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Poverty & Social Exclusion

Sisters and Brothers in Our Lord and Saviour Jesus, the one and true Christ, a pleasant afternoon to all of you. While I wish you a pleasant afternoon, I hope that at the end of this talk we would feel an unpleasantness. An unpleasantness that would tug at our navel string; that we would feel a strong uneasiness; that deep down inside a seed of discomfort would be sown that would begin our personal transformation necessary to oppose injustice and to take action against injustice. Therefore, I hope that my talk would be in keeping with the Mission of Jesus which he pronounced at the start of His ministry on earth Luke 4:18

*The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
For he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor.*

Today part of this good news may sound like bad news and indeed it is bad news. It becomes good news if, in raising our consciousness, we are challenged to reflect on our own reality, analyse that reality and work towards crafting creative and innovative solutions that would transform that reality into our own heaven here on earth.

I wish to take as my reference point and point of departure for this talk the quotation of Jesus which we all quote to justify the existence of poverty and therefore the acceptance that whatever I do, you do, we all do, it seems to be all in vain. That quotation is:

“The Poor you will have with you always”.

In reflecting on this often misinterpreted statement by Jesus – which is often used to justify the unjustifiable, I wish to explore, firstly, the meaning of poverty; to outline its manifestations - globally and locally; to reflect on our mission as Church in eradicating poverty; and to share ideas about what can we do.

What is poverty?

I wish to quote a poem from a World Bank document. Now the World Bank has been the perpetrator of much poverty in the world by its policies and programmes. However, in the last 10 years it has made poverty a target for reduction. The poem reads:

“Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and

across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape.”

What is the reality of this Poverty?

The global statistics on poverty seem to support this oft quoted saying of Jesus. These statistics are meant to make us uncomfortable

- According to the United Nations Human Development Report 2007: There are still around 1 billion people living at the margins of survival on less than US\$1 i.e. TT\$6.30 a day, with 2.6 billion—40 percent of the world’s population—living on less than US\$2 a day.
- Approximately 790 million people in the developing world are still chronically undernourished, almost two-thirds of whom reside in Asia and the Pacific. [*World Resources Institute Pilot Analysis of Global Ecosystems, February 2001*]
- 1.3 billion have no access to clean water. [*The Reality of Aid 2000, (Earthscan Publications, 2000), p.10*]
- 3 billion have no access to sanitation. [*The Reality of Aid 2000, (Earthscan Publications, 2000), p.10*]
- 1.6 billion people — a quarter of humanity — live without electricity [The Reality of Aid 2000, (Earthscan Publications, 2000), p.10]
- According to The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 26,500-30,000 children die each day due to poverty. And they “die quietly in some of the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the scrutiny and the conscience of the world. Being meek and weak in life makes these dying multitudes even more invisible in death.”
- Based on enrolment data, about 72 million children of primary school age in the developing world were not in school in 2005; 57 per cent of them were girls. And these are regarded as optimistic figures.
- Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names.
- Of the 2.2 billion children in the world, 1 billion (every second child) live in poverty. Children who live in poverty are the most vulnerable.
- For the 1.9 billion children from the developing world, there are:

- 640 million without adequate shelter (1 in 3)
 - 400 million with no access to safe water (1 in 5)
 - 270 million with no access to health services (1 in 7)
 - 1.4 million die each year from lack of access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation
- 2.2 million children die each year because they are not immunized

What about poverty in our own Trinidad and Tobago?

In 2005, 16.7% of our population were living below the poverty line (TT\$665 per adult person per month or \$7,980.00 per adult person per year). This poverty rate translated into approximately 210,000 persons living below the poverty line

1.2% of the population was indigent (living below \$255.00 per adult person per month or \$3,060.00 per adult person per year). This indigent rate translates into approximately 15,600 persons indigent in T&T. (These are included in the poverty rate quoted above).

Geographic distribution of Poverty and Indigence by region

The geographic distribution of poverty was highly unequal. The north-east and the south-west of the island of Trinidad were the two poorest areas, but the spread could be conceived in terms of a band that extended from the north-east along the east of the country and then across its south.

In terms of the prevalence of poverty within Regional Corporations, Sangre Grande had the most poor persons per 100 in the population; 39.1 percent of the population in the Regional Corporation of Sangre Grande were deemed to be poor. Other regions of high poverty concentration included Princes Town (30%), the Borough of Point Fortin (24.6%), Mayaro/Rio Claro (26.6%) and Siparia (27.7%),

In the areas of the highest concentration of the population, some of the poorest live within less than two miles from the most well-off. These are figures and statistics we as Church in our parishes must be using to guide our mission and our work.

The Vulnerability Line (Annual in local currency) stood at \$9,975.00. This means those persons who are above the poverty line but only just above such that any shocks in their lives or in the environment in which they live could cause them to fall easily below the poverty line.

The poorest allocated more than 40% of expenditure to food, as compared to the richest who devoted 23.7% of expenditure to food. The average expenditure of the richest was more than eight times the average expenditure of the poorest.

Socio-economic status and gender

38 percent of the poorest households were headed by women compared to a national average of 33 percent.

Socio-economic status and education

As much as 30.6 percent of the population sampled had not passed any exam above the primary level.

Socio-economic status and employment status

The poor were heavily concentrated in elementary occupations among men and in low level services and sales among women. Poor women made up 38.8 percent of the working poor.

Other Findings

The poor were less likely to be in a marital union than the non-poor. Poor women were more likely to have four or more children than their better-off compatriots.

Mean age at first birth tended to be lower for poorer women.

17 percent of children were not getting some of their vaccines. There was a greater prevalence of this among poorer women.

I am sure that the local reality I have profiled, with some statistics, can be supplemented with your own observations and experience of poverty and poor persons in Trinidad and Tobago.

What did Jesus mean?

Let us look at what resources we have in the world

The world's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006 was \$48.2 trillion.

The world's wealthiest countries (approximately 1 billion people) accounted for \$36.6 trillion dollars (76%).

Low income countries (2.4 billion people) accounted for just \$1.6 trillion of GDP (3.3%)

Middle income countries (3 billion people) made up the rest of GDP at just over \$10 trillion (20.7%).

The world's billionaires — just 497 people (approximately 0.000008% of the world's population) — were worth \$3.5 trillion (over 7% of world GDP).

Less than one per cent of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000 and yet it didn't happen

Grain is being used to produce bio fuel

Food has been dumped to maintain market prices while people starve.

Trinidad has a per capita income of over US\$13,000 or over TT\$81,900. In other words if you take the all the money earned in this country and divide it by the population each person would have TT\$81,900 a year. This is very high by all standards and what it is saying is that we have the resources to ensure that no one is hungry and certainly that no one is poor.

The big problem, of course, is that wealth and income are not evenly distributed and we are experiencing the phenomenon of a widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote to the high level summit of heads of state, convened in June 2008 to address the current world food crisis, climate change and bio-fuels. He said: "Hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable in a world that, in reality, has sufficient levels of production, resources and know-how available to put an end to poverty and other social ills and their consequences. (*CN , June 8, 2008*).

The fact that we have the resources globally and locally to ensure that there is no hunger, no poverty, suggests that we are in fact operating in a world order that is fundamentally unjust; a world order that is in direct contradiction to God's Creation.

As Catholics we have a God-given duty to challenge unjust structures and systems that perpetuate poverty, hunger, malnutrition, wars, global warming, crime, child abuse, and the many social ills that plague our countries.

The world leaders have seen the urgency of the task and have set global goals (Millenium Development Goals) for all of us to halve the number of persons living in poverty by 2015 and to halve the number of persons who suffer from extreme hunger by 2015. From the figures I have quoted, this means that we have to reduce global poverty from 2.6 Billion to 1.3 Billion and global hunger from 800M to 400M.

More importantly for us in Trinidad and Tobago, this translates to reducing poverty from the 16.7% or 210,000 in 2005 to 8% or 105,000 in 2015. We will also need to reduce our indigent or extreme poor from 1.2% or 15,600 persons to .8% or 7,800 persons. Must we constrain ourselves to this target or can we say that, given all our resources - human, physical, financial, we must have no indigent persons by 2015?

In this region of San Juan/Laventille with a population of approximately 157,000, according to the 2005 SLC, the poverty rate is 14.7% which translates into approximately 23,000 persons living below the poverty line. So we know what the target is for each region in Trinidad and Tobago.

My dear brothers and sisters the world is faced with the crisis of climate change. We are already beginning to see the warning signs - increased exposure to drought, more intense storms, floods and environmental stress. These are obviously having a greater impact on the poor and vulnerable and are holding back the efforts of the world's poor to build a better life for themselves and their children.

In addition to combating poverty we now have to combat climate change and its effects of reversing the gains made so far in reaching our targets. So that while in 2005 we reduced poverty to 16.7% from 21% in 1992 this figure today would most probably be higher due to rising food prices in the past two years.

So to continue with the definition of poverty as outlined in the poem with which we started: "... poverty is a call to action -- for the poor and the wealthy alike -- a call to change the world so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities."

For us Catholics this call to action has its genesis in scriptures - the old testament and the new testament, and the many writings, teachings and examples of the Church Fathers, and of course the Church's Best Kept Secret – Catholic Social Teaching in Papal encyclicals, especially those in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, Pope Leo XIII.

While we have been acting to remove poverty for hundreds of years, we are called to act in a way that Jesus wants us to act. The poor we would have with us always **unless** we overturn the unjust structures, economic systems, our thinking that perpetuate the poverty and injustice that exists in the world and in our country. We have to take a side as church people. It is either we are for the poor or against them.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said:

"If you are neutral in a situation of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

As followers of Jesus Our first commitment is to the dignity of the human person.

All acts of justice in the world have their foundation in this principle. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, the Church is "the sign and the safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person." (Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World*, 1965, #69.)

This principle is grounded in the idea that the human person is sacred; made in the image of God. The human person is the clearest reflection of God among us. In other words,

when we look into the eyes of the human person, we see there the greatest manifestation of the grandeur of God, the clearest reflection of the presence of God among us.

We are asked never to forget this most basic principle: people are more important than things. Every person, regardless of age, sex, race, gender, religion, or economic status, has the special dignity that comes from being a child of God. Every person is a reflection of the sacred and is worthy of respect.

If the human person reflects God's presence in the world then our second commitment is to work for the **common good which means "to promote the flourishing of ALL human life and all of God's creation."**

In Catholic social thought, the human person is not only sacred, but also social. The very nature of human beings is that we are communal creatures. We live and grow in community, the first of which is the family. We cannot survive without community. Therefore, the dignity of the person makes sense only in the context of the person's relationships with others in the community. Human dignity can only be realized and protected in the context of relationships with the wider society.

This principle has deep implications not only for individual attitudes and behavior, but also for the institutions and structures of society. How we organize society -- economically, politically, legally -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community, whether that be the family structure or otherwise. If our economic system is not designed to serve people it will be oppressive and unjust. If people are not protected by the policies of the state and just legislation there will be anarchy and chaos. If our social institutions are not fueled by life giving values, then they will be sterile and irrelevant.

The obligation to "love our neighbour," therefore, has an individual dimension, but it also requires a broader social commitment to the common good. Everyone has an obligation to contribute to the good of the whole society, to the common good. For, if we are serious about our commitment to the dignity of the human person, we must be serious about humanizing the social, economic, political systems in which the person lives – ensure that the poor and vulnerable are given the opportunity to become self sufficient and self reliant and the population are offered quality health care and education, ensure that people are gainfully employed with just wages, give voice to the voiceless, govern fairly and justly, make local government meaningful through genuine participation.

This is a difficult truth to be taught and realized. The culture of individualism has created a separation of private life from social life. Our country is witnessing a loss of commitment to the social order, escalating crime, road misbehaviour, breakdown in family life, misplaced values, adults disrespecting children and vice versa - all culminating in a general declining willingness to sacrifice one's immediate selfish interests for the good of the wider society. We are no longer our brother's and sister's keeper. This privatized and radically individualized culture is operating on a creed that

Charles Dickens once described as: "Every man for himself, said the elephant, as he danced among the chickens."

When we preside over the failure of creative, people-centred institutions like credit unions and co-operatives then we must weep at how we have become so turned in on ourselves.

PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Our third commitment is to Opt for the Poor. The theme of special care and love for the poor is one that is central to the biblical notion of justice. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasized that God expects those faithful to the covenant to pay special attention to the "widows, orphans, and aliens." In the New Testament, Jesus recalls and carries on this theme. In the Beatitudes, in the story of the last judgment (Mt 25), and in the whole of Jesus' life and teaching it is unmistakably clear that those who seek to follow the way of Jesus must care for the poor in a special way.

John Paul II has spoken of this special obligation to the poor as "a preferential, but not exclusive, love of the poor." He has described this preferential love as a "call to have a special openness with the small and the weak, those that suffer and weep, those that are humiliated and left on the margin of society, so as to help them win their dignity as human persons and children of God" (Pope John Paul II, "Address to Bishops of Brazil," *Origin*, July 31, 1980 p. 35.)

The "preference" or "option" for the poor gives us Catholics a point of reference to examine personal decisions, policies of private and public bodies, and power relationships in terms of their effects on the poor - those who lack the minimum necessities of nutrition, housing, education, and health care.

This moral principle is also closely tied to the values of human dignity and community. In light of the social nature of the person, a healthy community can be achieved only if its members give special attention to those with special needs, to those who are poor and on the margins of society.

Think about a family with a disabled child. That family cannot function in a healthy and mature way unless its members give special attention to that child. So a society cannot function well unless the poor get special attention. And just like the family with a disabled child, if the members follow this principle, the beneficiaries are not only the disabled and the needy, but everyone. All members of the family or the society will be better off. It follows, then, that the "option for the poor" is an essential part of society's effort to achieve the common good.

In John 3:17 Jesus questions: "If someone who has the riches of this world sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?" This has been reinforced by the Church Fathers over the centuries with even stronger words. St. Ambrose said: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor

person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich." Therefore everyone has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for themselves and their family.

Think about relationships between the so called "Developed and Developing Worlds", the Aid through grants that are given by the former to the latter and all the conditions that are attached to accessing and using those grants. Think about who controls the world's resources - even when those resources reside in the "Developing World". Think about our own personal relationship with "possessions" and with those who do not have.

In the face of these "signs of the times," people of faith are confronted with a very basic question: "Am I my brother's and sister's keeper?" These words from Genesis have always been troubling, and difficult to answer. To what extent are we morally and socially responsible for the fate of others, especially those who are in need? This question is difficult enough when it refers to those who are in one's immediate vicinity. But how does one answer that question when it refers to people half a world away? Am I supposed to be the "keeper" of my brothers and sisters who live in places I've never seen, who speak languages I don't understand, and whose culture is radically foreign to my own?

Church teaching answers this question with a resounding "Yes." We must be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters all over the world. This is premised on the belief that all of humanity is interconnected that we all come from the same source of life. Therefore solidarity is a deep commitment and covenant that God has entrusted to each one of us.

John Paul II has been the Church's leading voice on behalf of global solidarity. In fact, he has called solidarity a virtue. It is the virtue, he says, by which we demonstrate "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good ... because we are all really responsible for all." (Pope John Paul II, *On Social Concern*, 1988, #38.)

John Paul went back to the Bible to explain the foundation for solidarity. He writes: "Sacred Scripture continually speaks to us of an active commitment to our neighbour and demands of us a shared responsibility for all of humanity. This duty is not limited to one's own family, nation or state, but extends progressively to all . . . so no one can consider himself or herself extraneous or indifferent to the lot of another member of the human family." (Pope John Paul II, *The Hundredth Year*, 1991, #51.)

Therefore when we act for the common good we are in fact acting out of solidarity with those who are less fortunate than ourselves. We are recognizing that our neighbour is in fact an extension of us, our other self.

There are many initiatives by Catholic groups. We must seek them out and support them. There are also Catholic initiatives that do not go beyond the welfare approach. The challenge for you is to move towards "teaching to fish". This is true solidarity.

Let us therefore remember and find courage in the words of **Nelson Mandela** as we fight this good fight:

“ ...like slavery, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of Human Beings.”

Jeffery Sachs in his book “The End of Poverty” outlined 9 steps to end poverty in our world. I wish to highlight two on which we might take action:

1. Commit to Ending Poverty: Global leaders have committed to halving poverty by 2015. In Trinidad and Tobago this means reducing poverty to 8%. We might also be bold to target 2020 or shortly thereafter as a date by which we will end poverty in T&T. We must work with others in our parishes to halve the rate in the municipal regions in which our parishes are located. This may mean that several parishes will need to collaborate with each other.

This can only happen if we promote **Sustainable Development** – we teach people to fish; we respect the environment; we shift our focus from massive use of fossil fuels to more renewable sources of energy and considerably reduce the degradation related to industrial and other forms of pollution.

2. Make a Personal Commitment: In the final analysis it comes back to us as human beings; as individuals working in unison to form and shape a different society - one that is free from the scourge of poverty. In the words of Robert F. Kennedy –

“Each time a man/woman stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, she/he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope; and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance and poverty.”

Today the Gospel is about Jesus’ parable of the Sower. Our Social Mission informed by the Gospels and Catholic Social Teachings have been with us for centuries. How come our world is in this condition? Where are we planting our seeds? What are we doing in our parishes? Gandhi, a Jesus person of our time, once said: “Think of the poorest person you have ever seen and ask if your next act will be of any use to him.” That injunction captures a basic idea: namely, that the true ethical test of any community lies not in its wealth but in how it treats its most vulnerable members.

Sisters and brothers the poor we would have with us always if we do not challenge poverty creatively, innovatively and with the deepest respect for the dignity and of the human person.

I thank you and God Bless all of us as we work in solidarity with Jesus to rid our world of the inhuman situation of poverty.

