

Sunday 12th October 2008

Sr. Mary Anthony

LADY OF THE ROSARY

“Look beyond the bread you eat, see your Saviour and your Lord. Look beyond the cup you drink, see His love poured out as Blood.”

The narrator of the story of creation tells us that after God created man and woman in His own image and likeness and looked at everything He had created "God saw all He had made and indeed it was very good." (Gen 1:31)

A famous theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said: "Creatures are all around me with their disappointing weaknesses and their terrifying powers".

Part of the essence of being Catholic is having the capacity to look beyond and to see beyond the limits of our prejudices; to recognize that together with our disappointing weaknesses we hold terrifying powers... powers for good and powers for evil. I ask you today: "Can we trust the powers for good that lie within others?"

Mary was asked to look beyond the limits of her virginity and see her capacity to bear and bring forth God's child. Joseph was asked to look beyond Mary's pregnancy and see her condition as the result of the invasion of God's Spirit within her. Jesus' disciples were asked to look beyond the crucifixion and death and see in His empty tomb the resurrected Saviour of all of creation. Can we too look beyond? Can we look beyond the deeds of prisoners and former prisoners and see in them the power for good?

About four years ago when I started the Walk Tall programme with Fr. Matthew d'Hereaux (a programme that aims to help prepare prisoners at the Maximum Security Prison for their release back into society), there was a man in his early fifties whose face and voice stood out for me. When I looked at him what I saw was the image of "The Notorious Criminal". His language was violent; his face was hard and heartless. This, together with what he shared in his testimony, made me say to myself: "Oh my God, I would not like this man to have dealt with me". Would you believe that after about two years of constant participation in the programme I have completely changed my attitude towards him? His face and physical demeanour have changed. Even his language has changed from cursing to blessing. Although he is in prison for life, his constant greeting these days is: "Blessings! Blessings!"

The Catholic Commission for Social Justice asked me to speak with you for two reasons. Firstly, because of my work in the prisons at Frederick Street in Port of Spain and in Arouca. Secondly because one of the Commission's mandate is "to collaborate with other concerned bodies and to establish a rehabilitation centre for former prisoners."

When you hear this mandate, what comes to your mind? What do you feel? Do you agree that this is a just and a right thing to do? Do you feel you want to work towards making this goal a reality? Or do you feel: “Eh! Eh! Something wrong! How we could be praying the Rosary, talking about Holy Mother Mary and wanting to be associated with people behind bars? People who could murder others like they murdered Sean Luke, Hope, the female Taxi driver from Cunupia, the male taxi driver from Waterloo, the foreigners from Sweden... people who could plunder and kill until our murder toll is 400 plus ... Causing people to leave the country...causing those who remain to live in fear? What has ‘reflection on Mary’ to do with all of this? What is the connection between Mary and prisoners: former prisoners, those who are currently incarcerated and those who in the future may fall foul of the law and may be incarcerated?”

I believe that reflection on Mary's journey can inspire us with the graces necessary for bringing that mandate to fulfillment. The inspiration is to be found in her human journey with God and with others... a journey which is in reality our journey. Today we want to reflect on how her journey is also the journey of each prisoner and each former prisoner.

Who is this Woman of mercy and action?

The woman named Mary whom we honour today persists through the ages because her journey is repeated over and over again in each of our lives.

From the moment of the annunciation Mary's life is turned topsy turvy. From a confident young lady, engaged to an eligible bachelor she becomes a scared refugee.

When we first meet Mary, she is anxious and fearful at the angel's greeting. Confused and scared and full of questions, Mary is all those throughout the ages who have cried out, "How can I survive in prison? What does God want with someone like me?" Yet some prisoners tell you that they found God for the first time in prison. Like Mary they choose to recognize God and choose to respond "Yes" to God in a situation in which saying "Yes" does not come easily.

When Jesus is born, Herod conspires to kill him. In order to make sure he has discovered the right baby, Herod has all children less than 3 years old murdered. Mary and Joseph are terrified. Prisoners too are terrified. Having injured others, they fear that their families will become victims of their crimes...they too could be murdered in revenge.

Mary has to flee with her husband and child and become a refugee in a foreign land; a land that was associated with bondage and hardship in the past. Prisoners are totally displaced because of their wrong doings. They look lost; they are very lonely and must make sense out of their wrongdoings. Sometimes release from prison is more terrifying than remaining there. Often repeat offenders choose to return to prison because they cannot find refuge outside of prison. God provided support for Mary through Joseph. Can we be the “Joseph” for those seeking refuge?

The TNT mirror of March 2nd, 2007 carried the story of a Trinidadian Mary. Hers is a story of utter conversion. Through God's intervention in her life while she was in prison and through the help of a "Trini Joseph", she has been totally rehabilitated. She has become a "Joseph" to others.

One of our sisters, who now resides in Ireland, used to say to me often when I lived in Woodbrook: "Look! Our Lady up Laventille hill is overlooking the whole of Trinidad and Tobago. Isn't she beautiful?" Yes this beautiful lady, who has lived the good, the bad and the ugly, watches over the good, the bad and the ugly in Trinidad and Tobago and inspires us to move beyond cheap visions of holiness and embrace, claim and cherish the humaneness that God self embraced and cherished in her. As a Church committed to Social Justice we are required to walk with the 2 feet of justice: works of mercy and works of social action.

Today, as we focus on our incarcerated brothers and sisters and the place they hold within our hearts, we must pray for and work towards prison reform. We must move away from a vision of justice that focuses on revenge and punishment, and move towards mercy and social action. This kind of justice called "restorative justice" aims to repair the harm that has been caused by crime; to heal the entire community. In certain circumstances, the process involves bringing offenders and their victims face to face. This is no easy job as you may imagine. Most of our unfortunate brothers and sisters are poorly educated; they come from broken homes with many social problems. How can we as a nation rise to the challenge of restoration; of promoting right relationships? Let us, with Mary our Mother, say to God who asks that we bring to birth this new attitude to prisoners: "... Be it done unto me according to thy will".

The journey of Mary reminds us of how we should respond to God...with trust that through the questions, through the hard times, God will be there always...bringing us safely home.

Litany of Mary of Nazareth: Response: Pray for Us.

<p><i>Model of Courage</i></p> <p><i>Mother of the liberator</i></p> <p><i>Mother of the homeless</i></p> <p><i>Mother of the nonviolent</i></p> <p><i>Mother of the political prisoner</i></p> <p><i>Mother of the condemned</i></p> <p><i>Mother of the executed criminal</i></p>	<p><i>Closing Prayer:</i></p> <p><i>Mary, Queen of Peace,</i></p> <p><i>we entrust our lives to you.</i></p> <p><i>Shelter us from war, and oppression.</i></p> <p><i>Teach us to live in Peace.</i></p> <p><i>Inspire us to act justly;</i></p> <p><i>to reverence all that God has made.</i></p> <p><i>Root peace firmly in our hearts and in our world. Amen</i></p>
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<i>Liberator of the oppressed</i>	
<i>Comforter of the afflicted</i>	
<i>Breaker of Bondage</i>	
<i>Political refugee</i>	
<i>Woman of Mercy</i>	
<i>Our Lady of the Rosary</i>	

Closing prayer:

Mary, Queen of Peace, we entrust our lives to you.

Shelter us from war and oppression.

Teach us to live in Peace.

Inspire us to act justly, to reverence all that God has made.

Root peace firmly in our hearts and in our world.

Amen