

**SEMINAR AT SANTA ROSA ON 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
UN INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE FAMILY &
UN INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FAMILIES 14 MAY 2014**

Theme: “Promoting and Protecting Family Life.”

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1. Open with a Prayer:

2. LR: Good evening my friends. Today the world marks the 20th Anniversary of the UN International Day of the Family and the UN International Day of Families. Given the many challenges which our families in TT face, we thought it would be timely to focus on the theme: Promoting and Protecting Family Life.

Since none of us fell from trees, we all have families, so the topic is pertinent to all of us. And if you read what Pope Francis said on Saturday 10 May to more than 300,000 students, teachers, and parents packed St. Peter's Square and the surrounding streets, you will realize that we all have a role to play in strengthening family life. He referred to the African proverb which says “it takes a village to educate a child” and asked all present to repeat these words after him. Let’s heed these wise words.

The format for the Seminar is as follows. There are 4 panellists who will speak on this theme:

- The **first** is **Louis Blake** whom many of you will know. He is a member of the Family Life Unit of the Family Life Commission - based in this parish.
- **Secondly**, we will hear from **Keisha Alleyne** who is a psychologist and a member of an Arima-based NGO called Parenting TT which “is geared towards helping children and improving our society through the means of psychological services, parent education, support and family empowerment.”
- Our next speaker will be **Sandra Theodore**, a representative of the Archdiocese’s Family Life Commission’s Common Sense Parenting Programme.
- **I** will be the 4th speaker.
- After my presentation you will then have an opportunity ask us **questions**/share your thoughts on the issues raised and on the theme. We will then end with a prayer and have an opportunity to socialize as we share some light refreshments. **(Introduce Louis Blake)**

MY PRESENTATION

Promoting and protecting Family Life is a justice issue. Our families today face many challenges, and, as the Body of Christ in this world, we cannot afford to sit on the sidelines and ignore the many social ills that impact adversely on family life. Our previous speakers listed some of these ills. If we are to respond, we must be grounded in our faith; we must know what our Church teaches about the importance of The Family. This will help us to identify what we need to do/can do to promote and protect The Family.

In October last year, I represented the Archdiocese at two major events at the Vatican. The first event was a Conference held during the October 23-25 21st Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family (PCF) on the theme *New Anthropological horizons and the rights of the family*.

At the centre of the discussion was the Charter of the Rights of the Family which was presented by the Holy See on October 22, 1983 “to all persons, institutions and authorities concerned with the mission of the family in today’s world”.

H E Msgr Vincenzo Paglia, President of the PCF, introduced the working session and reminded us that it is important to rediscover the rights our families must have. It is significant, he said, that we were meeting at a time when Pope Francis has called a 3rd extraordinary general assembly of the Bishops’ Synod to be held in the Vatican from October 5-19, 2014 on the theme: “The Pastoral challenges of the family in the context of Evangelisation.”

On October 25, I was fortunate to be among members of the PCF and Consulters of the PCF when we had a Private Audience with the Holy Father, Pope Francis. Although only a few persons had been identified to greet him personally, he shook hands with each of us. Eloquence failed me as he held my hand with both of his, I simply blurted out: “Holy Father, I am Leela Ramdeen, your Caribbean neighbour from Trinidad and Tobago....” Both he and Msgr Paglia laughed along with me. He asked me to pray for him.

(You can read Pope Francis’ excellent address via the following Zenit link:

<http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-s-address-to-21st-plenary-assembly-of-the-pontifical-council-for-the-family>.)

Pope Francis focused on **three key points**, referring to **the family** as “**the engine of the world and of history**”. “**The family**”, he said, “**is a community of life which has its autonomous foundation. As Blessed John Paul II wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, the family is not the sum of the persons that constitute it, but a ‘community of persons’ (cf. Nos. 17-18). It is the place where one learns to love, the natural centre of human life. It is made up of faces, of persons who love, talk, sacrifice for others and defend life, especially the most fragile, the weakest.**”

Secondly, he reminded us that “**the family is founded on matrimony**”, the “first sacrament of the human...Spousal and family love also reveals clearly the person’s vocation to love in a unique way and forever, and that the trials, the sacrifices, the crises of the couple as those of the family itself represent passages to grow in the good, in truth and in beauty...In matrimony one gives oneself completely without calculations or reservations, sharing everything, gifts and renunciations, trusting in the Providence of God.”

Finally, he referred to “**two phases of family life: childhood and old age**. Children and the elderly represent the two poles of life and also the most vulnerable, often the most forgotten. A society that abandons children and marginalises the elderly cuts off its roots and darkens its future. Every time that a child is abandoned and an elderly person is marginalised, not only is an act of injustice committed but the failure of that society is confirmed. To take care of little ones and the elderly is a choice of civilisation ... The ‘good news’ of the family is a very important part of evangelisation, which Christians can communicate to all, with the witness of life...The truly Christian families are recognised by their fidelity, patience, openness to life, respect of the elderly ... The secret of all this is Jesus’ presence in the family.”

On Saturday, October 26, the Holy Father presided over an event at St Peter’s Square where over 150,000 families from around the world met in a “Pilgrimage of families to the tomb of St Peter for the Year of Faith”. The theme was *Experience the joy of Faith*. We listened to reflections, music and testimonies. It was truly a family affair.

On Sunday, October 27, my five-day stay in Rome ended with the Solemn celebration of the Mass at St Peter’s Square, presided over by Pope Francis. I was fortunate to be given a pass, along with members of PCF and the Consulters, to sit to the right of the altar. Sitting in the third row, I felt truly blessed. What an experience. Our faith is alive!

*** Note that Pope Francis has called a Synod of Bishops on the Family from 5-19 October 2014.

Family life will be the focus of an extraordinary general session of the Synod of Bishops that will meet at the Vatican between 5-19 October 2014. Around 150 Synod fathers will take part in the meeting to discuss the "pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization." It is expected to last two weeks. The last [Synod of Bishops meeting on the family held in 1980](#) that resulted in the document *Familiaris Consortio* (The Christian Church in the Modern World).

Also, the **8th World Meeting of Families** will be held in Philadelphia, USA, from **22 – 27 Sept 2015** on the theme: **Love is our mission: The Family fully alive**. The theme was announced yesterday.

*** Also of information is the fact that at their meeting last weekend in Jamaica, the AEC Bishops issued a statement entitled: Marriage: A covenant between a man and a woman.

*** Also see draft document by AEC Bishops on Domestic Violence etc.

*** Note also a statement from the AEC Bishops' Meeting: "All Arch/Dioceses will publish the revised and approved AEC Norms for dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests and Deacons as well as the specific diocesan implementation procedures for the Norms"

Our Catechism tells us that: "The family must be helped and defended by appropriate social measures. Where families cannot fulfill their responsibilities, other social bodies have the duty of helping them and of supporting the institution of the family..."

"The importance of the family for the life and well-being of society entails a particular responsibility for society to support and strengthen marriage and the family. Civil authority should consider it a grave duty 'to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family, to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality, and promote domestic prosperity.' The political community has a duty to honour the family, to assist it..."(2209, 2210, 2211).

In 1981 Saint John Paul II released an apostolic exhortation called: *The Christian Family in the Modern World*. In it, he made some very profound statements. He said:

"...the family is the primary and most vital foundation of society, the first school of social virtue ... As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live".

He made a special plea for families to "become what you are, the domestic Church and the heart of the world." Promoting good family values within our families will help us to play our part to build the common good and to transform the world so that it will reflect Gospel values.

The 1983 Catholic Charter of the Rights of the Family defines family as "a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society" (Compendium #229).

At the 7th World Meeting of Families in Milan (2012), Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI 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." He reminded us that "It is within the family that we experience for the first time that the human person is not created to live enclosed within himself, but in relationships with others; and it is in the family that the light of peace is first set aflame in our hearts so that it might illumine our world."

Read what our Catholic Catechism says about the Family and Society: 2207 – 2211. In his 1994 *Letter to Families*, Saint John Paul II rightly said 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." This situation is even more dire today.

Today the marriage and the family are in crisis. At a time when so many false so-called 'values' strive to influence the hearts and minds of family members, let us reflect on the kind of values that Christians should be promoting in our families.

Values are internalized sets of beliefs – they are subjective and based on your personal choice. They can change with time. Not all values lead to moral or ethical behaviour. For example, Hitler had values, but they are not the kind of values that one would wish to promote.

If our vocation is to be holy, then families need to promote values that would lead to holiness. Our values must be linked to ‘virtues’ if we are to live holy lives. As our former Archbishop Gilbert used to say: “*Virtues inform values and values influence behaviour.*”

Virtues are qualities of moral goodness or excellence – based on objective morality – virtues will help us form consciences in accordance with God’s truth and build good character; they help us to learn right from wrong and be our guide as we strive to be upright, honest citizens.

Families would do well to embed virtues among their members by providing opportunities for members to experience and practise them. Our Catechism (1803) tells us that virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself/herself.

I believe that of all the values that we need to instill in our families, **love** is the most important.

As is stated in 1 Corinthians 13:13 “...*there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love.*” **Agape love; self-giving love** – giving ourselves by word and example – unconditionally, is, I believe, the most important value/virtue that we can nurture in our families – particularly as love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human person (*The Christian Family in the Modern World.*)

CCSJ has produced a pocket card with a list of values that we should nurture within families and communities. But these would all flow naturally if we embrace the kind of love that God intended when he gave us His greatest commandment: to love Him and to love our neighbour. That kind of love in families would lead to values such as: right relationships; mutual love, care and respect for each other; good communication and interaction skills within the family; responsibility – all underpinned by prayer and a spirituality based on our Scriptures.

As Blessed Paul VI said: “The family, like the church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. In a family which is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelize and are evangelized...and such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families and of the community of which it forms part. (*The Christian Family in the Modern World.* #52)

In his exhortation *The Christian Family in the Modern World*, Saint John Paul II highlights the importance of **family love**. He said: “...*the essence and the role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has as its mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.*” In his letter to Families on 25 Feb, 2014, Pope Francis emphasized the fact that: “If there is no love (in your journey as a family) then there is no joy, and authentic love comes to us from Jesus.” (Oct 2014: Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to discuss the theme of: “pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization”).

Nurturing love in our families will help us to deepen our faith; to walk in Christ's footsteps; to be His living witnesses. Let us open our hearts and minds to allow God's love to flow in and through us and our families; let His love infuse our lives with Gospel values so that our families will play their part in building God's Kingdom here on earth.

When last did you hug your loved ones in your family and tell them that you love them?

END: I leave you with the words of Saint John Paul II (Message to the Pontifical Council for the Family on the 20th anniversary of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: *Familiaris Consortio*, 22 Nov 2001):

“Family, believe in what you are; believe in your vocation to be a luminous sign of God's love.”

Good governance is about so many things, including using the resources of the nation for the benefit of the people. As the US Bishops have said: “Marriage and the family are the central social institutions that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined.”

The Catholic Church believes that the economy should work for the people. The people are the object; people are more important than things.

What is the use of having tall imposing buildings when so many of our people go hungry daily, when the differently-abled face endless hurdles to accomplish even simple tasks, when our health care system remains deficient in so many ways, when so many families are dysfunctional and there are no real safety-nets for them.

A Catholic vision of society is an **inclusive** one – one in which justice, peace, truth, love, freedom and forgiveness prevail. If we are to promote and protect Family Life, we must create conditions within our communities/country that will allow The Family to flourish. Too many of our families/individuals within families live on the margins – in this land of plenty.

A key obstacle to TT's development is corruption at various levels of society. **Corruption** deprives citizens of fundamental human rights; to the monies that should be used to lift the living standards of our people; it deprives them of the resources of the land which should be used to enhance their lives and enable them to realise their potential; it sometimes deprive them of their lives. Families cannot thrive where corruption exists.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said on International Anti-Corruption Day 2012 (9 Dec):

“The cost of corruption is measured not just in the billions of dollars of squandered or stolen government resources, but most poignantly in the absence of the hospitals, schools, clean water, roads and bridges that might have been built with that money and would have certainly changed

the fortunes of families and communities. Corruption destroys opportunities and creates rampant inequalities. It undermines human rights and good governance, stifles economic growth and distorts markets...Corruption is not inevitable. It flows from greed and the triumph of the undemocratic few over the expectations of the many.”

We will only build strong families when we empower people to believe in their ability to achieve. Too many of our children are growing up with **no fathers** in their lives and in at-risk communities. And since teachers in many of our schools are female, studies, such as the recent Ryan Report: *No time to quit: Youth at Risk*, show that society must find solutions e.g. mentoring, positive male role models etc.

While the State has a duty to ensure that sustainable development in TT is people-centred, each of us has a duty to pray for and to reach out to families; help them to flourish – starting with our own. God has made us all “family”. The challenge for us is to move from a vertical relationship with God to a horizontal relationship with Him as we see Him in our family members and in the community at large. It’s time to stand up for The Family!

(See handout on flip side of your programme – taken from Catholic Catechism: 2207 – 2211: THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY. I won’t read it – you can read it at home.

“2207 The family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability, and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honour God, and make good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society.

2208 The family should live in such a way that its members learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped (differently abled), and the poor. There are many families who are at times incapable of providing this help. It devolves then on other persons, other families, and, in a subsidiary way, society to provide for their needs: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

2209 The family must be helped and defended by appropriate social measures. Where families cannot fulfill their responsibilities, other social bodies have the duty of helping them and of supporting the institution of the family. Following the principle of subsidiarity, larger communities should take care not to usurp the family's prerogatives or interfere in its life.

2210 The importance of the family for the life and well-being of society entails a particular responsibility for society to support and strengthen marriage and the family. Civil authority

should consider it a grave duty "to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family, to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality, and promote domestic prosperity."

2211 The political community has a duty to honor the family, to assist it, and to ensure especially:

- the freedom to establish a family, have children, and bring them up in keeping with the family's own moral and religious convictions;

- the protection of the stability of the marriage bond and the institution of the family;

- the freedom to profess one's faith, to hand it on, and raise one's children in it, with the necessary means and institutions;

- the right to private property, to free enterprise, to obtain work and housing, and the right to emigrate;

- in keeping with the country's institutions, the right to medical care, assistance for the aged, and family benefits;

- the protection of security and health, especially with respect to dangers like drugs, pornography, alcoholism, etc.;

- the freedom to form associations with other families and so to have representation before civil authority."

It is parents who are charged with communicating love of God and of neighbour to their children. It is only through love that that community of people called "the family" can promote the full development of personhood in each member. In his Letter to Families (1994), the Pope rightly stated that **the family "remains a social institution that neither can nor should be replaced: it is the 'sanctuary of life.'"*

****Mother Teresa's words are sound. She said: "What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family." It is because of a lack of love that there is so much injustice against The Family today. Many families in our country and in our world are in crisis - in both rich and poor countries.**

Here is TT, we don't seem to have up to date data on poverty. Recently, you would have read that the Government has initiated a Survey of Living Conditions through the Ministry of the

People and Social Development. The last Survey is dated 2005. The data shows that at that time 16.7 per cent of our people (about 210,000 persons) live below the poverty line. The poverty line today is \$665 per adult person per month. Prof Karl Theodore, UWI, conducted a study that shows that in 2008 the poverty line should have been \$881 per adult per month. Given the rise in food prices etc. we must ask: 'Is the poverty line of \$665 TT per adult per month realistic?' We need up to date data so that we can develop evidence-based policies; target our limited resources effectively; develop appropriate poverty reduction programmes; implement these and monitor and evaluate their effectiveness.

Work undertaken last year by the Network of NGOs for the Advancement of Women – led by Hazel Brown, shows that the figure is much higher than this today.

Does our Poverty Reduction Action Plan outline short, medium and long term goals, showing clearly the roles and responsibilities of the various Government Ministries in Poverty Reduction and strategies for promoting Corporate Social Responsibility?

As the **World Bank** has stated in relation to poverty reduction in TT: “Ensuring the collection and analysis of data such as the **Survey of Living Conditions** on a regular basis, will provide policy makers with an important tool for decision making.”

(It is not clear whether the data that is being used currently is drawn from the 2012 Trinidad and Tobago Human Development Atlas, launched on July 9, 2012, and produced by the Central Statistical Office and the United Nations Development Programme.

You can access the Atlas at: <http://www.planning.gov.tt/mediacentre/press-releases/human-development-atlas> Senator Dr. the Honourable Bhoendradatt Tewarie said in the Foreword:

“This Atlas marks the first time that Human Development Indicators, Millennium Development Goals data, Crime and Violence statistics and data covering Trinidad and Tobago by regions are represented in such a format. The data assists us to establish the status of the country and our people as of 2010 and provides a baseline for improving the condition of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

“By documenting the state of human development using spatial representations, the Atlas allows us to view specific aspects of human development, including the Millennium Development Goals and crime and violence in Trinidad and Tobago at a regional level. We are able to identify clearly the regions where poverty is highest or lowest, or where crime is more of

a problem, or is perceived to be. Discrepancies among the various regions permit policymakers to ask questions about how resources are allocated to tackle national issues. More and better information can support better decisions with a more targeted focus.”)

Last May (Fri 10), I attended a Consultation at the Hilton - organised by the Ministry of Planning and Sustainable Development. Minister Tewarie acknowledged in his presentation at the Consultation entitled: “The Future We Want” that “Although Trinidad and Tobago was classified as a high income country, it has pockets of **extreme poverty**.”

Catholics must develop our vision for families in our communities/country and play our part to promote and protect our families so that they will have an opportunity to participate in the social, economic, physical and cultural activities of our nation – indeed, in nation-building.

Sadly, while many of our families in our communities are faring well, if we read the signs of the times, we will know that all is not well for a significant number of our families. In our region, over the last few decades, the family has been undergoing a profound and far-reaching transformation. In many ways, family structure and family values have been changing. The extended family is eroding rapidly. Also, there appears to be an **anti-family mentality** that is sweeping our world. This is all part of the throw-away society that threatens our stability. Human life and human dignity are being compromised daily. Family life and family values are often debased. Yet we must not give up. Now is the time to strengthen our resolve to stand by our families.

And while we acknowledge the contribution of single/divorced/widowed parents, grandparents or guardians to their children or to children in their care, our vision must be for a world in which all children can grow up with a mother and a father.

We must be aware of the challenges that families face; the social ills that confront them e.g. poverty and social exclusion. According to **The Social Exclusion Unit** (1997) in England: “Social exclusion is a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as *unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown*.” There are quite a few areas like that in TT. And then there is our inadequate education system from which about 4,000 students drop out each year (according to the Minister of Education), domestic violence, incest, human trafficking, drug/substance/alcohol abuse, the proliferation of guns; lack of care or respect for the elderly, the differently abled, the mentally ill and so on. And then there are deficiencies in various State institutions that impact adversely on families – not enough social workers, guidance counsellors, psychologists, probation officers etc.

The family is the bedrock of our society. In his Independence Day address to the nation on 31 Aug 1962, **Dr Eric Williams stated clearly that “the strength of the Nation depends on the strength of its citizens.”**

Strong families build strong communities which in turn will build a strong nation. A strong family is one in which:

- There are good communication/interaction skills and members know how to talk and listen to each other.
- There is mutual love, care and respect for each other.
- Parents set an example of ethical and moral behaviour and consistency of values. The “do as I say, not as I do” brigade will always fail to build a strong family (see boy and porn in S’do.)
- There is mutual help among family members for human growth and growth in faith, values and morals.
- Parents take an interest in their children’s lives and seek to guide and counsel them – always remembering to praise and reward good behaviour and to reprimand bad behaviour in a manner that does not break a child’s spirit or spawn violent behaviour in the child e.g. Some time ago I was in a Supermarket and I heard a woman tell her young child who wanted her to buy a pack of biscuits for him: “Put it back or I will buss two wood in yuh tail!” We must remember that children learn what they live.

It is in the family that we will develop **a culture of life; a spirit of nation-building.** To love one’s nation, one must have love in one’s heart. Love for God, love for neighbour, love for oneself, and for God’s Creation. God must be at the centre of Family Life. When we take God out of our lives, we take love out of our lives because God IS love.

During the Consultation on Constitutional Reform in TT, you will recall that the Humanist Association submitted a proposal to take God out of our Constitution. Can you imagine what will happen to our country if we push God out? In his encyclical, Charity in Truth, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reminded us: “...without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is.” We read in John 15:5: “Apart from me you can do nothing.” And in Mt 28:20 we read Jesus’ promise to us: “Know that I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.” We must help families to hold on to Jesus.

How do we demonstrate our love for our families?

Dr. Nick Stinnet, expert in family life (who retired from the University of Nebraska, identified characteristics of successful families in his *Family Strengths Research Project*) says that “the patterns found to be important include *mutual appreciation, quality time, effective communication, commitment, and religious orientation*(<http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info/>).

While we strive to build families within our communities, **the State** has a duty to do so also. Sustainable development must be people-centred development.

People-centred development must be based on sound values which human beings usually develop within families – whether it’s in single parent homes, the nuclear family, or the extended family (which has all but eroded today).

It is difficult for parents to inculcate in the hearts and minds of their children *values such as love, integrity, honesty, fairness, justice, peace, truth, forgiveness*, and so on, if no one nurtured these in them in the first place.

Sadly, today, with more and more **socially displaced children/street children and barrel children** on our streets, they have to “drag” themselves up without any guidance, mentors or role models.

(Tell story of

- Credo Foundation for Justice: socially displaced children
- Radio interview with boy just out of YTC – how did you become a bandit... barrel child)
- Family life is under constant attack today from various social ills. A few months ago I met a 22 year-old man in a take-away restaurant. He was limping and his foot was bandaged. He told me he had been shot in the foot. He asked if I would give him some money if he sang me a song. I agreed. His song struck a chord in my heart. He sang about his life; a life of trials and tribulations.

He sang about holding on to Jesus as the only one who could save him. And as we talked he received a call on his cell phone. It was his 6 year-old son whom he had left at home alone. “Doh worry bout he, man, he cool!” he said, as I expressed my concern for the welfare of his son. There are many families in our communities that are hurting and need healing. We live in a country in which many young children are left on their own. Leaving a cell phone with a young child so you can keep in touch while you’re out will not cut it as far as good parenting is concerned.

There are a number of issues relating to **males in our society** that we continue to ignore e.g. the lack of male role models at home, in schools, in communities; the prevalence of gangs and gang warfare – these gangs mainly comprise males; the fact that about 80% of students at UWI are female – where are our young men?

*** If we are to promote and protect The Family, we need to be aware of attempts to redefine terms such as “gender” and “family” which 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 on 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.*”

Pope Emeritus 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 Emeritus Benedict XVI stressed that “sexual difference cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the definition of marriage.” **REFER TO STATEMENT BY AEC BISHOPS LAST WEEK IN J’CA ON MARRIAGE ETC.**

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.

(Refer to *Draft National Policy on Gender and Development* and the *Draft Policy on Sexual and Reproductive Health* – which religious groups believe are seeking, inter alia, to redefine the term ‘gender’ which could pave the way to legalise same-sex relationships, abortion etc. Also, see the SRH Draft Policy is calling for the reduction in the age of consent – now at 16. Battle to get it to 13!

We must not be lured into the trap of enlarging the term “Gender” which is contained in the current draft National Policy on Gender and Development. Inter alia, the Ministry’s draft states that

“*Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities, attitudes and behaviours, and attributes and expectations associated with being male and female, which are denoted by the terms masculine and feminine. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women’s and men’s roles and responsibilities, access to and control over resources, and participation in decision making. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a man or woman in*

*a given context. It is socially constructed and learned through **socialisation processes.***”

At 2 meetings with the then Minister of Gender, Youth, and Child Development, Hon Minister Marlene Coudray, Catholics, as well as all other faith communities represented at the meetings, rejected this definition which is intrinsically flawed and which makes 'Gender' fluid - male, female and anything else that one may choose to call oneself.

Catholics recognise the only internationally-binding definition of gender which is outlined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) which TT signed in 1999. The statute came into force in TT in July 2002. The ICC definition states: **“Gender refers to the two sexes, male and female, within the context of society. The term gender does not indicate any meaning different from the above.”**

During the second meeting with the Minister, Msgr Llanos (now Bishop Llanos) and I did some calculations and found that those religious leaders/representatives present represented more than 937,000 citizens in TT. This is a clear indication that TT does not wish to enlarge the meaning of the term 'Gender.'

As Archbishop Joseph Harris said to the media when he was speaking out against homosexuality and same-sex unions on 10 June 2013: “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 who 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.”

(Refer to Conference in Jamaica: [International Conference “Human Rights, International Law and the Family” – Jamaica](#) – 8 Dec 2012. You can read my 69-page report under the Reports section of my Commission’s website. Just Google: *CCSJ Trinidad*. The conference “explored in detail the basis for new ‘rights’ and the threats which these ‘rights’ pose to the traditional, natural family. At the end of the Conference participants were invited to sign *The Kingston Declaration on Human Dignity, Family and Society*, a formal statement outlining the Judeo-Christian ideals for marriage and the natural family, which serves as the basis for a healthy society.

It was helpful to listen to speakers from other countries e.g. Canada, South Africa, England, the Caribbean, as they addressed key issues affecting our families e.g. How laws are shaping cultural

attitudes towards Marriage and the Family. Mrs Ruth Ross, Christian Legal Fellowship from Canada, reminded us that “God is always redeeming the time – Go and tell! Trust God... There is still time to redeem the law and the culture. We must wake up. We can’t be reactionary. We must be proactive.” If you have some time, do read the report.

Pope Emeritus 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.”

Archbishop Edward Gilbert said in his New Year’s Eve homily a couple of years ago: “*The nature of the family is to form people, to train them to learn values, help them to learn virtues so they know how to live their lives...I ask the **grandparents** to teach the grandchildren if you see the parents not teaching them. Parent, teach your children, if you do not teach them how are they going to learn?*”

Sadly, for a variety of reasons, many grandparents are not part of their grandchildren’s lives. Indeed, if we are to focus on family life, we need to look at how we treat the older generation in our families; we must focus on **intergenerational/solidarity/ justice** also. We are called to respect all life.

Many countries in the world today are faced with the prospect of populations that are getting progressively **older**. In TT the fertility rate is 1.6 per 1,000.

See European Study: [Intergenerational solidarity - European Commission - Europa](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_269_en.pdf) The Flash Eurobarometer Intergenerational solidarity (Flash No 269)
ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_269_en.pdf :

“...birth rates are declining while life expectancy is rising. This demographic evolution will be accompanied by profound social changes: in terms of social protection, housing and employment, for example. However, the EU population’s gradual ageing process is also having a strong impact on conventional relationships between generations. The political debate has often focused on the negative challenges of ageing, such as the need for increased expenditure on pensions, health care and social protection systems. Such systems are dependent on the concept of (intergenerational) solidarity, an integral part of the European economic and social system, and –therefore –a crucial factor in this debate. According to the European Commission, solidarity and the creation of links between younger and older generations should not be seen in strict financial terms. The Commission recommends placing equal importance on the promotion of mutual cooperation and interchanges between the generations, as well as better understanding and new forms of co-existence.”

In 2000, there were 600 million people aged 60 and over. It is estimated that there will be 1.2 billion by 2025 and 2 billion by 2050. Ageing is a development issue which TT, like other countries, must address. To improve the quality of life for our ageing society, we would do well to focus on the UN Principles that address the *independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity* of older persons. Instead of utilizing the talents of our elderly, there is quite a significant amount of elder abuse in TT.

On 4th June 2012 our Health Minister in TT, Dr Fuad Khan, made a statement about the number of our elderly citizens whose families “willfully” abandon them in hospitals where they remain as they have nowhere else to go. For example, he said that “out of **800** elderly patients admitted to St Ann’s Hospital, **600** were what he described as “social cases” — people left to fend for themselves...

There may be legitimate instances, among the hundreds of elderly people left behind in local hospitals, of families who are genuinely unable to care for their aged, but it’s possible that the public healthcare system, with the best of intentions, maybe abetting scams to cheat infirm citizens out of their pensions and property. Shaliza Hassanali’s report in The Guardian on 3 June states that “the same problem of abandonment exists at the Port-of-Spain General Hospital, the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex (EWMSC), the San Fernando General Hospital and at the gerontology unit at the St James Medical Complex.

“Health Minister Dr Fuad Khan on Thursday confirmed that **the dumping of senior citizens is on the rise**. Senior citizens are being dumped at public hospitals by relatives—some heading off

on holidays, others unable to cope with the pressure and stress of being full-time caregivers. “Khan said **some patients at St James have been living there between 20 and 30 years.**

“People are just living at St James. They have free room and board. People come and take their pensions and everybody happy except the taxpayers. “St James has been a dumping ground over the years for elderly people. **These people have families who do not want to take care of them.** They leave them in St James and disappear.”

He said the management at St James was also at fault for turning a blind eye. Khan said it was time the relatives of the elderly live up to their responsibilities.”

As the Guardian Editorial on 4 June 2012 states: **“It’s also clear that there is a need for formalised public-sector geriatric care and residency.** Director of the Division of Ageing Dr Jennifer Rouse notes that *the population is greying and the 156,000 people now listed as elderly will rise by one percent each year.*

“Dr Rouse anticipates a need for greater capacity in residential care. *Of the 131 homes for the elderly in Trinidad and Tobago, 85 are functioning* and there is a need for greater capacity to manage the needs of the growing elder population. Dr Rouse envisions government and private-sector collaboration on residence-care model homes and more growth in the elder-care sector over the next few years.

“These new facilities might be purpose-built or adapted from existing structures and offer a real home for older, infirm citizens who find themselves without the support systems necessary to continue a dignified life. The window for creating these improved facilities and for establishing a viable, well-monitored geriatric-care sector in both the public and private sectors is rapidly closing as the numbers of elderly people who will need care steadily increase beyond existing capacity. What’s clear is that the current situation is intolerable...”

***Sadly, there appears to be **no regulatory systems** to monitor the quality of care in homes for the elderly. A significant number of senior citizens in some of these homes have had one of their legs amputated because they have diabetes and it appears that the necessary care is not forthcoming in some of these homes.

According to Dr Kenwyn Nicholls who is working with CCSJ on a Project entitled: Diabetes: Prevention and Management, **we have one of the highest levels of amputations in the Western hemisphere per capita due to diabetes.**

On 12 March 2012, Director of the Diabetes Outreach Programme with the Trinidad and Tobago Health Sciences Initiatives (TTHSI), Dr Paul Ladenson named diabetes as possibly the leading cause of blindness and foot amputations in Trinidad. Dr Ladenson is Professor of Endocrinology, Medicine, Pathology, Oncology, Radiology and Radiological Science at the Johns Hopkins

University School of Medicine in Maryland, USA. According to the Express Newspaper, “he emphasised that this country faces an epidemic that if left unchecked has significant economic, human and health consequences.

“President of the Academy of Diabetes Clinicians of T&T, Dr Claude Khan, stressed that there is an explosion of diabetes in this country and called for more resources to be invested in the primary care settings for diabetes care, to prevent serious complications from the disease.”

Diabetes is not the only challenge facing our families in TT. Many are being buffeted and blown by winds of darkness and death. We must be firm in our resolve not to give in but to hold fast to our belief that God made us, His children, and our families for a noble purpose. Your task as religious leaders, and indeed, of all of us, is even more important in the face of moral relativism, individualism, greed, selfishness and secularism which seek to push religion off the public stage and relegate it to the private realm.

We would do well to heed the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who said: “Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being”

Let us start treating families as if they are truly families so that we will help them to become what they are capable of being – mothers, fathers, sons, daughters and so on. If we are to “become” what we are, children of God, made in His image and likeness, we have to do as Archbishop Joseph Harris says, and *move from veneration to imitation – for Christians this means imitation of Christ.*

To “become” what we are, Christians must walk in the footsteps of Christ; we must “live” Christ - which means we must love as Christ loves us. I would hazard a guess that the main reason for many of the problems in our families is a lack of agape love (self- sacrifice; selflessly serving to build the common good). As Pope Emeritus Benedict said in his encyclical: “God is Love”, “love is probably the most misunderstood subject in history.”

We need a new vision of love – the love that God provides. In a world of selfishness, greed, individualism, moral relativism; in a world in which attempts are being made to push God off the public stage and into the private realm, it is little wonder that our families are in crisis.

We will only build a strong nation if we all learn how to live our faith in the marketplace. God has made us all “family”. The challenge for us is to move from a vertical relationship with God to a horizontal relationship with Him as we see Him in our family members and in the community at large.

Our parents need to develop life skills and parenting skills. Schools and faith communities could do more to support parents in this regard. See Family Life – **Commonsense Parenting**

programme. Also, Minister Marlene Coudray has said that her Ministry – Gender, Youth and Child Development, will be embarking on a **National Parenting Programme** soon.

Families face myriad challenges and we need to acknowledge the lived situation of individuals/families (single parents families etc), reach out to assist them and seek to empower them. (Give example of single mothers in part of TT who could not use an **ATM** and who were being exploited by youths who took a third of their wages to get the money out of the ATM for them).

We need all hands on deck to address the many social ills that pervade our communities As people of faith, we cannot afford to watch silently as the gap between the rich and the poor widens into a yawning gap.

Remember the parable of Dives and Lazarus. In our region and in the world there are many families living like Lazarus waiting for the crumbs to fall from the table of rich people like Dives. Each nation is only as strong as the families and the individuals within those families. Many of our families are socially excluded. There is a sense of urgency in the air. Sociologists see strong links between crime and social exclusion.

In their Pastoral Letter on Crime and Violence, the Catholic Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference highlighted the risk factors that impact on family life. We would do well to address these.

And what about the **education** of our families? We cannot say that we have free education when there is no level playing field and some children are denied education because their parents do not have the money to pay taxis to take them out of areas in which the roads are so bad that taxis hike up the price to e.g. \$10 per person or if students miss schools to help their parents sell in markets etc. (Ryan Report)

Our forebears saw education as the way out of poverty. However, our education system leaves much to be desired. Families cannot help to build our nation if many of them are illiterate, if no one is seriously addressing school drop-outs, bullying, an inappropriate curriculum etc. Pope Paul VI called illiterate people: “Starved spirits”. Sadly, there are untold numbers of starved spirits in our countries.

The mental health and well-being of children are dependent on the presence or absence of a number of variables that have a powerful impact on their lives. The presence/involvement of fathers, just like mothers, is one variable that always matters. Parenting roles should complement each other. Committed fathers are essential to the growth and development of families. Fathers can be important contributors to their children’s lives. According to psychotherapist Will Schutz, a good relationship between father and child needs 3 things: involvement, respect and influence,

and affection. Involved fathers contribute to children's confidence, competence, and emotional, intellectual, and social well-being. It is important that a child comes to understand that his/her father is available and trustworthy in a variety of different situations.

We can and must do more to promote responsible fatherhood e.g. by establishing community/faith-based fatherhood programmes. Encourage fathers to take an active and positive role in their children's lives.

And how are we preparing our boys for fatherhood and our girls for motherhood (give example of UWI Panel Discussion on Domestic Violence – girl– “If yuh love de man yuh go take de licks.” – how are we socializing our youths?)

Every child brings us God's smile and invites us to recognise that life is His gift, a gift to be welcomed with love and preserved with care always and at every moment.(Pope Emeritus Benedict) These words came to mind as I read about the pain that 6-year-old Josiah Governor must have gone through at the hands of his 25 year-old stepfather, now before the Court in TT charged with his murder. On January 25 2012, he reportedly told police that he used a piece of PVC pipe to beat Josiah because he was not paying attention during a maths lesson. It is also alleged that Josiah was thrown through a window after being beaten. He fell 10 feet down and died.

In CCSJ's media release in January 2012 we reported on a case in which another man is alleged to have thrown a 10-month-old baby through a window because the child was crying. He also beat the baby's 3-year-old sister with a baton and beat their mother. It is an indictment on societies that continue to fail to protect innocent, defenseless children. The Express Editorial (Jan 25) sums up the situation in T&T:

“In Josiah's death...the whole society is culpable. Josiah's family failed to fulfil their most basic duty — protect the life of their child. The community failed him, by refusing to get involved even to the extent of reporting the matter to the police. The teachers at Josiah's school failed, either by not noticing that anything was wrong, or failing to deal with the issue if they did notice.

The social services failed from the time Josiah was born, by not identifying the mother and her baby as at-risk. And all the adults in Trinidad and Tobago who believe corporal punishment is justified have tacitly contributed to the cycle of violence which all too easily leads to the killing of children.”

As Dr David Bratt said in his Guardian column on 31Jan 2012 entitled: “Lost children, every child for himself”: “Another bad week for children in T&T. We seem to be having so many of them: weeks of the lost children for whom no one speaks. ...the name, Joshua, will now join the list of the Akils, Seans, Daniels, Amy, Emilies, and so on, whose deaths we have come to regret.

“After being beaten up with a piece of PVC pipe, Joshua was thrown through a window of his “home” to crash land on the ground 10 feet below. The perp said “he could not believe that a few strokes with the PVC pipe could have resulted in the death of the boy.”

A 25-year-old handyman, allegedly used the PVC pipe because Joshua was not paying attention during math lessons.

“The autopsy at the Forensic Science Centre in St James revealed that Joshua died from blunt force trauma. In addition to being undernourished, he also had a healing fracture of the right arm which the child suffered last December. The body was covered with bruises. Not surprisingly the neighbours were aware of the child being repeatedly beaten. No one ever called the Police. Every child for himself. Those that survive the brutality must feel kindly towards the rest of us.

The week ended with the suicide of a 12-year-old and the waterboarding of a nine year old. Everton Vasquez, had recently received an “F” grade in class. Because of this he had not received any presents for Christmas or his birthday; he was described as “full of rage and anger at times” and had just been “belted for not listening.” He hanged himself with an electrical cord.

One wonders why he failed school and why he was “full of rage and why he was “not listening.” Could he have been depressed? Do children get depressed? Yes, they do. Could he have been one of the 50,000 or so school children who do badly at school because they have some sort of learning problem? Dyslexia? ADHD? Could he perhaps have been a genius who was dissatisfied with the slow pace and deadly routine of school work in T&T? Yes, all possible.

Then there was the local case of waterboarding. A staff member of a private school in Maraval allegedly attempted to flush the head of one of the students down a toilet, a physical impossibility at the best of times. “Nine-year-old boys are quite strong and agile so much force must have been required. In addition to the danger of drowning, or at least the sensation of drowning, waterboarding can cause extreme pain, damage to lungs, brain damage from oxygen deprivation, other physical injuries including broken bones and bruising due to struggling against restraints and lasting psychological damage and death. In this particular case, infection from the contents of the toilet is another possibility. Waterboarding upgraded? Really, what could this child have done to warrant such a reaction? There can be no excuse for this. In between all this action, we had the Daniel Guerra Murder Inquiry taking place. Daniel is the little eight-year-old boy who went missing in February last year, after he was sent to a parlour to buy Lucozade and whose body was found in a drain two days later...It is all quite too much.”

The welfare of our children is too important to leave it to chance. Our hearts are not fully open to receive God’s gifts. Last February that Marlon King was sentenced to death by hanging for the murder of four-year-old Amy Annamunthodo. “On May 15, 2006, King tied Amy's hair to a piece of cloth and strung her to a door frame at his Ste Madeleine Road, Marabella, home. He

then gagged the child with a knotted plastic bag and punched her about her body with his clenched fists 20 to 30 times. King and Amy's mother, Anita Annamunthodo, took the child's corpse to the hospital that night. The attending doctor found the child's body had already stiffened and bore bruises covering her body and cigarette burns to her chest, abdomen, back and genitals. The pathologist later found lacerations, tears, bleeding, scrapes and bruises on Amy's brain, neck, eye, chest, shoulder, palm and back of her right hand, her heart, lungs, spleen, liver, adrenaline glands, kidney, abdomen, pelvic area, upper, mid and lower back, and bottom.”
(Express)

* And on Easter Sunday (Apl 2012), two-year-old Aaliyah Johnson

was pronounced dead at the Siparia health facility. The autopsy showed she was beaten to death - she suffered blunt-force trauma to the abdomen, which ruptured her liver. Her 18 year old mother is before the courts charged with killing Aliyah by cuffing her and rupturing her liver. She allegedly taught the child to drink beer and beat the child to death when she drank some of her beer. Where were all the religious people in the community? Who was looking out for the child? Today so many could say share the horror stories of this little child's short life, yet no one came to her aid. We all have to take some of the blame. If we are not part of the problem, let's become part of the solution.

See Express report on 14 Apl by Carolyn Kissoon :

“In delivering the homily, Fr Martin Sirju said Aliyah joined a long line of children who have died in violent attacks. He said in an era where science and technology were developing tremendously too many children were becoming victims of abuse.“Sirju said the only solution was through education and religion. "Education is not reaching the poor and without education our options are reduced. Too many poor children are without an education and they are left out of society," he said. Sirju said uneducated people become angry and violent. "People with little or no education become angry, particularly young boys. This also increases the number of angry women and Aliyah was a victim of violence," he said.

“Sirju said a number of the country's women become pregnant before the age of 18. "Parenting is not a responsibility to take lightly. It is the most important responsibility that a man and woman ever has. And it is something many people cannot handle," he said. Sirju said religious organisations and community centres should offer lessons on proper parenting.

"Sometimes we seek help when it is too late. Let religious bodies and community centres be a place where people can go to learn these skills. Community centres should not be places for entertainment only, but learning. There is an urgent need for some kind of widespread parenting training in every town, village, city in this country," he said.

We live in a culture in which neighbours do not assist by contacting the authorities – until it is too late. Neighbourliness has gone through the window – fear of retaliation by the aggressor has caused us to ‘mind our own business’. However every child’s life is our business. We have to bring back love. There are hotlines that exist. We must encourage people to use these. Our police service also leaves a lot to be desired in terms of response times etc.

This is a good time for us to review the **values** that underpin the lives of our families. For example, my friend was proudly showing me around her new house when we opened the door to her son’s room. She thought he had gone out. There he was watching porn – he is 14 years old. She was so ashamed that she started to quarrel with him. He retaliated by saying: “When daddy does it, you don’t say anything, do you?” Yes, children learn what they live. Our parents must model the kind of values they wish to inculcate in their children.

Too often, though, we call for a return to traditional family values without calling the various authorities to demonstrate that they value families. Action is also required in our schools/educational institutions which must do more in the curriculum to promote character development, conscience formation and values/virtues education. (Refer to the VVFP programme in Catholic Primary schools – now incorporated in material produced by the Catechetical team).

*****I make an urgent plea** to all of you today, to **set up ministries in your parishes to reach out to at-risk families and children and to be advocates for them.** The sanctity of life and the dignity of each person are at stake here. As the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, UK, states: “The future of any community depends on its ability to ensure the health and well-being of the next generation... All children deserve an equal opportunity to experience healthy growth and development. When child abuse and neglect interferes with that opportunity, we put our future at risk.”

While we need our Governments to put in place and implement legislation, policies, a fully functional Children’s Authority and appropriate infrastructure to protect the nation’s children, we, our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, must also take action to promote justice for them. We can make a difference; we can prevent child abuse.

One of the most shocking reports I have read about recently is in Newsday on 5 June 2012 (Miranda La Rose). The headlines read: More moms abusing kids. “A publication, Situation analysis of children and women in Trinidad and Tobago has reported a growing trend in child abuse, and that mothers were the main perpetrators of physical abuse in the homes. “A high level of sexual exploitation in Trinidad and Tobago,” involving mainly sex with females under 16 years, and high incidence of rape, have also been reported. The publication also reports an increase in violence in schools, particularly bullying, at the secondary school level.

“The findings and recommendations of the situation analysis was launched in June 2012 by Khin-Sandi Lwin, UNICEF Representative based in Barbados at UWI’s Health Economics Unit, St Augustine. The analysis was funded in the sum of US \$120,000 with UNICEF providing the sum of US\$70,000 and UWI providing the remainder. The research and analysis were conducted by UWI Health Economics Unit.

“Minister of the People and Social Development, Dr Glenn Ramadharsingh, who delivered the keynote address noted that the findings and recommendation will be a key to the work of his ministry and the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development.

“Professor Karl Theodore, who led the research and analysis, gave an overview of the findings and recommendations which found that 32.9 percent of mothers were responsible for physical abuse to children in the home, compared to 26.8 percent by fathers. Both parents were responsible for 7.4 percent of physical abuse, stepfathers and stepmothers account for 11.4 percent each, and 10.1 percent by others. “These findings, Theodore said, corresponded with the UWI’s survey which found that “24.4 percent of mothers or care-givers in Trinidad believed that children need to be physically punished.” The data covered children mainly between the ages of two to 14 years.

“According to the report, children between the ages of eight and ten appear to be more vulnerable to abuse than children of other age groups. It found too, that girls more than boys, regardless of age group, tended to be more susceptible to abuse.

We are not the only ones in TT struggling to grapple with issues relating to family life. In

London last June the Anglican Bishop of London, the Rt Rev Richard Chartres, writing in a Bible Society pamphlet about the origins of the word ‘jubilee’ (in relation to the Queen’s Jubilee celebrations) said although people were better off in many ways than in 1952 when the Queen ascended the throne, “inequality had grown and material progress had been at the expense of communal life with relationships within families, communities and society more strained, fragile and broken than people cared to recognise.

"Literally millions of children grow up without knowing a stable, loving, secure family life - and that is not to count the hundreds of thousands more who don't even make it out of the womb each year....Promiscuity, separation and divorce have reached epidemic proportions in our society....Perhaps, then, we shouldn't be surprised that depression and the prescription of anti-depressants has reached a similarly epidemic level.” He said the Queen’s jubilee provides an opportunity for society to seek to “rebalance the scales” in society and focus on how society can “reset” the situation. There is much in what he says that speak to us herein TT. Can we ‘reset’ the situation in our various countries?

We need to take stock of where family life is and where it's going. Will we stand up for the Family and work to save our families? Investing in families is investing in society as a whole. Therefore, let's invest in our families and build a society in which all families are treated with dignity and respect.

And while we accept that there is a crisis in family life in our region, let us at least stand up for a definition of "marriage and the family" that is in keeping with our religious beliefs i.e. that marriage is a union between a man and a woman and that homosexuality is contrary to the natural law and to God's plan for humankind. When we see other people's houses on fire, we should wet our own. We do not have to import more of the culture of death that pervades other countries.

Let us join forces to stand up for the family and to play our part in encouraging families to live as living witnesses to the faith they say they profess. Only then can we realize the vision of building strong families and a strong nation. We should not simply look to government for solutions to our social ills. We must also look to our communities for role models and mentors to encourage, challenge and enthuse those who are at risk.

Sadly, as a Vatican II document (*Gaudium et Spes*, 43, 1965) states, the "split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age".

John Rohn's words are instructive. He said: *"Your family and your love must be cultivated like a garden. Time, effort, and imagination must be summoned constantly to keep any relationship flourishing and growing."*

Let us invest in our families and do as Pope Emeritus Benedict said: "support families; reach out to those in difficult marital situations, especially the divorced, single parents, teenage mothers and women considering abortion." We can and must build a society in which all families are treated with dignity and respect. And let us put God at the centre of our families. Godly families are essential to build a strong nation. It was Nehru who said that achievement requires character, discipline, united action and the readiness to sacrifice the individual self for the larger cause. Are we ready to do this to achieve our goals?

I want you to leave this Seminar committed to reflect on how you demonstrate love for your family and to work with others to create structures nationally and locally that will support families to live in dignity. Investing in our families is investing in society as a whole. We cannot abrogate our responsibilities. Each of us must raise our awareness of the part that we must play to promote and protect Family Life in TT.

END – and question and answer session.

AEC STATEMENT MARRIAGE: A COVENANT BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN

Introduction

We, the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference joyfully greet the faithful of all the various Arch/Dioceses of the Antilles Episcopal Conference with the words of the risen Christ addressed to his apostles: "Peace be with you!" [John 20:21].

In 2015, the Holy Father, Pope Francis will convene a Synod of Bishops in Rome to study and reflect upon the reality and importance of the family. To that end, we, your bishops wish to make clear the Church's teaching on the nature of marriage and the family in God's plan. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: "Marriage and the family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children...A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family" [CCC #2201 & 2202].

The holy institution of marriage thus understood is the very cell of society and Church life. We, therefore, commend and salute those who espouse this noble vocation which is beautiful and at the same time inspirational when lived faithfully, in spite of difficulties and hardship encountered because of its self-sacrificing nature.

For that reason, Vatican Council II reminds us thus: "Christ our Lord has abundantly blessed this love, which is rich in its divine love and modelled on Christ's own union with the Church" [Church in the Modern

World, #48]. We pray that married couples will never tire witnessing to their being "a union of loves in the service of life." Indeed, this is a lifestyle worthy of praise and our whole-hearted support!

We wish to reach out to our brothers and sisters who espouse a lifestyle that is contrary to the divine teaching proclaimed by the Church from time immemorial. As your bishops we wish to affirm that you are loved and blessed by God with many gifts and talents which have enriched both Church and society.

We also admit that we cannot begin to appreciate fully the extent of the pain, anguish and trials that you daily undergo, especially within the atmosphere that is prevalent in the Caribbean. Like Pope Francis, we, too, sincerely hope that you—like us—will seek to know and love personally the will of God who embraces all his children, without exception, with a love that surpasses all understanding.

The Love of God.

This is the basis of God's laws and commandments which have as their objective the total fulfilment or happiness of persons. The Church recognises the fact that God always reveals his designs for his creatures which are made in the very image of God [Gen.1: 27]. When we begin to fathom the beauty of this teaching and how it impacts upon people's situation, it leads us to consider two aspects of God's revelation: Creation which determines the law of nature; Redemption or re-creation which pertains to the divine positive law consonant with the salvation and glorification of humanity.

Creation [Law of Nature].

It is evident from the species created that there is some set order that regulates and furthers the on-going creation set in motion by God, the Creator. Both inanimate and animate beings are regulated by a certain design that is enshrined in the very act of creation [cf. Gen. 1: 11-12; 24-25]. Of interest is the fact that all are created according to their kind. Most importantly, "God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them"(Gen. 1:27). They are created to complement one another and are explicitly directed to multiply and care for the earth [cf. Gen. 1:28]. For believers--be they Jewish, Christian or Muslim--this creation story undergirds the essence of marriage and the family.

Redemption [Divine Positive Law].

The Ten Commandments are the basics of the divine law, the objective of which is proper relationships with God and with fellow human beings. The Saviour sums up the Decalogue under the Great Commandment: love God and love neighbour [cf. Dt. 6: 4-5; Lev. 19: 17], all of which culminates in the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus, which ushers in a new life welling up into eternal life. This Great Love Story of salvation could be considered as God embracing all of humanity with an everlasting love. Dare we say that married love between man and woman reflects this beautiful union?

By his saving death and glorious resurrection, Jesus has liberated humankind from the innumerable burden of laws and regulations which were meant to safeguard God's covenanted relationship with mankind. However, in no way was license intended, as St. Paul reminds the early Church: "After all, brothers,

you were called to be free; do not use your freedom as an opening for self-indulgence, but be servants to one another in love, [Gal. 5:13]. Clearly St. Paul

gives us an indication of our relationships with one another, a relationship that is based on love that is Christ-related.

The Gender Debate.

Having established ever so briefly the context, within which Christians should conduct themselves, be they married or single, we wish to comment on the topical issue of gender. It must be clearly established that all human beings, be they male or female, young or old, are endowed with inalienable rights, but rights, however, that must not infringe upon the rights of other human beings nor undermine the common good of society. What are some of those rights? The right to freedom of expression, right to freedom of religion, right to marry and to have a family, the right to an education, health care, housing, and employment. Without such rights life would not be worth living!

To sum up, then, the right to life is the most fundamental of all rights; all others are predicated on that right to life that ensures the integrity of one's dignity which is imparted neither by Church nor State, but by God, the Creator. Each person, male or female, is equal in the pursuit of those rights that ensure fulfilment of one's potential, but it must be remembered that with rights come responsibilities. For Christians, such responsibilities entail their relationship with God, and are expressed by acts of reverence, respect, and acceptance of God's will which is enshrined both in natural and divine positive laws. No one has a right to contravene natural and divine laws. Doing so leads to our peril and the determination of family life and society.

Marriage as Covenant between Man and Woman.

Within the wider context of gender, we return to the question of Marriage. We do so because world-wide there is much discussion with a view to altering the age-old tradition of this far-reaching relationship that affects the very existence of the human race, civil society, and the Church. Marriage between one man and one woman is not only a Christian institution. It is also pre-Christian and is recognised as the ideal means and context whereby children are raised with love that is both masculine and feminine [to correspond to the masculinity and femininity of each person], and educated for their rightful role in the society. Christ himself recognised and raised this complementary union of man and woman to the level of a sacrament--not just as a contract but a covenant. We never tire to reflect on this marital union as one that signifies the great mystery of covenanted union of Christ and his Church [cf. Eph. 5: 21-33].

Same-Sex Union

One of the "rights" being promulgated aggressively today in our Caribbean

Region is the union between persons of the same gender. In light of our age-old tradition of marriage that ensures the propagation of the human race and the

promulgation of our civilisation and culture, same-sex union is being promoted

by very powerful forces, as a "civil right" and an alternative form of "marriage."

Same-Sex unions are contrary both to natural law and God's positive divine law as outlined above and indeed to the Christian culture on which we still pride ourselves in the Caribbean.

Advocacy of same-sex union is presented as a means to address justice issues as a result of two homosexuals or lesbians living together and owning jointly

their home, bank accounts, and other legal assets. This sort of arrangement is viewed by many as a move in the wrong direction. It would be a mere civil union recognised by the State, but not by the Church who has no competence in changing the law of nature or the divine positive law in order to recognise such unions as "marriage." However, given the fact that assets are jointly owned by persons espousing such a union, the Church recognises the justice issue thus entailed.

The Mission of the Church.

Does that mean that the Church is not concerned about men and women having such an orientation? Of course not! The Church's role is to proclaim the Truth, "in season, out of season" [2 Tim. 4:2] to each and every person who would listen to the Word of God being proclaimed. It is that proclamation received in faith that will bring about a deeper understanding of the Truth that the Holy Spirit wishes to impart to every human being in the quest of happiness and peace. Hopefully that deeper understanding will lead to a true encounter with Christ for all of us so that we see in each other brothers and sisters on the way to Christ. However, when people make choices for lifestyles contrary to the gospel, the Church must be full of mercy, slow to judge; rather she proclaims "in season, out of season," the love and compassion of the Good Shepherd who tenderly seeks out the stray sheep and says to one and all: "Come to me all who are weary and burdened" [Matt. 11:28].

Therefore, in imitation of the Good Shepherd, the Church must care for all human beings and love them. All are God's creatures "made in the image of

God." To that end, the Church teaches regarding homosexual, bisexual and transsexual orientations: "They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfil God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition" [CCC, #2358].

The mission of the Church is clearly defined: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" [Matt. 28:19-20a]. That's the Church's mandate to proclaim the Good News of salvation!

Therefore, we appeal to our Catholic faithful to stand firm in the faith handed on to us by the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church impelled by and committed to the teaching and mission of Jesus. We also strongly urge that all will respect those brothers and sisters of ours who admit to having an orientation different from the majority of our people. We must respect them, do no violence to them, and respect their basic human rights, for they, along with us, are made in the image and likeness of God.

Respect for others, however, does not imply approval of the life styles contrary to the traditional ones, even if and when the State were to decriminalise the anti- buggery law, always bearing in mind that legality does not make a thing moral.

Our duty, under all circumstances, is to express love and concern as we remain firm in the faith of our Fathers fostered and maintained by God's Holy Spirit.

“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with every good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” [Heb. 13: 20 – 21].

Yours faithfully in Christ, Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, 8 May 2014

- **NB “All Arch/Dioceses will publish the revised and approved AEC Norms for dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests and Deacons as well as the specific diocesan implementation procedures for the Norms”**