

Respect for Life Week

Opening Address

6th October 2012

“After all, life on earth is not an “ultimate” but a “penultimate” reality; even so, it remains a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters.”

This quotation from *Evangelium Vitae*- the Gospel of Life, spells out for us the reason why we have this RFLW. Human life must be protected so that all persons can be perfected in Love through the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters. This in fact has two dimensions to it. There must be respect for our own lives if we are to gift ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters, and we must help others to respect their own lives so that they too can make the corresponding gift of themselves to God and to others.

Respect according to the dictionary of current English means consideration for the rights and feelings of others. When the word respect is applied to life it carries with it the connotation of the avoidance of harm or interference in a negative way with life. Because of this I recommend to all that we study again, Pope John Paul’s encyclical “*Evangelium Vitae*” because it gives us a deep insight into the principles which must be observed as we more and more interface and treat with this reality called life. Life begins as we know with conception and ends with natural death. We must lobby for this understanding of life to be accepted by more and more persons and that it be worked into law. Those who have other understandings of life certainly work very hard to have their understandings of life accepted and made into law. As believers, we too must make our voices heard and carry the fight, for want of a better word, to them. We must not allow them free rein.

I say this because of a very tragic circumstance which occurred to a young couple, friends of mine recently. The mother miscarried at 20 weeks. According to law the foetus is not considered a human being until it is 26 weeks old or 500 grams in weight. The mother, since she miscarried at home, together with her husband took her miscarried baby to the doctor, who simply told them to throw it into the bin. They could not. They took their baby back home and cremated it themselves as they stood around and prayed the rosary. If we believe that

human life begins from the moment of conception should we not lobby that human foetuses, at whatever age be treated differently. Should not parents be given the chance to take leave of their dead baby in the way that they desire?

As we speak of respect for life it is essential that we do so in the context of Trinidad and Tobago, where we live. If this is not to be simply an intellectual exercise, it is important that we look at the ways in which life is devalued in T&T and seek ways to remedy the situation.

Pope John Paul II of Blessed memory in this encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* reminds us of the words of the Vatican II constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* #27.

"Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practise them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator"

From this list of actions which devalue human life, many indeed are to be found here in our Land. The unacceptable murder rate; the high level of abortions, the subhuman living conditions of too many of our people, the unsolved disappearance of women and children, wages which in no way can be considered sufficient to provide truly human living conditions, the attempts to facilitate the rise of one ethnic group over others are all things which need to be urgently corrected because they violate the integrity of the human person and/or insult human dignity.

How are we as Catholics and Christians to facilitate the reversal of these sins against human life?

I do believe that our first and principal attack on these sins against humanity must come about through a renewed system of education which will help our young people to leave school aware of their own dignity, with a great sense of self-worth and a consciousness of the dignity of other

human beings. This system of education must include philosophy or critical thinking at all three levels of education. This is extremely important. All the surveys show that gang members are functionally illiterate and that they find their self-esteem in the gang. Young women are also at risk and the lack of a good education often exposes them to exploitation in jobs for which the remuneration is far below the minimum or living wage. This brings with it other complications, including the risk of unwanted pregnancies and abortions etc. Education is therefore of extreme importance for the elimination of the conditions which often lead to the devaluing of human life.

The other facet of education which is extremely important is the teaching or training for critical thinking or philosophy. Because there is no philosophical discourse in this land of ours, our people to a large extent act only on emotion. Decisions of life and death are often made on the basis of emotion, not because someone has critically examined the issue and made a judgment about what should be done. In such a situation, life runs the risk of being devalued because it often comes down to what makes me feel good at the moment and not what is best for me or for the other in the long run. So much spousal and child abuse occurs because persons act on emotional impulses only.

Of equal importance is the harm done to our land and to families when disasters occur because of our total disregard for the land. So much ecological destruction has taken place because of the indiscriminate abuse of our natural resources for monetary gain. The recent floods in Diego Martin and Maraval have taught us a lesson which I hope we have learnt.

We are all becoming aware of the dangers of ecological destruction and so we seek ways to stop this destruction. More and more countries, including Trinidad and Tobago are enacting laws to protect the environment but unless the foundation for Environmentalism, we are told by Fr. Cantalamesa is of a religious nature we are doomed to fail. I quote "Faith teaches us that we must respect creation, not only for selfish reasons, in order not to harm ourselves, but because creation is not ours. It is true that in the beginning God said to man that he was to "subdue" the earth, but in dependence on him, on his will; as administrator, not as absolute master. He ordered man to "till and keep" the garden (Genesis 2:15); man is therefore keeper, not owner, of the earth. Between him and things there is more of a relationship of solidarity

and fraternity than of dominion. St. Francis of Assisi understood all this well, calling all creatures brothers or sisters: the sun, moon, flowers, earth, water... we should seek contact with nature, moments when we feel profoundly attuned with it and with things. The power that contact with nature has is incredible to help us re-discover ourselves and our interior equilibrium. Spiritual environmentalism teaches us to go beyond pure "protection" and "respect" of creation; it teaches us to unite ourselves to creation in proclaiming the glory of God.

I would like to end this address by reminding us of the fundamental message of the Bible. The bible you know was created between two very powerful images of harmony; The Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem. We are told that Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden in the cool of the evening; we are told that there was total trust between humans, Adam and Eve were naked in front of each other and the earth produced sufficient food to feed humans. However all the harmony and respect which humans had for God for each other and for nature was lost with the sin of our first parents and with that first sin the devaluation of human life began and has continued apace since then. If we fast forward to the New Jerusalem, we read that We are once more God's people and God is our God. We read that humans life in harmony and respect for each other. We read that the earth once again produces food with medicinal effects for human beings. All of history therefore, seen from a perspective of faith is a journey for harmony lost to harmony regained. You and I are somewhere on that journey and we are either facilitators of that journey or obstacles on the journey. In the measure that we respect life, all life and nature; in the measure that we teach others to respect all life and nature we hasten the time when there will be no more weeping and pain because the old will have passed away. We will be living the new.