

## **Statement from the Archbishop of Port of Spain, Archbishop Edward Gilbert and The Catholic Commission for Social Justice**

**Issued at Press Conference held at Archbishop's House, 27 Maraval Rd., POS on Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2003.**

### **Mobilising the entire community to reduce crime**

The Catholic Church is deeply concerned about the escalation of crime in T&T. Crime and fear of crime pervades our entire country. Our response to this scourge is a moral test for our nation and a challenge for each citizen. We are aware that the causes of crime are complex and that the ways to reduce it must be multi-dimensional. We cannot wait until the situation overwhelms us before responding with a range of measures.

We call on the national community to join in a new commitment to reduce crime and restore our respect for law and for the dignity of human life. Our aim must be to challenge and reject the culture of violence and death that has engulfed T&T and embrace a culture of life. Together we can promote crime prevention, restore a sense of community and build the common good.

The Catholic Church recognises that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender. We must all stand in solidarity with crime victims in their pain and loss, and reach out to them with understanding, compassion, and healing.

Those who harm others or damage property must be held accountable for the hurt they have caused. The community has a right to establish and enforce laws to protect people and to advance the common good. However, we cannot afford to give up on those who have broken the law. We believe that both victims and offenders are children of God and their dignity should be protected and respected.

While recognising the critical role that the Government and law enforcement bodies must play in crime prevention, they alone cannot solve our problems. The recent proposals outlined by the Minister of National Security and the Commissioner of Police address the symptoms of crime and not the root causes. Short-term answers to deeper social problems will not work. We need to develop short term, medium term and long term strategies. There needs to be, for example,

- a social analysis of the issues involved;
- anti-crime programmes at national, community and institutional levels;
- resocialisation programmes for youth at risk;
- guiding principles – at all levels - that will promote crime prevention;

- government consideration of instituting a gun amnesty within a limited period of time, as part of an overall strategy to reduce crime;
- government intervention to create conditions that will enable individuals to realise their potential and their human dignity. This includes addressing issues such as poverty, employment, housing, health, education and so on;
- a review of the government's Crimestoppers initiative. It does not appear to be achieving the desired results because of the fear that has gripped society about issues of confidentiality in the face of rampant crime;
- action by the new Commissioner of Police to raise the level of confidence of the public in the Police Force; increase response rate to reports of crime; increase the number of those who are apprehended and the number of cases solved. We need a Police Force that demonstrates integrity, professionalism, fairness and compassion;
- government rehabilitation programmes for prisoners and ex-prisoners.

Many of the strategies that can be adopted should involve the government, NGOs, CBOs, faith communities and society as a whole. Of major concern is the level of lawlessness that pervades the land – at all levels of society.. It is not only the poor who are involved in committing crime. White-collar crime must also be addressed.

There is indiscipline in many areas of life. We call the Country back to the virtue of discipline – even in acts that may not appear to some to contribute to the level of crime, such as ‘breaking’ traffic lights; not wearing seat belts; littering the environment and so on. We pray for a conversion of hearts so that each small act of discipline will help to build our nation.

The Catholic Church recognises that it must strengthen its efforts to help rid our country of the scourge of crime. The following are some of the areas that we believe require urgent attention if we are to succeed in reducing crime:

1. **Family Life:** All around us families and family life are breaking down. Drugs, alcohol abuse and violence affect many families. The family is the cornerstone of the community and the various communities make up the nation. So if the family is strong then the community will be strong and the nation will be strong. But if the family structure crumbles then the whole structure collapses because there is no foundation.

We call on all parents to set good examples for their children and to instil in them moral and spiritual values that they can take with them on their journey through life. Keep the channels of communication with your children open. Talk to them and listen to them.

God wants us to develop right relationships at all levels in our society and in our world. This starts in the home, in the family. We need to support parents to build

families that are loving, caring, and responsible. Much can be done in each community/parish to promote parenting skills.

- 2. Schools:** Much can be done at school level – from pre-school upwards - to promote moral and spiritual values; to engage in anti-crime campaigns such as organised marches on the issue; to include in the syllabuses a programme to promote good citizenship; to provide students with opportunities to engage in community work; to debate issues relating to crime; to tackle crime by building effective home/school/community links and so on. Catholic schools must do more to promote Catholic values and spirituality so that their students will have a frame of reference that will guide them in their daily lives. The Ministry of Education's Values Education programme, part of its 2020 Vision which is already being introduced in schools, is a positive strategy in the right direction.

However, the Government must review the education system to determine how it can be re-organised to meet the needs of all our young people so that some do not become disaffected and turn to crime. Figures referred to recently by our President, The Honourable Max Richards, highlight the fact that between the time that students take their SEA and their CXC, about 5,000 children go missing from the education system.

It is clear, however, that among those students who attend our schools there are some who have already turned to crime. Current school intervention strategies must address this issue and must address the needs of socially displaced children, of whom there is a growing number.

A review of current provision for those who do attend schools needs to be undertaken to determine whether sufficient funding is budgeted for and allocated to schools to provide, for example, supply teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, classroom assistants, remedial teachers, school psychologists, and classrooms that are not small and overcrowded.

- 3. Community:** Our communities must play a more active role in taking 'control' of their neighbourhoods and in reducing crime. We need to create a more neighbourly society that strives to prevent people from being drawn into a life of crime. If each one of us in our daily interactions with people, starting in the home, was more loving, more human, as opposed to being merely tolerant or ambivalent or worse, the ripple effect would impact on an ever widening circle of people, promote right relationships and transform lives. We have to create a culture of caring to replace the greed and selfishness which epitomises so much of our society today.

We must address the cultural values that help to create a violent environment: a denial of right and wrong, education that ignores fundamental values, an abandonment of personal responsibility, an excessive and selfish focus on our individual desires, a diminishing sense of obligation to our children and neighbours, and a misplaced emphasis on acquiring wealth and possessions.

The Catholic Church has placed a special pastoral emphasis in the Morvant and Laventille areas where a priest and a deacon have been allocated to serve the needs of the community. The Church will continue its prayer strategy by

organising, in September, a Day of Prayer for the reduction of crime and the promotion of peace and justice in our society. There can be no peace without justice.

Prayer must be combined with action. Therefore, parishes/communities should give priority to the issue of crime – discussing, analysing and coming up with ideas and programmes to address the crime situation. Community organisations such as the Association of Village Councils, Rotary Clubs and Lions Clubs have a key role to play in assisting communities in this process and in offering solutions.

Inter alia, newly elected Councillors can assist their respective communities to reflect on the positive and negative impact of modern technology; gang-related violence; the need to build community, for example, by persons in each area getting to know each other and looking out for each other and to lobby for/develop structured leisure activities and recreational facilities for young people within their communities.

4. **Media:** Finally, the media has a critical role to play in reducing crime. The practice by some in the media to glorify crime and violence and exploit sexuality undermines attempts by others to reduce crime. Media images and information can communicate fear and a distorted perception of crime. Responsible media coverage will go some way to tackle the problems we face.

The media should develop strategies to promote positive crime prevention strategies, to share good practice and to mobilise national and local support to address the issue.

The Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ) continues to work in all the areas listed above in its efforts to assist in the process of reducing crime in T&T. One of its most important projects is to assist in the process of turning a particular community around by bringing together many elements of that community, including youth, Police, local Councillors, the elderly and so on, and devising strategies with them, thus empowering them to take back their neighbourhoods and reduce the crime in the area.

In conclusion, the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of crime prevention and crime reduction strategies are all our ‘business’. As Mother Teresa once said: “We are not put on this earth to do great things, but little things with great love.” If each of us does some “little thing” with “great love”, collaboratively we can create communities in T&T where justice, peace, love, and freedom will prevail.