

Working towards a National Gender Policy that is Christ-centred

By Leela Ramdeen, Chair, CCSJ

Speech delivered at seminar on The Gender Policy at Our Lady of Fatima RC Parish Hall on Wednesday 7th November 2012

Good evening my brothers and sisters. I am pleased to have been asked to address you on the important topic of the proposed National Gender Policy in TT. Before we examine the content of CCSJ's Media release of 20 June 2012, I want to place our theme within a local context.

I quote from a letter to the Editor which was published in May 2010. It's from the group in TT called ASPIRE (Advocates for Safe Parenthood: Improving Reproductive Equity). The group writes in its letter: "...the law does not recognise a Trinidadian and Tobagonian until he or she is born." This was written in response to a Catholic Journalist's (Suzanne Shepherd) article about ASPIRE's goals etc. Suzanne responded (May 9, 2010: *In defence of life from conception*) by quoting Rev Dr Peter Hammond of Africa Christian Action, who states: "Birth is not a magical act that turns a non-human being into a person. Birth is only a change in environment for a life that began many months before."

I quote these opposing views to make it clear that we are living in a time when Judeo-Christian values are diametrically opposed to certain views that are gaining traction in TT and across the world. These views seek to "normalize" sin.

ASPIRE has always stated that they are not promoting abortion. Yet, if you visit the website of Planned Parenthood, the US group that's making billions from running abortion clinics around the world, you will read:

"In 2001, PPFA provided seed support for the founding of the grassroots women's rights organization ASPIRE (Advocates for Safe Parenthood: Improving Reproductive Equity), which is dedicated to reducing the rates of maternal death and disability due to unsafe abortion and advocating for less restrictive abortion laws. (www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/international-program/trinidad-tobago-country-program-19031.htm).

It is timely, as we move forward from celebrating the occasion of TT's 50th Anniversary of Independence that we stop and take stock of whether or not we, as a people, are moving in the right direction. Do we have policies, procedures and practices that will lift our people to a "higher, more noble place" (Martin Luther King Jr.)? Are we committed to promoting authentic integral human development, or are the Policies that we are devising going to take us down a road that could destroy the very fabric of our society? And if we are aware of this, can we afford, as Catholics, to remain silent on the sidelines? In Sept 2010, CCSJ said in a media release that:

“There can be no neutrality in the face of the many attacks on human life...The situation is so grave that it is essential that we come together to pray and work to build a culture of life in our communities and in the world.”

As Catholics we believe that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the moral foundation of our vision for Trinidad & Tobago and the world. It is for this reason that we seek to promote a culture of life and to protect, defend and enhance life at all stages and in all circumstances – from conception to natural death.

During Lent 2012, CCSJ circulated this poster to all parishes. It's the theme of the Holy Father's Lenten Theme drawn from Hebrews 10:24: *“Let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works.”* The Lenten message was entitled: *“We must not remain silent before evil.”* I repeat: *“We must not remain silent before evil.”* While there are many who are trying to “normalize” evil/sin, we must strive to overcome this culture of death and promote a culture of life.

Proverbs 29:18 tells us that “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” What kind of vision do we have for TT? In an age in which moral relativism, secularism, individualism, utilitarianism, greed and selfishness threaten to overwhelm us and in which many people seek to push God off the public stage and into the private realm, it is little wonder that there is a yawning gap between Catholic morals and values and those espoused by some citizens in TT/the world.

I don't know if you listened to the commentaries about what influenced some voters in yesterday's US elections. Presidential Candidates' views on issues such as abortion, same-sex unions, and homosexuality were among the key determining factors influencing people's votes.

There is a saying that when America sneezes we here in TT catch the cold. Well, take note that on 6 Nov two more states in the USA, Maine and Maryland and the City of Washington DC, now recognise same-sex marriage.

In the six states -- Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire and New York -- and the District of Columbia where same-sex marriage is recognised, this "right" was recognised because of actions taken by judges or legislators, not voters. Now, for the first time in history, voters, through a referendum, voted to legalize same-sex marriage in Maine, Maryland and Washington DC.

Since 2001 11 Countries and some sub-national jurisdictions (parts of Mexico and the above US States and City) allow same-sex marriage. The countries are:

Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, South Africa, Sweden.

Take note that some of these countries have a high proportion of Catholics – Argentina, Spain and Portugal. We must read the signs of the times and stand up for what we believe.

(Also, see Daily Mail UK on 8 Nov - day after this lecture:

"French set to legalise gay marriage despite vocal opposition from religious leaders

- Polls show a majority of French support gay marriage but it has divided the country's left and right
- France would become the 12th country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage if the bill passes

President Francois Hollande's Cabinet pushed ahead with a controversial French bill that could see gay marriage legalised early next year. The move defies vocal opposition in the majority Catholic country from religious leaders, the rural heartland and the conservative opposition.

The French leader's top ministers approved the bill legalising marriage and adoption for same-sex couples and have sent it on to the legislature for debate.

Gay marriage has become a contentious issue in France, where Hollande made it a liberal cornerstone of his campaign, hoping it would create a clean break from his conservative predecessor...

Though France would become the 12th country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage if the bill passes, the country of 60 million people would become the biggest so far in terms of economic and diplomatic influence.

Polls show a majority of French support gay marriage, but it has divided the country's left and right, with lawmakers from the conservative UMP denouncing the Cabinet approval Wednesday.

'It's the end of the family, the end of children's development, the end of education. It's an enormous danger to the nation,' UMP Senator Serge Dassault said on the radio show France Culture.

In France, a prominent conservative and former prime minister, Francois Fillon, has opposed any gay marriage legislation, and he plans to run in this month's election for the UMP leadership.

Amid the clamoring, the Socialists have decided to delay the parliamentary debate about the bill until January, knowing that it risks being modified or diluted by legislators."

We also have to be aware of legal decisions being made in other countries that could

eventually have implications for Catholics. For example, see the following report in the UK's Daily Mail – by Steve Doughty on 2 November 2012:

“Catholic adoption agency loses five year legal battle over its refusal to accept gay couples

- Catholic Care said it would lose its funding through Church collections and other voluntary donations if it allowed same-sex couples to adopt children
- Charity Commission insisted charity's stance is 'divisive, capricious and arbitrary' and 'demeaning' to dignity of homosexual couples
- Judge was told that charity's stance was in clear violation of Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights
- Charity says it might close its adoption services after landmark court ruling
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Roman Catholics who support traditional marriage and oppose gay rights are not bigots, a High Court judge declared yesterday. Mr Justice Sales said those who follow religious beliefs long established across Europe ‘cannot be equated with racist bigots’. Rather, he said, these Christian views ‘have a legitimate place in a pluralist, tolerant and broadminded society’. His comments came at the end of a four-year legal battle by the adoption society Catholic Care against equality laws making it place children with gay couples.

Despite his call for tolerance, Mr Justice Sales rejected the claims of the Leeds-based agency. His ruling means it will now abandon its 100-year-old adoption service, which found families for ten children every year.

The judge told the Upper Tribunal that Parliament has made discrimination against gay couples against the law. He added that the agency could not show weighty reasons why it should be an exception to this. However, he rebuked the Charity Commission, which described the service as being run on behalf of bigots that helped children only of one race.

The declaration that traditional Christian views are not bigotry came amid a continuing row over gay rights and if opposition to these is prejudiced and ignorant. It has led to clashes between pressure group Stonewall and Scottish Catholics after Cardinal Keith O’Brien was dubbed ‘bigot of the year’. He was given the insult after describing same-sex marriage as a ‘grotesque subversion’ of marriage rights.

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg was also caught up in the debate after the draft of a speech used ‘bigot’ to describe opponents of same-sex marriage. Catholic Care (which has been in operation for over 100 years) said it will now be forced to close its adoption service. Ten other Catholic adoption societies have already stopped all their adoption work.

Labour’s Sexual Orientation Regulations came into force in 2008 and became part of the Equality Act passed in 2010.”

It is because of the various threats to life that the Holy Father has asked us during the Year of Faith which commenced on 11 Oct and will run until 24 Nov 2013, the Feast of Christ the King, to seek to transform the world by being true witnesses to our faith. We will do so if we live our faith with joy, conviction and enthusiasm. The challenge for us is to be faithful to the teachings of our Church. However, if our faith is built on fertile soil, we will proclaim the Gospel and transform the world.

I keep saying that Catholics are like a sleeping giant. While many around us are working feverishly to get their issues on the agenda and to effect changes that will have detrimental effects on our people in TT, many Catholics fail to be advocates for truth and so there is a danger that objective moral truths may be sidelined in favour of subjective views of 'truth'.

I want to stress tonight how important it is for all of us to see TT as OUR motherland which we must build together. The social justice principle of 'participation' is important. As Catholic citizens who have something to say in the marketplace, we will be shirking our responsibilities if we don't step up and speak out.

The Gender Policy that is being finalized as we speak has major implications for individuals and families. We will all agree that family life in TT is under threat from a variety of social ills and we are here to speak about some of these social ills.

Although in the Caribbean the family over the years was made up of the extended family, this has eroded over the years and His Grace has asked the faithful to rekindle this love for the extended family.

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 7th World Meeting of Families. He said "the future of humanity absolutely depends on the family. 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."

(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.")

*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 2012) 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. 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 that 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 held 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)

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.”

So, although we live in a democracy and some feel that this gives them the right to do what they like, God implanted a moral order in our hearts and minds so that we do not have the right to do what is wrong. A simple example is that I have a right to swing my arm, but my right ends where your nose begins. I have no right to hit you for no reason.

“Democracy stands or falls with the truths and values which it embodies and promotes. But these values themselves must have an objective content. Otherwise they correspond only to the power of the majority, or the wishes of the most vocal.” (Blessed John Paul II (address given at the farewell ceremony of Oct 8, 1995, which officially closed his visit to the USA).

The Mission Statement of the Catholic Church in TT since our Synod, states that we are building the *Civilization of Love*.

(We are the people of God in TT, building the COL – reconciliation with God, neighbour, creation and self- through: The New Evangelization; Revitalising Catholic Culture and Identity, and Regenerating the Moral and Spiritual Values of our Society).

There is a mismatch in perception between the civilization of love that we Catholics envisage and the kind of civilization that some citizens wish to promote.

On Mon 22 October, I attended an event at NAPA entitled: Advancing Women’s Transformational Leadership – organised by the Network of NGOs of TT for the Advancement of Women, in collaboration with the Office of the PM and the Australia HC, and the Caribbean Instituted for Women in Leadership and the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

One of the speakers was Hon. Marlene Coudray, Minister for Gender, Youth and Child Development. She made it clear that a draft Gender Policy is being examined by a Cabinet Appointed Committee and will be submitted to Cabinet soon. There was no mention of any consultation on the document.

This is taking place at the same time as an online Petition entitled:– organised by students at UWI and friends - including CAISO and others. At *Support for change – for a National Gender Policy of TT* the conference on 22 Oct, Dr Gabrielle Hosein encouraged all participants to sign the petition.

The petition lists some worthwhile priority issues that should be addressed in such a policy e.g. *gender-based violence and human security, masculinity and manhood, health and well-being, education and literacy, poverty alleviation, labour and employment, unwaged economic activities, domestic and family life, agriculture and Food Security, macro economy and trade, leadership and governance.*

However, it is what is not said on the petition that worries me. Dr Hosein made it clear in her presentation that she wishes to see the “rights” of the LGBT community included in such a policy. And I know that CAISO is also fighting for their issues to be addressed in the policy e.g. to have sodomy decriminalised. And then there is ASPIRE and other groups that wish to decriminalize abortion.

As Catholics we would welcome a Gender Policy – one that is Christ-based; one that respects the right to life from conception and respects the natural roles of father, mother and the family. That is what we need to offer as an alternative to what groups such as ASPIRE are proposing.

On 20 June 2012, CCSJ issued a Media Release which was also signed by Msgr Llanos, our Vicar General. It focused on the issue of a Gender Policy for TT. His Grace was abroad and Msgr Llanos was acting in his absence. Since we have a procedure whereby all Media Releases must be approved by His Grace or his representative, we asked Msgr Llanos to approve it and not only did he do so, but he added his name to it as he sees this issue as being very important.

In the Statement we simply outline what the Church’s position is on issues such as: the definition of Gender, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, abortion.

(refer to the Media Statement).

I wish to read a letter from Emmanuel Community published in Catholic News on Sat 27 Oct 2012 and entitled:

The gender deception

We return to the National Gender Policy issue to uncover the deception that can ultimately take away freedom of religious belief and help to destroy marriage and family.

The deception is in the draft Gender Policy’s use of the word “gender”. In the average person’s mind, gender refers to male and female, whereas the drafters of the proposed Gender Policy state that “Gender is used to refer to the social roles, responsibilities, behaviours, attitudes and identities as men and women which are the result of social, cultural and historical factors *as opposed to our biological differences.*” (Emphasis added)

This gender definition arose out of the need to promote the “alternative lifestyles” of the homosexual agenda. Because it is not fixed to our biological state, it allows for people to choose the gender they believe themselves to be. It was established by the radical feminists in the United Nations (UN) sponsored 4th World Conference on Women at Beijing, China, in 1995 and promoted by the UN ever since. The UN bureaucracy aggressively promotes the homosexual “rights” agenda, as well as contraception and abortion, through the activity of many of its divisions throughout the world.

The Draft National Gender Policy is unacceptable in any form once gender remains the cornerstone of the Policy. It can be used to lay the groundwork for multiple false gender categories such as gay, lesbian, transvestite and bisexual, to name the main ones used. It is useful to note that the homosexual “rights” organization, the Coalition Advocating for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO) is campaigning to endorse the National Gender Policy as is ASPIRE, the abortion “rights” activists - a warning for the future.”

I have been thinking that perhaps what we need to do as Catholics is to work with others to develop a Christ-based gender policy that respects the right to life from conception and respects the natural roles of father, mother and the family. That's what we need to offer as an alternative to what groups such as ASPIRE are proposing. And so, I have written to Priests for Life, Human Life International, CARIFAM (Sarah Flood-Beaubrun) for support. Priests for Life has put me on to Mrs Marie Smith, Director of The Parliamentary Network for Critical Issues (PNCI), a ministry of Priests for Life. She, Mrs Flood-Beaubrun and Hyacinth Griffith, from Lawyers for Jesus, are interested in working with me to address this issue.

While we love all human beings, we have to stand up against the eradication of traditional genders – male and female/masculine and feminine. We know from Genesis that God created man and woman in his image and likeness and placed them on this earth for procreation and to be stewards of His creation.

We also have to be alert to the way in which the use of the term reproductive health care/reproductive rights masks a package that includes: abortion, contraception, sterilization etc.

It is important for Catholics to remember what our faith teaches us – if we wish to build a culture of life. The Church does not offer an a la carte menu from which one can choose “some of these and some of those”. That is why His Grace said at a pro-life Conference at Crown Plaza some years ago, that one cannot say that one is against the death penalty but supports abortion and so on. We must be concerned about all life issues if we are to be true witnesses to Christ.

I offer the following quotation from the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), Second Vatican Council, Dec. 7, 1965.

“whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who

practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator.”

We all know that the pro-choice agenda will not go away as it is a billion dollar business. The challenge for us is to ensure that we are vigilant and stand up for the unborn and his/her mother - in the same way that we stand up for the lives of those who suffer because of crime, lack of basic amenities and so on. It cannot be 'either' 'or', we must address the hydra headed monster of injustice wherever it rears its head.

It is important to place the National Gender Policy in context. It has a long history. For many years individuals and groups have been striving to decriminalize abortion, sodomy etc.

Refer to OAPA 1925 – s.56 and 57•

In 2004 CCSJ opposed the draft document prepared and circulated by ASPIRE (Advocates for Safe Parenthood: Improving Reproductive Equity. This draft document with the misnomer: Women’s Choice on Pregnancy Bill outlined ASPIRE’s proposed changes to Trinidad’s legislation on abortion. Since no MP or governmental Ministry accepted the document, it was not actually a legislative bill, only a “wish list” from ASPIRE. Inter alia, the document proposed that:

- Non-physicians will be able to perform abortions (which would mean that s.56 and s 57 of the Offences Against the Person Act - Chap 11:08, would have had to be repealed) – read sections 56 and 57);
- Abortions will be performed anywhere the abortionist sets up a clinic;
- A girl/woman would be able to obtain abortion on demand up to and including the 3rd trimester, without the patient being required to notify her husband or parents. The justification for such an extreme proposal is for the mental and physical health of the mother. Young women under 18 in TT will be able to have abortions without their parents or guardians and without obtaining their consent.

In 2005, the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs issued a Draft National Gender Policy under the stewardship of Senator The Hon Joan Yuille-Williams. It was prepared by the University of the West Indies, Centre for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS) in December 2004. Apparently, in Sept 2002 the then Cabinet had agreed to the development of such a policy and CGDS were engaged as a consultant for the project.

On Wed 6 April 2005, CCSJ submitted a 9-page critique of the voluminous document to the then PM, Hon Patrick Manning, and to Hon Joan Yuille Williams. Inter alia, the document would have undermined family values. It sought to redefine masculinity and

proposed to legalise abortion. The then PM, Hon Patrick Manning, eventually withdrew the Draft – after various religious groups objected to it.

(refer to the issues raised in CCSJ's critique).

As you many know, Hon Joan Yuille Williams was removed from this Ministry and Hon Marlene Mc Donald was appointed. She eventually produced a further draft Gender Policy which did not deal with issues relating to abortion, same sex unions, homosexuality or sexual orientation.

In 2008 TT's Family Planning Association retained the services of Attorney-at-Law, Douglas Mendes, Senior Counsel, who prepared for the Association a Legal Opinion on the laws governing abortion in TT. His opinion favours a pro-choice perspective but it is yet to be tested in TT's Courts. It is to be noted that he was introduced at a recent Seminar at the Institute of International Relations as an Advisor to International Planned Parenthood Federation, which organization promotes abortion and makes billions of dollars doing so – particularly in third-world countries and to black and minority ethnic communities in the USA where IPPF's headquarters are based. IPPF also provides funds to ASPIRE. It is important to note that ASPIRE brought representatives from Catholics for Free Choice to speak at various events in TT to hoodwink people into believing that there are many Catholics who believe that abortion is OK.

In May 2010 the Coalition, the People's Partnership, formed the Government. The Ministry was renamed: Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development. The then Minister in charge of this Ministry was the then Hon. Verna St Rose Greaves who made it clear from the start that she supports abortion and the "rights" of the LGBT community. She was eventually removed and the present Minister in that Ministry is Hon Marlene Coudray who, as I stated earlier, made it clear that a Cabinet appointed Committee is examining a draft National Gender Policy.

We must be alert and make our voices heard. During the Year of Faith we are called to live our faith daily. I urge you to stand up for what we believe and to reject any National Policy that will be contrary to the morals and values that we Catholics espouse.

Catholics make up a significant proportion of our society and make a significant contribution to the coffers of our treasury. Therefore, our concerns must be taken into consideration.

And underpinning all our work must be prayer. Let us pray incessantly that the Holy Spirit will fill the hearts of those in authority that they may govern with wisdom and charity. I call on you tonight to proclaim the Gospel with enthusiasm and to be proud of our Faith. I thank you.