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MEDIA RELEASE

CCSJ says hanging not the answer to creating a safe society

The Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ) urges the Government to devise an anti-crime plan that will not include hanging. We can find no conclusive proof that the death penalty is a deterrent that reduces crime rates. As US Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall said:

“The death penalty is no more effective a deterrent than life imprisonment...it is also evident that the burden of capital punishment falls upon the poor, the ignorant and the underprivileged members of society.” (www.capital-punishment.us)

While this Commission recognizes that those who are found guilty of murder, through the due process of law, must be held accountable for their crime(s), we make a plea, as we did in our 2005 Statement, that “we use our human ingenuity to develop more effective methods to provide for the safety and well-being of the public. In T&T human life seems to be losing its value. Violence pervades the very fabric of our society.”

How are we to address this plague in society? As we said in 2005, we need to ask ourselves: “What vision do we have for T&T?” Our vision should be one that is concerned to build a culture of life. Catholics are devoted to defending life.

The view of the Catholic Church is that capital punishment undermines the sacredness of life and only serves to inflame the culture of violence that is already too prevalent in society. The late Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical, *The Gospel of Life* (1995):

‘...the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon and ought not to go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: In other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today, however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of penal systems, **such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent.**’

While society needs to defend itself from crime and violence and to uphold the value of the lives of its citizens, we should not sacrifice the values we seek to protect. CCSJ supports an ethic of respect for all life and urges the Government to devise crime reduction strategies that will help us to build the common good.

Instead of baying for blood, let us :

- consider short, medium and long term solutions that are more effective;
- develop an holistic approach to creating a more peaceful society by addressing the **root causes** to crime and violence e.g. social exclusion which includes poverty, the breakdown of family life; the proliferation of illegal drugs and guns, the prevalence of gang culture

- in TT; illiteracy and an inadequate education system; unemployment/underemployment; high crime environs; poor health; inadequate housing; lack of basic amenities;
- improve our archaic prison system and embrace models of restorative justice that seek to address crime in terms of the harm done to victims and communities, not simply as a violation of law. We will be failing in our duty if our anti-crime strategies do not address recidivism, which, to a certain extent, is the result of little or no rehabilitation programmes for prisoners in our prisons or when they are released;
 - improve the Administration of Justice and the ability of our Police Service to “fight crime”. Hanging will not improve our low level of crime detection, arrests and conviction. Hanging will not address the long delays in having cases dealt with expeditiously in our Courts;
 - buy in to the concept of Restorative Justice and build a society in which there is hope and opportunity for all – especially for the victims of crime and for those who feel the brunt of poverty and social exclusion. While our prayers go out to the victims of crime and their families, justice for them will not be served by creating a climate of fear and a desire for revenge in the hearts and minds of our people;
 - offer ourselves as good role models and mentors to our youths so that they will reject a life of crime;
 - develop prevention strategies e.g. by establishing a fully functional Children’s Authority;
 - form the consciences of our people and promote civility, moral values, ethical behaviour, accountability and transparency at all levels of society;
 - leave no stone unturned to address white-collar crime and corruption. How many of the ‘big boys’- those who are bringing in the drugs and guns, do we see in our prisons?

Hanging will not lift us out of the morass of runaway crime to a “higher, more noble place” (Martin Luther King Jr.). If we believe in authentic integral human development, and in building a culture of life, we will develop a plan that does not include hanging.

CCSJ welcomes this opportunity for a new national dialogue in TT about how we deal with crime and violence; how we restore respect for law and life; how we protect and rebuild communities, and how we help offenders to redeem themselves.

For further information contact Leela Ramdeen, Chair, CCSJ, on 299 8945