

Demonstrating our love by our good works by Leela Ramdeen, Chair, CCSJ

Lenten reflection delivered to parishioners at Holy Cross RC Church, Princess Town on Friday 9 March, 2012

My brothers and sisters in Christ, it gives me great pleasure to be here with you this evening to share some words about what our faith tells us about doing good works. Throughout our scriptures there are references that inspire us to do good works. During this Lenten season, I urge you to spend some time to read from our Scriptures. Take out your Jerusalem Bible and read from the Old Testament and the New Testament.

In Acts 10:38, we read that Jesus, whose footsteps we should be following, “went about doing good”. And in John 15:8 Jesus makes it clear that “It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit, and then you will be my disciples.”

Prayer will help us to bear fruit. However, prayer alone is not sufficient. As we read in James 2:26: “...faith is dead if it is separated from good deeds.” James makes it clear that salvation does not come from faith alone. Some Christian denominations believe that faith alone is sufficient for one to be saved.

Catholics believe that we must put our faith in action; that faith and good works must go together if we want to be saved. Interestingly, it is our faith that spurs us on to do good works. By our good works we can demonstrate our faith.

In Matthew 5:13-16 we read: “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...your light must shine in the sight of men and women, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven.”

In 1 Peter 2:12 Peter tells Christians about their obligations towards those who are not Christians. He says: “...Always behave honourably among pagans so that they can see your good works for themselves.”

Scripture tells us to do good to everyone, not only to Christians e.g. in Galatians 6:10 we read: “We must never get tired of doing good because if we don’t give up the struggle we shall get our harvest at the proper time. While we have the chance, we must do good to all...”

In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy tell the Church in Thessalonica that they must “care for the weak...you must all think of what is best for each other and for the community...pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God, because this is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus.”

In Paul’s first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 6:18), Paul urges Timothy to tell rich Christians “that they are to do good, and be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share.” Distributive justice is a key aspect of the social teaching of our Church.

Jesus highlights the generosity of the poor in the story of the widow's mite (see Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4). He was teaching in the temple and watched people putting money in the treasury. Many rich people put a lot. A poor widow came and put in 2 small coins, the equivalent of a penny. He said to his disciples: "I tell you solemnly, this poor widow has put more in than all who have contributed to the treasury; for they have all put in money they had over, but she from the little she had has put in everything she possessed, all she had to live on." That is love in action.

I always tell people how my heart filled with love for my people in TT as I entered a hall a couple of years ago to deliver the feature address at an SVP AGM. Many of the foot-soldiers of the SVP and other charitable Catholic organizations in our Archdiocese are men and women who are not rich. They are "the salt of the earth" and give their time, talent and treasure from whatever little they have. I salute all Catholics – rich and poor - who give generously to build the common good.

1 John 3:17-18 tells us: "If a man who was rich enough in this world's goods saw that one of his brothers was in need, but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him? My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active; only by this can we be certain that we are children of the truth..."

And remember what we are told in Col. 3:17 : "...never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Pope Benedict XVI's Lenten Message this year is drawn from Hebrews 10:24 which states: "Let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works." His theme for his Lenten message is: "Do not remain silent before evil." If we link the 2 aspects of his message, we will see that he is asking us, not only to do good works, but also to speak out in the face of evil.

Our Church requires us to walk with the 2 feet of Christian Service: works of mercy and works of social action. We must not become armchair Christians or be concerned only with our own salvation, but must respond to Jesus' greatest command to us, that is, to love Him and to love our neighbour.

We are an Easter people. We are a Eucharistic people. The Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives. Paragraph 1324 of our Catechism, (quoting from the Vatican document: Lumen Gentium (11), tells us that "The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life."

But going to Mass on Sundays and receiving the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ, is not all that is required of us if we are to be true to our faith. The challenge for us is to go out into the world after Mass and *become* the body and blood of Christ in the world. We must *live* the Gospel. To be truly human; to be true witnesses of our faith, we must demonstrate our love and concern for each other.

Remember Jesus' response when asked: "Who is my neighbour?" Read the Gospel of Luke, Chap 12 verses 25-37. Read what Jesus tells us in the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. Our neighbour is everyone who has need of us. Our neighbour includes those in need around the world – and there are billions in need. There is an e-mail being circulated showing 55 pictures of "slum-dwellers" - taken by a woman called Paula Nelson. One billion people worldwide live in slums, a number that will likely double by 2030. (http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2012/02/slum_life.html)

It was Pope Paul VI who said in his encyclical, *On the Development of Peoples*, that the "world is sorely ill." We must play our part to heal it. Here in TT there are over 300,000 living in squats. Our Minister of the People and Social Development has said that there are over 20% of our people living in poverty. Last a survey was conducted on Living Standards in TT, so we should hear soon if this figure is about correct. The last survey conducted in 2005 showed that 16.7% of our people live in poverty. We have so much money from our natural resources, yet the gap between the rich and poor is growing daily. Some people still don't have the basic necessities such as clean water; electricity; decent housing, roads, transportation and so on.

And what about those living in your own street, or who are members of this congregation. Too often we come to Church, shake people's hands at the Sign of Peace, and go home without really reaching out to each other; communicating with each other. I am not saying that we must 'macco' each other, but it is only by opening up the channels of communication that we will find out about the needs of our neighbour.

(Give example of St Theresa's – Woodbrook – project to discern the needs of all those living in the parish – not only Catholics – see Catholic News this weekend – article about St Theresa's and their social justice work e.g. every Sunday they distribute food to the needy).

I know that many of our parishes, including this parish, are involved in doing good work. That is how we will demonstrate our love for God and for each other. That is how we will achieve the Archdiocese's Mission which reads:

"We are the People of God in Trinidad and Tobago, building the Civilization of Love – reconciliation with God, neighbour, creation and self – through:

- *The New Evangelization*
- *Revitalizing Catholic Culture and Identity*
- *Regenerating the Moral and Spiritual Values of our Society."*

This year we are seeking to implement our second pastoral priority: Revitalizing Catholic Culture and Identity. Central to our identity as Catholics is the requirement that we do good works. Remember the words of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the merciful, for they

shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Archbishop Harris is asking all of us to practise the Spiritual and Corporal Works of mercy which are:

The Corporal works of mercy:

- To feed the hungry;
- To give drink to the thirsty;
- To clothe the naked;
- To shelter the homeless
- To visit the sick;
- To visit the prisoner;
- To bury the dead.
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The Spiritual works of mercy:

- Warn the sinner
- Teach the ignorant
- Counsel the doubtful
- Comfort the sorrowful
- Forgive injuries
- Bear wrongs patiently
- Pray for the living and the dead
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His Grace wants us to commit ourselves to do one thing each day - for Jesus.

Jesus mentions many of these corporal works of mercy when He talked about The Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46). He tells us that on Judgement Day all that God will be concerned about is how we loved each other; how we saw Him in each other. Matthew 25:35-40 states:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. . . Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:35-36, 40)

The social doctrine of our church tells us that we must be concerned to promote the dignity of each human person. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, calls us to promote ‘integral human development’, which means the development of each dimension of a person and of each person. No one should be left behind. He came to save us all.

Scripture tells us that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and has an inherent dignity. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity

of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our Church's social teaching. We are called to stand in solidarity and struggle for the rights of others.

God wants us to put our prayer in action by doing good deeds. We are the ones who must demonstrate Jesus' compassion and mercy for others. We are the ones who must build God's Kingdom of justice, peace, love, truth, and freedom. As St Teresa of Avila said:

“Christ has no body here on earth but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.”

We are called to be the leaven for transforming the world. And change begins with changing ourselves; opening up our hearts and minds to treat our neighbour as another self. You know the saying: “Change the world, Lord, and start with me.” What better time to do so than now – during Lent.

Let us commit ourselves today to stand in solidarity with people everywhere e.g. those who are on low incomes or who are unemployed; the differently abled; the sick, the homeless or poorly housed; those in prison or who are otherwise vulnerable, powerless and at a disadvantage. Solidarity means the willingness to see others as another ‘self’ and so to regard injustice committed against another as no less serious than an injustice against one's self.

Vatican II stressed the need for the Catholic Church to stand in solidarity with the whole human family: *“The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ.”* (*Lumen Gentium*).

We are one human family. As the saying goes, our responsibilities to each other cross national, racial, economic and ideological differences. Learning to practise the virtue of solidarity means learning that ‘loving our neighbour’ has global dimensions in an interdependent world. Love of neighbour impels us to work for just laws, policies, and social structures because love without social justice is like a body without a backbone. Our responsibility is not just to avoid evil in order to save our individual souls, but to do right, especially for the weak and vulnerable.

Prayers are essential to social justice work. Indeed, our social ministry must be anchored in prayer. Prayer helps us to apply our faith to everyday situations and not to walk on the other side like those in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

There is much good work going on, but we need more hands on deck to build God's Kingdom. When I was a member of the Girl Guides at Holy Faith Convent, Couva, we used to visit the sick in hospital. My mother ensured that every Saturday she baked bread and she took us to what was then called the “Poor House” in Chaguanas to distribute the bread to those living there.

Putting money in a collection for those in need is good, but it is even better to physically be in touch with those in need.

Mercy is a virtue which we should all embrace. St Thomas regards works of mercy as part of almsgiving. We must be concerned not only for our neighbour's physical needs, but also his/her spiritual needs. Hence the reason why Pope Benedict XVI, in his Lenten message, talks about fraternal correction. If we see someone doing wrong, we have a duty to correct that person, not out of malice, but in love - ... (SEE NEWSLETTER).

Life is a precious gift from God and we must defend, support, promote and enhance life at all stages and in all circumstances. If we are to build a culture of life, we must work to create conditions that allow people to reach their full potential and realize their human dignity. Give some examples of times when we have neglected our people e.g.

- Linus – who was killed in Arima when a dump truck emptied its content on him as he slept in the “dump” after looking for food there.
- Photo on front page of newspaper - of dead man on POS street and people passing by without even glancing at him.
- Media (TV) report of man with rotting foot opposite Houses of Parliament – in Woodford Sq.
- Homeless man in Savannah - supermarket trolley with his belongings.
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Catholic teaching tells us that “the basic moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation.” We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor and work to overcome unjust practices and situations that oppress the poor.

You know the saying: “The world has enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed.” It is partly greed that has led to the economic crisis in our world today. According to UNICEF, each day about 22,000 children die in our world. 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.”

Our parishes are blessed with a diversity of gifts. You should conduct a skills/gifts audit in your parish. Seek out, recognize, and utilize the diversity of gifts, experience, knowledge and competence amongst your members.

There must be a number of you in this parish who can act as mentors to young people – particularly to our young males who so desperately need male role models. Offer your services to your local schools and in your parish. Join organisations such as SVP, Zion Community, Eternal Light Community, Living Water Community or form your own groups to do good deeds. As Martin Luther King Jr said: “The time is always right to do what is right.” Let us do what is right now.

We read in Proverbs that “Without a vision the people perish”. Our Catholic Church has a vision. The challenge for us is to implement this vision. Let us ask God for the grace to do more good deeds. Remember, we can do nothing without his grace. We must pray for a conversion of hearts because, as the US Bishops said: “true justice and peace can be a matter of policy only if it is first a matter of the heart.”

Let us pray for God’s grace to open our eyes and those of our leaders, so that we will see the needs of our neighbour. Let us pray that He will open our hearts so that we will demonstrate love and concern for our neighbour by doing good work. We ask these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.