

Sunday 14th September 2008

Social Justice and Youth at Risk: Sr. Arlene Greenidge & Ms. Candice Khan

(Candice's contribution was taken from a speech she first delivered at a SERVOL public speaking exercise in March 2008).

In a world that has become highly individualistic and pleasure-seeking, to some people this celebration of the Exaltation of the Cross must be confusing – even scandalous. Like Good Friday, it is a holy day, the Christian significance of which, in the words of Resenberger, “cannot be bleached out to leave a commercially viable residue”. Christmas, Easter and the other major holy days have all become highly commercialized. But how do you “sell” suffering, injustice, sacrifice, rejection...

In order to understand what we celebrate, it is vital that we recognize that the cross is neither the beginning, nor the end of our salvation story. In today's Gospel reading we are reminded that “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life”. Our faith story begins with a God who loves us... a God who loves us so totally that God holds nothing back. The Calvary story is the story of God's self-sacrifice – the ultimate expression of God's love. Our faith story ends in victory, the “Great Reversal” (Mc Cullough), triumph, recovery, restoration... as death is eventually swallowed up in eternal life.

Today, against the backdrop of this celebration of the Triumph of the Cross, we reflect for a few minutes on the Church's social justice work, specifically in relation to our ministries to children and youth who are socially displaced. To help us better understand some of the dynamics and issues pertaining to this ministry as it exists and to stimulate our imagination in relation to where it needs to go, I would like to invite Candice, 17 years old, to share her experience and thoughts as someone who has grown up in residential care.

Candice's presentation:

My name is Candice Khan. My topic today is: “*Surviving Without Parents.*”

Let me start by asking this question: “How do children end up without parents?” I thought in order to have a child there must be an egg and a sperm that fuses together to make a child. The egg comes from the female and the sperm from the male. So what happened to this mother and father after the birth of the child? Why did they abandon their child? Countless parents are abandoning their children every day for one reason or another. Do parents not think before they act? Is the pleasure of three to five minutes worth letting a child survive on his or her own?

Every child has the right to equality, regardless of race, colour, religion, sex, mental health and physical development.

Children have a right to a name, a nationality, sufficient food, housing, medical care – whether disabled or not – love, understanding and an up-bringing in the spirit of worldwide brotherhood and peace. Every child has the right to free education, protection from cruelty, neglect, exploitation and immediate aid in the event of disaster. However, is it a child's right to grow up with parents?

I will tell you a little about myself. I live at a children's home. I live there, because there were circumstances beyond the control of my mother and father. As a result, I was forced to survive without my parents. This is certainly not easy. I recall while going to school, the discrimination I faced by some of my peers and teachers, the whispers behind my back, or sometimes the unkind comments. When I was sad, it was said that I was sad because I am from the Home or when I was happy, I was too happy for someone from the Home. I was faced with mixed feelings from the Home. I was faced with mixed feelings from people. There were those who felt pity; others scorn; while a lot of people saw an opportunity to do charity work. Others did not take the time to listen and to understand my challenges. Why could people not see me and love me - Candice Khan?

In the Home, I have a lot of opportunities that I may not have had with my parents. Because of my interest in dancing, I was able to pursue it with the financial help of the Home and some kind people. I was able to perform in numerous plays, shows and concerts with people from all strata of society and I was also able to visit many places of interest. I am involved in life-skills training, where I learn new things in communication, sexuality, health and career guidance. At present I am in the Transition Programme that will prepare me for life on my own. There are programmes that would be available to me when I leave the Home. These programmes will provide me with psychological, financial and general support.

I will say that the Home is a good place in which to live; it is full of opportunities. However, in spite of all these opportunities, when the light goes out at night I often cry for my mother and father. I would rather be faced with difficult times and be with them, than the separation I face now. "Mummy" I cry sometimes, "come and get me"!

Young man, young woman, you may have one parent but how lucky you are. Love them; hold them, because some of us do not have even one. Those who have both their parents, I hope today you understand how blessed you are.

You that are like me, without parents, dry your tears and be encouraged. I have over the years dealt with my problems and I am continuing to do so. You should do the same. I do not have all the answers, but I live in hope. We have a lot to offer and, who knows,

maybe one day we will be mothers and fathers. I pray always: “Lord help me to be a good mother so that my children would not have to survive without parents”.

You parents who are here listening to the sound of my voice, where are your children? Are you taking care of them or are they surviving without you? I hope that by sharing my short life story, it has helped you to realize how important your role is as a parent. Your children need you! Would you neglect, abandon or forsake your children or would you put your children first? THANK YOU!

Sr. Arlene continued:

By presenting situations and case histories of children in residential care generally one can see evidence of some “fruit” of the tree of injustice: abuse, exploitation, neglect, and abandonment. The perpetrator(s) might be an individual – an abusive parent, a neglectful teacher, an unconcerned neighbour; or corporate employers, leaders, policy-makers and planners who create and/or sustain systems/structures that perpetuate poverty, destroy family life and promote values that are “death-wieldin”, amongst the young. Unwittingly, otherwise well-meaning persons might find themselves party to unjust systems or actions that threaten the well-being of our children.

This celebration of the Triumph of the Cross offers each of us an opportunity to reflect upon our practices as persons directly involved in ministry to children and youth at risk; an opportunity to reflect on the quality of my presence as a parent/parent-substitute – my parenting; an opportunity to reflect on my life position and way of being in the world.

Reflecting on Candice’s story and on the resilience of children in difficult situations against the backdrop of this celebration of the Triumph of the Cross, we are challenged:

- To portray and promote, through our conversations, our preaching, our choice of recreation, our alliances, our strategies of intervention... a life position that “does not condemn the world” but rather upholds the inherent dignity and worth of each human person – no matter where they come from or how vulnerable, broken, youthful, or misguided their initial presentation. A life position that drives us to draw on the strengths of the others (instead of focusing on their limitations); celebrating their resilience, encouraging participation and affirming their efforts – no matter how small.
- To actively work for the preservation of the family and family reunification for children in out-of-home care – where that is in the child’s best interest. Safety, the creation of permanency situations and concern for their well-being must be the goals for children admitted to residential care.
- To build better linkages between us as members of Church/religious organizations and communities, eliminating the various gaps that exist in services

provided to families, children and young people who are at risk; care that is “seamless”.

- To speak out against public policy and practices that systematically erode the ability of families to care and provide for their children.

“For God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved”. May God bless our efforts.