers to take an active and positive role in their children's lives.



And how are we preparing our boys for fatherhood and our girls for motherhood (give example of UWI Panel Discussion on Domestic Violence – girl – “If yuh love de man yuh go take de licks.” – how are we socializing our youths?)

*Every child brings us God’s smile and invites us to recognise that life is His gift, a gift to be welcomed with love and preserved with care always and at every moment.* (Pope Benedict XVI)

These words came to mind as I read about the pain that **6-year-old Josiah Governor** must have gone through at the hands of his 25 year-old stepfather, now before the Court charged with his murder. On January 25, he reportedly told police that he used a piece of PVC pipe to beat Josiah because he was not paying attention during a maths lesson. It is also alleged that Josiah was thrown through a window after being beaten.

In CCSJ’s media release in January we reported on a case in which another man is alleged to have thrown a 10-month-old baby through a window because the child was crying. He also beat the baby’s 3-year-old sister with a baton and beat their mother.

It is an indictment on our T&T society that we continue to fail to protect our innocent, defenseless children. The *Express* Editorial (Jan 25) sums up the situation in T&T:

“In Josiah’s death...the whole society is culpable. Josiah’s family failed to fulfil their most basic duty — protect the life of their child. The community failed him, by refusing to get involved even to the extent of reporting the matter to the police. The teachers at Josiah’s school failed, either by not noticing that anything was wrong, or failing to deal with the issue if they did notice. The social services failed from the time Josiah was born, by not identifying the mother and her baby as at-risk. And all the adults in Trinidad and Tobago who believe corporal punishment is justified have tacitly contributed to the cycle of violence which all too easily leads to the killing of children.”

As Dr David Bratt said in his Guardian column on 31 Jan 2012 entitled: “Lost children, every child for himself”: “Another bad week for children in T&T. We seem to be having so many of them: weeks of the lost children for whom no one speaks. ...the name, Joshua, will now join the list of the Akils, Seans, Daniels, Amy, Emilies, and so on, whose deaths we have come to regret.

“After being beaten up with a piece of PVC pipe, Joshua was thrown through a window of his “home” to crash land on the ground 10 feet below. The perp said “he could not believe that a few strokes with the PVC pipe could have resulted in the death of the boy.” A 25-year-old handyman, allegedly used the PVC pipe because Joshua was not paying attention during math lessons.

“The autopsy at the Forensic Science Centre in St James revealed that Joshua died from blunt force trauma. In addition to being undernourished, he also had a healing fracture of the right arm

which the child suffered last December. The body was covered with bruises. Not surprisingly the neighbours were aware of the child being repeatedly beaten. No one ever called the Police. Every child for himself. Those that survive the brutality must feel kindly towards the rest of us. The week ended with the suicide of a 12-year-old and the waterboarding of a nine year old. Everton Vasquez, had recently received an “F” grade in class. Because of this he had not received any presents for Christmas or his birthday; he was described as “full of rage and anger at times” and had just been “belted for not listening.” He hanged himself with an electrical cord. One wonders why he failed school and why he was “full of rage and why he was “not listening.” Could he have been depressed? Do children get depressed? Yes, they do. Could he have been one of the 50,000 or so school children who do badly at school because they have some sort of learning problem? Dyslexia? ADHD? Could he perhaps have been a genius who was dissatisfied with the slow pace and deadly routine of school work in T&T? Yes, all possible. Then there was the local case of waterboarding. A staff member of a private school in Maraval allegedly attempted to flush the head of one of the students down a toilet, a physical impossibility at the best of times.

“Nine-year-old boys are quite strong and agile so much force must have been required. In addition to the danger of drowning, or at least the sensation of drowning, waterboarding can cause extreme pain, damage to lungs, brain damage from oxygen deprivation, other physical injuries including broken bones and bruising due to struggling against restraints and lasting psychological damage and death. In this particular case, infection from the contents of the toilet is another possibility. Waterboarding upgraded? Really, what could this child have done to warrant such a reaction? There can be no excuse for this. In between all this action, we had the Daniel Guerra Murder Inquiry taking place. Daniel is the little eight-year-old boy who went missing in February last year, after he was sent to a parlour to buy Lucozade and whose body was found in a drain two days later...It is all quite too much.”

T&T needs to put in place Ofsted-type School Inspections (UK), which would include inspections of private schools, to determine the quality of teaching and learning in all educational institutions. School Supervisors are not trained to inspect schools. The welfare of our children is too important to leave it to chance. Our hearts are not fully open to receive God’s gifts.

Last February that Marlon King was sentenced to death by hanging for the murder of four-year-old Amy Annamunthodo. “On May 15, 2006, King tied Amy's hair to a piece of cloth and strung her to a door frame at his Ste Madeleine Road, Marabella, home. He then gagged the child with a knotted plastic bag and punched her about her body with his clenched fists 20 to 30 times. King and Amy's mother, Anita Annamunthodo, took the child's corpse to the hospital that night.

The attending doctor found the child's body had already stiffened and bore bruises covering her body and cigarette burns to her chest, abdomen, back and genitals. The pathologist later found lacerations, tears, bleeding, scrapes and bruises on Amy's brain, neck, eye, chest, shoulder, palm

and back of her right hand, her heart, lungs, spleen, liver, adrenaline glands, kidney, abdomen, pelvic area, upper, mid and lower back, and bottom.” (Express)

\* And on Easter Sunday (Apl 2012), **two-year-old Aaliyah Johnson** was pronounced dead at the Siparia health facility. The autopsy showed she was beaten to death - she suffered blunt-force trauma to the abdomen, which ruptured her liver. Her 18 year old mother is before the courts charged with killing Aliyah by cuffing her and rupturing her liver. She allegedly taught the child to drink beer and beat the child to death when she drank some of her beer. Where were all the religious people in the community? Who was looking out for the child? Today so many could say share the horror stories of this little child’s short life, yet no one came to her aid. We all have to take some of the blame. If we are not part of the problem, let’s become part of the solution.

See Express report on 14 Apl by Carolyn Kissoon : “In delivering the homily, Fr Martin Sirju said Aliyah joined a long line of children who have died in violent attacks. He said in an era where science and technology were developing tremendously too many children were becoming victims of abuse.

“Sirju said the only solution was through education and religion. "Education is not reaching the poor and without education our options are reduced. Too many poor children are without an education and they are left out of society," he said. Sirju said uneducated people become angry and violent. "People with little or no education become angry, particularly young boys. This also increases the number of angry women and Aliyah was a victim of violence," he said.

“Sirju said a number of the country's women become pregnant before the age of 18. "Parenting is not a responsibility to take lightly. It is the most important responsibility that a man and woman ever has. And it is something many people cannot handle," he said. Sirju said religious organisations and community centres should offer lessons on proper parenting.

"Sometimes we seek help when it is too late. Let religious bodies and community centres be a place where people can go to learn these skills. Community centres should not be places for entertainment only, but learning. There is an urgent need for some kind of widespread parenting training in every town, village, city in this country," he said.

We live in a culture in which neighbours do not assist by contacting the authorities – until it is too late. Neighbourliness has gone through the window – fear of retaliation by the aggressor has caused us to ‘mind our own business’. However every child’s life is our business. We have to bring back love. There are hotlines that exist. We must encourage people to use these. Our police service also leaves a lot to be desired in terms of response times etc.

This is a good time for us to review the values that underpin the lives of our families. For example, my friend was proudly showing me around her new house when we opened the door to her son's room. She thought he had gone out. There he was watching porn – he is 14 years old. She was so ashamed that she started to quarrel with him. He retaliated by saying: “When daddy does it, you don't say anything, do you?” Yes, children learn what they live. Our parents must model the kind of values they wish to inculcate in their children.

Too often, though, we call for a return to traditional family values without calling the various authorities to demonstrate that they value families. Action is also required in our schools/educational institutions which must do more in the curriculum to promote character development, conscience formation and values/virtues education. (Refer to the VVFP programme in Catholic Primary schools – now incorporated in material produced by the Catechetical team).

\*\*\*I make an urgent plea to all of you today, to set up ministries in your faith communities to reach out to at-risk families and children and to be advocates for them. The sanctity of life and the dignity of each person are at stake here.

As the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, UK, states: “The future of any community depends on its ability to ensure the health and well-being of the next generation... All children deserve an equal opportunity to experience healthy growth and development. When child abuse and neglect interferes with that opportunity, we put our future at risk.”

While we need our Government to put in place and implement legislation, policies, a fully functional Children's Authority and appropriate infrastructure to protect the nation's children, we, our brothers' and sisters' keepers, must also take action to promote justice for them. We can make a difference; we can prevent child abuse.

One of the most shocking reports I have read about recently is in Newsday on 5 June 2012 (Miranda La Rose). The headlines read: **More moms abusing kids.**

“A publication, *Situation analysis of children and women in Trinidad and Tobago* has reported a growing trend in child abuse, and that mothers were the main perpetrators of physical abuse in the homes. “A high level of sexual exploitation in Trinidad and Tobago,” involving mainly sex with females under 16 years, and high incidence of rape, have also been reported. The publication also reports an increase in violence in schools, particularly bullying, at the secondary school level.

“The findings and recommendations of the situation analysis was launched yesterday by Khin-Sandi Lwin, UNICEF Representative based in Barbados at UWI's Health Economics Unit, St Augustine. The analysis was funded in the sum of US\$120,000 with UNICEF providing the sum

of US\$70,000 and UWI providing the remainder. The research and analysis were conducted by UWI Health Economics Unit.

“Minister of the People and Social Development, Dr Glenn Ramadharsingh, who delivered the keynote address noted that the findings and recommendation will be a key to the work of his ministry and the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development.

“**Professor Karl Theodore**, who led the research and analysis, gave an overview of the findings and recommendations which found that 32.9 percent of mothers were responsible for physical abuse to children in the home, compared to 26.8 percent by fathers. Both parents were responsible for 7.4 percent of physical abuse, stepfathers and stepmothers account for 11.4 percent each, and 10.1 percent by others.

“These findings, Theodore said, corresponded with the UWI’s survey which found that “24.4 percent of mothers or care-givers in Trinidad believed that children need to be physically punished.” The data covered children mainly between the ages of two to 14 years.

“According to the report, children between the ages of eight and ten appear to be more vulnerable to abuse than children of other age groups. It found too, that girls more than boys, regardless of age group, tended to be more susceptible to abuse.

We are not the only ones in TT struggling to grapple with issues relating to family life. In London recently, the **Anglican Bishop of London**, the Rt Rev Richard Chartres, writing in a Bible Society pamphlet about the origins of the word ‘jubilee’ (in relation to the Queen’s Jubilee celebrations) said although people were better off in many ways than in 1952 when the Queen ascended the throne, “inequality had grown and material progress had been at the expense of communal life with relationships within families, communities and society more strained, fragile and broken than people cared to recognise.

**"Literally millions of children grow up without knowing a stable, loving, secure family life - and that is not to count the hundreds of thousands more who don't even make it out of the womb each year....Promiscuity, separation and divorce have reached epidemic proportions in our society....**Perhaps, then, we shouldn't be surprised that depression and the prescription of anti-depressants has reached a similarly epidemic level.” He said the Queen’s jubilee provides an opportunity for society to seek to “rebalance the scales” in society and focus on how society can “reset” the situation.

There is much in what he says that speak to us here in TT. **Can we ‘reset’ the situation here?** As we observe our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence, we need to take stock of where family life is and where it’s going. Will we stand up for the Family and work to save our families? Investing in families is investing in society as a whole. Therefore, let’s **invest in our families and build a**

**society in which all families are treated with dignity and respect.** And while we accept that there is a crisis in family life in TT, let us at least stand up for a definition of “marriage and the family” that is in keeping with our religious beliefs i.e. that marriage is a union between a man and a woman and that homosexuality is contrary to the natural law and to God’s plan for humankind. When we see other people’s houses on fire, we should wet our own. We do not have to import more of the culture of death that pervades other countries.

Your task as Religious Leaders, is to join forces to stand up for the family and to play your part in passing on your faith to followers of your respective faith communities, encouraging families to live as living witnesses to the faith they say they profess. Only then can we realize the vision of building strong families and a strong nation.

We should not simply look to government for solutions to our social ills. We must also look to our communities for role models and mentors to encourage, challenge and enthuse those who are at risk.

Sadly, as a Vatican II document (Gaudium et Spes, 43, 1965) states, the “split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age”.

The IRO can and must do more to help our people live by the tenets of their faiths in their daily lives so that they can truly be agents of change and, as **Archbishop Harris said, “agents of harmony”**. But this requires us to have a vision about the kind of citizen we wish to nurture in TT. I don’t think we have a collective vision of the characteristics of a good TT citizen. Perhaps this is an exercise in which the IRO can engage the wider community.

As I end I recall that this year we celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence. Let’s remind ourselves of the wise advice from Dr. Eric Williams contained in the speech which he delivered to the nation over the radio on August 31, 1962. Inter alia, he said that

“The first responsibility that devolves upon you is the protection and promotion of your democracy. Democracy means more, much more, than the right to vote and one vote for every man and every woman of the prescribed age.” The following is an abbreviation of what he said Democracy means:

- **recognition of the rights of others**
- **equality of opportunity for all in education, in the public service, and in private employment**
- **the protection of the weak against the strong**
- **the obligation of the minority to recognise the right of the majority**

- **responsibility of the Government to its citizens, the protection of the citizens from the exercise of arbitrary power and the violation of human freedoms and individual rights**
- **freedom of worship for all and the subordination of the right of any race to the overriding right of the human race**
- **freedom of expression and assemble of organization.**

“All that is Democracy. All that is our Democracy, to which I call upon all citizens to dedicate themselves on this our Independence Day. This is what I meant when I gave the Nation its slogan for all time: Discipline, Production, Tolerance. Indiscipline, whether individual or sectional, is a threat to democracy ... **Let us always be able to say, with the Psalmist, behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.**”

John Rohn’s words are instructive. He said: “Your family and your love must be cultivated like a garden. Time, effort, and imagination must be summoned constantly to keep any relationship flourishing and growing.”

Let us invest in our families and do as Pope Benedict XVI said: “support families; reach out to those in difficult marital situations, especially the divorced, single parents, teenage mothers and women considering abortion.” We can and must build a society in which all families are treated with dignity and respect. And let us put God at the centre of our families. Godly families are essential to build a strong nation.

It was Nehru who said that achievement requires character, discipline, united action and the readiness to sacrifice the individual self for the larger cause. Are we ready to do this to achieve our goals? **I thank you.**