

The family - "the basic cell of society" (Blessed John Paul II)

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Good morning my friends. I hope you had a good night's rest as we have a lot of ground to cover today and we will do so joyfully. This morning we will focus in a bit more depth on 1 of the social justice principles which we outlined in last night's session. That is: The Family, which Blessed John Paul II referred to as "the basic cell of society".

It was Mother Teresa who said: "What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family."

Sadly, many families in today's world are in crisis - in both rich and poor countries. On Saturday evening I watched a BBC programme on TV. It focused on Child Poverty in the USA where about 46.2 million people are living in poverty – including nearly 16 million children. The National Centre for Children in Poverty states that figures have "spiked to levels not seen since the 1960s."

Around the world about 1 out of every 2 children live in poverty. Mr William McCarthy, Executive Director of Children's Charities, USA, states that current national spending cuts will "deepen and increase poverty." Here in the Caribbean families are also feeling the effects of poverty and social exclusion.

Listening to the adults and children speaking, there was a sense of hopelessness. But Catholics are a people of hope, not hopelessness. Christ is risen. He is our hope. Therefore, we must develop our vision for families in our communities/countries and play our part to build strong families that have an opportunity to participate in the social, economic, physical and cultural activities of our nation – indeed, in nation-building.

It is true that many of our families in our communities **are** faring well – notwithstanding all the challenges they face. There are many homes in which mother and father recognise that marriage and family are not matters of contract and convenience but matters of commitment and integrity.

Their homes are places of holiness and happiness for all who enter; places for growing and for sharing, for music and for laughter; for prayer and most importantly, for love; homes where children are constantly enriched and inspired by the beauty and the bounty of their parents unconditional love for each other.

This is not to say that many single/divorced/widowed parents, grandparents or guardians who have children in their care are not enriching, inspiring and nurturing them. However, our vision must be for a world in which all children can grow up with a mother and a father. Sadly, our world is moving away from this ideal.

In order to build strong families, if we are to stand up for Families, we must be aware of the challenges that families face; the social ills that confront them.

GROUP WORK: In your group, I would like you to list some of **the key social ills** and challenges that Families in our communities and in the world face today. This exercise will last for **5 minutes**. When we return I shall ask some groups to share their thoughts with us so please choose a Rapporteur for each group. All lists will be collected and will be displayed so that you can reflect on the challenges that Families in our modern world face.

(Rapporteurs). Then:

What does the Catholic Church say about Families?

See the **Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church: Chapter 5 – The family, the vital cell of society** (paragraph 209 – 254):

- **The family, the first natural society:** a. Importance of the family for the person. B. Importance of the family for society;
- **Marriage, the foundation of the family:** a. The value of marriage. b. The sacrament of marriage;
- **The social subjectivity of the family:** a. Love and the formation of a community of persons. b. The Family is the sanctuary of life. c. The task of educating. d. The dignity and rights of children;
- **The family as active participant in social life:** a. Solidarity in the Family. B. The Family, economic life and work;
- **Society at the service of the family.**

Also, see our **Catholic Catechism: 2207 – 2211: THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY:**

“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, 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."

In *Familiaris Consortio* Blessed John Paul II highlights the importance of family love: "...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..."

It is parents who are charged with communicating this 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.'"

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.

As is stated in the Project *Building Strong Families* (<http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info/>): “The importance of strong families and the impact they have on the quality of life in communities and the nation are becoming more obvious every day. The home sets up a pattern that spills over into all other aspects of our society.”

On Tues 12 June, 2012 Carl Anderson, grand knight of the Knights of Columbus, reminded an international gathering in Dublin, Ireland, at the Eucharistic Congress, that “The family is the primordial school of love.”

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

Citizens don’t just fall out of trees; they belong to families, so we need to strengthen family life. 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 (Give example of boy watching ‘porn’ at home and his response to his mother’s comments).
- 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 our young people first learn moral and spiritual values and virtues which give meaning to their lives. Blessed John Paul II reminded us years ago that: “The future of humanity passes by way of the family.” He referred to the family as “a society in its own original right”, and the “first and vital cell of society.”

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 and, indeed, love for oneself. When we take God out of our lives, we take love out of our lives because God IS love.

The challenge for nation-building is to ensure that we all strive to assist families; that we instill in the hearts and minds of our families and communities the kind of love that will propel us to see God in our neighbour and motivate us to build a nation based on God's love for us.

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*. The patterns found to be important included *mutual appreciation, quality time, effective communication, commitment, and religious orientation* (<http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info/>).

In 1981 Blessed John Paul II wrote an Apostolic Exhortation entitled: "The Family in the Modern World"

(http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)

in which he highlights the importance of family love:

"...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..."

It is parents who are charged with communicating this 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), Blessed John Paul II rightly stated that the family "remains a social institution that neither can nor should be replaced: it is the 'sanctuary of life.' He said that marriage and family life find themselves "at the centre of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love."

At the beginning of June 2012 Pope Emeritus Benedict delivered a speech in Milan where he went to open the 7th World Meeting of Families. The theme was: "*The family, work and celebration*". He concluded his address by highlighting the importance of faith and the family in today's society.

Inter alia, he said that the family is humanity's "principal asset." On 6 June 2012 he reviewed his trip to Milan and focused once again on the 'family'. He said "the future of humanity absolutely depends on the family, which he says is humanity's "principal patrimony," the "community of life and love which God Himself has willed for man and for woman...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." He referred to the identity of the

'family' as "a communion of love, founded on marriage and called to be a sanctuary of life, a domestic Church, a cell of society."

In Milan he highlighted "the importance of legislation and the work of state institutions being ordered to the service and protection of the person in his various aspects, beginning with the right to life, the deliberate suppression of which can never be allowed, and the acknowledgement of the proper identity of the family, founded on marriage between one man and one woman."

He emphasized his call for a defense of family time, "threatened by a kind of "overbearance" of work commitments." He said we should make time for God and time for family. The Pope also recalled his appeal for Church communities that are more and more family oriented. He said: "The 'triad' of family, work and celebration [are] three dimensions of our lives that must find a harmonious equilibrium in order to build a society with a human face." "From Milan," he concluded, "a message of hope was sent out to all the world, substantiated by lived experience: it is possible and joyous, even if demanding, to live faithful love 'forever' which is open to life; it is possible to participate as a family in the mission of the Church and in the building up of society."

We should use this opportunity today to pay tribute to the thousands of families that have helped to build our blessed nations – from whichever part of the world they originated.

We must thank God, first of all, for creating and bringing together on our islands so many wonderfully talented ethnic groups and religions. In spite of all our challenges and difficulties, we have much to be thankful for. In many ways our islands reflect *unity in diversity*. While we acknowledge that we still have a long way to go to bring all our talents to bear on nation-building, we live, to a great extent, in peace with each other.

It was Winston Churchill who said: "There is no doubt that it is around the family and the home that all the greatest virtues, the most dominating virtues of human society, are created, strengthened and maintained."

And it is these virtues that a nation needs if it is to be built on strong foundations.

Our former Archbishop Edward Gilbert used to say: "Virtues inform values and values influence behaviour." (The Catechism of the Catholic Church 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 ... 'The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.' (St Gregory of Nyssa)" (no. 1803).

The New Zealand Education Office Ltd. has produced a very helpful document entitled: *Taking the high ground: Virtues and Values in Catholic Schools* (see:

<http://www.nzceo.catholic.org.nz/media/resources/publications/schools-valuesvirtues.pdf>).

In this document Values and Virtues are defined as follows: “Values are internalised sets of beliefs or principles of behaviour. Not all values are consonant with moral or ethical behaviour, even though they may be strongly upheld. (see Hitler). Nor do people necessarily act in accordance with the values they hold.

“Virtues are qualities of moral goodness or excellence. Many virtues can be derived from universally accepted principles. To be effective, they need to be nurtured and practised so that individuals live by them, not merely believe in them.)

Families can’t do it alone, so it is important that children have opportunities to practise virtues and values – at home, at school, in the community, so that they will become a ‘habit’.

As Archbishop Joe Harris said to members of CCSJ at our retreat last year: “We are all creatures of custom; we do what we are accustomed to do. Good customs are virtues; bad customs are sins. The predominant custom in your life defines you e.g. if you have a habit of lying, you are a liar. If you have a habit of stealing, you are a thief. It is important to find out what the predominant custom is in your life.”

What is your predominant custom?

And 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.

I agree with our former TT President, Prof George Maxwell Richards, who said in his Divali address on 31 May that "we are not all that we can be. Indeed, it seems that we are some considerable distance from that state. Moreover, it is difficult to dispute that some of our hard won gains have been eroded and perhaps we cannot all plead innocence.”

He warned that "The part that family values and customs have played, in this regard cannot be set aside and we ignore it at our peril. The family as a bulwark against the ills of the demeaning conditions in which Indian immigrants found themselves, played a seminal role in the survival and flourishing of Indian norms and cultural expression. These, in turn, have contributed many positives to our growth as a nation."

"We may ask whether the security of strong family ties, which stood out as a good example, is under threat today. Are the traditions of respect, particularly for elders, of thrift and of industry still alive, or are they being eroded by the pull of contemporary existence which sometimes makes no room for these attributes? To what extent are these positive characteristics, rooted in family, still available as an important element in the cultural mix that distinguishes us?" he asked.

The same could be said about all ethnic communities. 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).

But parents cannot 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.

The old people used to have a saying: “Show them you were brought up, not dragged up.” There is deep meaning in these old time sayings. 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 Radio interview with boy just out of YTC – how did you become a bandit... barrel child). I am a Board Member of Credo Foundation for Justice....)

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 societies that we continue to ignore e.g. the lack of male role models at home, in schools, in communities; the emasculation of some of our men; 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?

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 justice** also. We are called to respect all life. 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.

Recently (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. Our task 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.

Attempts to redefine terms such as “gender” and “family” are being pushed by the very people who wish to push religion off the public stage. Archbishop Harris’ words are instructive. He said to the media 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.*”

Now is the time for Catholics to speak out and reject policies that are anti marriage between a man and a woman and against the family. (Refer to Draft Gender Policy in TT – which many believe is seeking, inter alia, to redefine the term ‘gender’ which could pave the way to the legalization of same-sex relationships. The Minister of Gender, Youth and Child Development has also made it clear that she supports homosexuality and abortion).

As Archbishop Joseph Harris said to the media when he was speaking out against homosexuality and same-sex unions on 10 June: “If we facilitate sinful structures, which are against God’s law, we are teaching our young people that it’s okay to lead a sinful life. We must turn back to God.” He made it clear that the Catholic Church does not consider sexual orientation a sin. It is when one acts on that orientation that it becomes a sin. It is the act that is a sin. He warned that TT would be going down “a dangerous path” if same-sex marriages were made legal.

If we are to nurture families 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 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."

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. 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 countries: poverty and social exclusion, incest, domestic violence, crime, corruption, human trafficking and so on.

As people of faith, we cannot afford to watch silently as the gap between the rich and the poor widens into a yawning gap. I was reading online about poverty in St Maarten. Like TT, and I am sure, like the other islands represented here, this is an issue that needs to be addressed if we are to support families.

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. Social exclusion has been defined in a number of different ways. For example, “Dr. Lynn Todman, director of the Institute on Social Exclusion at the Adler School of Professional Psychology, suggests that **social exclusion** refers to processes in which individuals and entire communities of people are systematically locked from rights, opportunities and resources (e.g. housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation and due process) that are normally available to members of society and which are key to social integration.

The Social Exclusion Unit (1997) in England defines social exclusion as follows: “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”

These different dimensions of social exclusion are mutually reinforcing. Unless we address these issues, our nation will not make much progress. 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. \$2 US per person or if students miss schools to help their parents sell in markets etc.

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.

Good governance is about so many things, including using the resources of the nation for the benefit of the people. 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 systems remain deficient in so many ways, when so many families are dysfunctional and there are no real safety-nets for them. You know the saying about giving a man a fish. Well, we keep giving our men and women fish and are not teaching them how to fish. Too often we are not thinking outside the proverbial box to find solutions to social ills.

And then there are issues facing our single mothers from particular communities who feel that in order to 'hold' on to their man, they will do 'what it takes' to survive. So, they have a child or two with a man, who sometimes leaves and they move to another to help feed their children, have more children for the new person in their life and that person moves on after the child is born. Often, the children feel the brunt of domestic violence at the hands of their stepfathers. As we have seen, sometimes this has been fatal. Too many of our children are growing up with no fathers in their lives. 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.

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.

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, TT, 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 (Apr 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 Values and Virtues Formation 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 XVI 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 Workshop 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 strengthen family life and take action to do this.

(Group work: Use *Babies Down the River Worksheet* and get groups to list some practical ways in which they/their parishes can assist families).

END