

LEELA RAMDEEN'S SPEECH DELIVERED AT THE AGM OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY ON SUNDAY 20 SEPT., 2009 AT ST AUGUSTINE SECONDARY SCHOOL, GORDON ST.

Good morning brothers and sisters. It gives me great pleasure to address you today at your AGM. I stand here in solidarity with you. The great American writer, Maya Angelou reminds us that we must recognize our heroes and heroines. I look across at a sea of heroes and heroines today. As members of this honourable, international organization, the Society of SVP, you continue to play an indispensable role in our society; you touch the lives of many and bring hope to them.

This year SVP marks 176 years since the organisation started in 1833 and 152 years since it started in T&T. Today the society exists in 142 countries and has over 600,000 members worldwide. The aim of SVP is the same today as it was at its inception in 1833: “to tackle poverty in all its forms through befriending and the provision of practical assistance to those in need. The concept of need is broader than financial hardship, so visiting the sick, the lonely, the addicted, the imprisoned and those suffering from disabilities form a large proportion of the society’s work.” (SVP, England & Wales: Turning concern into action)

Blessed Frederic Ozanam said: “The knowledge of social well-being and of reform can be learned not from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor person’s garret’ sitting by their bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces them, sharing the secrets of their lonely hearts and troubled minds.”

The work that you do helps to promote the dignity and integrity of human beings; it helps to build the civilisation of love that the Archdiocesan’s Mission Statement talks about. Yes, you and I are the people of God, building the civilisation of love here in T&T and in the world.

The life of St Vincent de Paul should motivate us to forge ahead. He said; “Extend your mercy towards others, so that there can be no one in need whom you meet without helping. For what hope is there for us if God should withdraw His mercy from us?”

I pay tribute to the SVP Executive, to all members of SVP Conferences and members of SVP’s various Ministries for the sterling work in which you are engaged. And as you undertake this important work, remember Jesus’

words: "As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you did it for me" (Matt. 25:40).

At a time when our country and our the world is in danger of being overwhelmed by selfishness, individualism and moral relativism, we need dedicated people like you who will be prepared to see God in your neighbour and respond to their needs.

While we stand ready to demonstrate our love for our neighbour, let us not forget Mother Teresa's words that: "Love begins at home, and it is not how much we do... but how much love we put in that action." I urge you to fill your homes also with love and generosity. And let that love extend to all members within the SVP.

Last Sunday Pope Benedict XVI in his public address asked 2 crucial questions:

"Who is Jesus of Nazareth for you?" and "Does your faith translate into works or not?" These 2 questions remind me of the question on which His Grace, Archbishop Edward J. Gilbert, C.S.S.R., has asked us to reflect: *What does it mean to be Catholic?* Pope Benedict continued his public address last week stating:

"Jesus did not come to teach us a philosophy, but to show us a way, indeed, "the" way that leads to life. This way is love, which is the expression of true faith. If a person loves his neighbour with a pure and generous heart, it means that he truly knows God. If instead a person says that he has faith, but does not love his brothers and sisters, he is not a true believer. God does not live in him. St. James clearly affirms this in the second reading of (last) Sunday's Mass: **"If [faith] is not followed by works, it is dead"** (James 2:17). In this regard I would like to quote from the writings of St. John Chrysostom, one of the great Fathers of the Church... Commenting on the exact passage from St. James' Letter, he writes: "One may have a right faith in the Father and the Son, and in the Holy Spirit as well, but if he does not live in the right way, his faith will be useless for salvation..."

Living the right way ensures that your faith is followed by works. We celebrate and thank God today for the good works of the SVP worldwide and in T&T. It is because of your commitment to your faith that SVP runs a number of institutions: Cyril Ross SVP Nursery, 7 homes for the aged, 2 hostels, 3 night shelters, 3 halfway houses and homeless centres. We thank

God for your ministry in these and in the many other areas of your work such as Prison ministry.

I was particularly pleased to read on p35 which focuses on Finbar Ryan Geriatric Home that ‘Spirituality is an important part of the residents’ lives’. I know that this is the case in all in the facilities that SVP runs. As the Holy Father says: “Jesus must truly be at the centre of our lives”.

I was also pleased to read on that same page that the residents of the Geriatric home gather on the Home’s rooftop and courtyard for recreation and they participate in a number of activities such as Carnival jump up at St James Medical Complex, SVP sports and family day, attending a comedy show etc. We have to remember that the elderly are people too and we must have an holistic approach to their care if we are to meet their various needs – being old does not mean that one can’t jump up or enjoy a good laugh. Thank God for the committed staff working within the Society.

I remember visiting a home for the elderly in an area in Trinidad a couple of years ago. I was struck by the scene that greeted me. There was a long corridor along one side of the building. It overlooked a crumbling, mouldy wall in a small paved area that surrounded the facility. All the residents could see was concrete or sky. Seated along this corridor were about 20 elderly persons just staring at the wall. I discovered that this was the norm and not the exception. Each day that was all they had to look forward to. If we wish to promote the dignity of the human person who is made in the image and likeness of God, we are called to assist each person, including the elderly person, to realize his/her full potential.

Too often in today’s world the elderly and those who are ill or vulnerable are seen as a burden. Indeed, the promotion of euthanasia and assisted suicide are seen by some as a way of getting rid of this ‘burden’. The lack of respect for life is part of the culture of death that Pope John Paul II spoke about in his encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*. Thus, while you go about your SVP work, you also need to pray and take action to promote a culture of life. The Vatican II document: *Gaudium et Spes: The Church in the modern world* outlines the various ways in which life is under attack today:

“...whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful 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 men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator.”

In his latest encyclical: Charity in Truth, Pope Benedict XVI highlights the dilemma we face today when society sometimes says one thing and does another. He says:

"A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized." (15)

Right here in T&T we are in danger of weakening the foundations of our society by the way in which we devalue or violate the lives of some of our people, particularly the weak and marginalized. We need to ask ourselves: Are we a just society?" That same Vatican II document, The Church in the Modern World (see Compendium 132) states that :

“A just society can become a reality only when it is based on the respect of the transcendent dignity of the human person.”

Is our society ordered in such a way that it recognizes that each person is made in the image and likeness of God? I don't think so. Our Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church says that "...the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person, since the order of things is to be subordinate to the order of persons, and not the other way around... we must consider every neighbour without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his/her life and the means necessary for living it with dignity...Every political, economic, social, scientific and cultural programme must be inspired by the awareness of the primacy of each human being over society. ” (246-8).

Central to the Holy Father's recent encyclical, Charity in Truth, is the concept of authentic '*integral human development*' which he draws from

Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical, *On the Development of Peoples*, that is, a "development of the whole person, in all his/her dimensions, and of all persons."

Progress, he says, is a vocation. Our vocation as Catholics is to strive to create conditions that will enable people to progress "from less human conditions to those which are more human." (Pope John XXIII: *Peace on Earth*, 1963). This is the challenge for us – to stand in solidarity with those living in less than human conditions and work as advocates to improve their conditions.

The conditions in which our people live are not befitting for persons made in the image and likeness of God. As the US Bishops said, the economy should work for the people and not the people for the economy. We are blessed with rich, natural resources, we are even more blessed with about 1.3 million people. If we agree that our people are our greatest assets, we will do more to ensure that they have a place at the table of life. Too many live on the margins of society.

You know, God inscribed in our minds a moral order that should inform all aspects of our lives – political, economic, cultural, social etc. – but we have deviated from this moral order and that is why we find ourselves surrounded by chaos. Now is the time for change.

Your work goes a long way to pull us back from the brink and helps to get us back on the right track. On Thursday we will be celebrating Republic Day. We became an independent nation in 1962 and we became a sovereign nation on 1 August 1976. On that day we severed our links with the British Monarchy and became a Republic within the Commonwealth. We mark this day on 24 Sept. each year.

We are free to determine our own future. But how are we using our 'freedom'? With freedom comes rights and responsibilities. Over the next few days, I want you to reflect on what it means to be a Republic and consider where we are going as a Republic. I invite you on Tuesday evening from 8 pm – 9 pm to watch Channel 10 (EWTN) (if you have access to Cable TV) when Sir Ellis Clarke, our first President, Prof John Spence and I will be reflecting on our journey as a Republic. It's a live, call-in programme, so do call in and express your views.

What can we be rightly proud of and what are the challenges we face as a Republic? One of the things we can be proud of are the many young people who continue to battle against peer pressure etc. and who have stayed on the right path. Youths such as those involved in SVP. I salute you.

Let us acknowledge the youths in our midst with a thunderous round of applause. Thank you for your commitment. Thank you for energy and willingness to share your God-given talent to build the common good. Thanks also to **SVP's Youth Co-ordinating Team** that strives to fulfil what it sees as its core mandate, as you state on p. 27 of this report: "to evangelise young people into joining this beautiful vocation to serve the Poor."

I was thrilled to read that you have returned to basics by seeking to foster a relationship with God which, as you recognize, will not only have a positive impact on your SVP work, but on your lives as Christians. Your weekend retreats will help you to be Christ-centred. As Pope Benedict XVI says in *Charity in Truth*: "Development needs Christians with their arms raised towards God in prayer...Development requires attention to the spiritual life..." It is prayer and the Eucharist that will nourish us as we seek to build God's kingdom of justice, peace, truth, love and freedom.

Your Youth leadership training course is also essential if you are to develop your leadership potential. Too often people talk about youths being leaders in the future. I say that our youths must be leaders now. This is your time to take your place in the country and in the world and to help us adults to re-plan for the future. And as you forge ahead, try to take others with you. I was pleased to note that the theme of your SVP National Youth Symposium this year was: "To seek and find those who are forgotten." We are our brother's and sister's keeper. No one should be left behind.

It is for this very reason that we must remember those who are incarcerated. We must pray earnestly for those involved in the work of SVP's Y.T.C. Committee as its members seek to minister and mentor young males below the age of 18 upon entry at the Youth Training Centre. (p32) . This work is critical. As the US Bishops said in their insightful document: *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*:

our response to crime is a moral test for our nation and a challenge for our Church... It is time for a new national dialogue on crime and corrections, justice and mercy, responsibility and treatment. .. As Catholics, we need to ask the following: How can we restore our respect for law and life? How can we protect and rebuild communities, confront crime without vengeance, and defend life without taking life?...

“Our tasks are to restore a sense of civility and responsibility to everyday life, and promote crime prevention and genuine rehabilitation. The common good is undermined by criminal behavior that threatens the lives and dignity of others and by policies that seem to give up on those who have broken the law... A Catholic approach begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender.”

You rightly quoted in your Prison Ministry report Matthew 25 which states: “When I was in prison, you visited me...In so far as you did these to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.” Let us learn to see Christ in the face of the prisoner also. He/she is also of worth.

I wish to end with a quotation from Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical, *Charity in Truth*: “God’s love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all...God gives us the strength to fight and to suffer for love of the common good, because he is our All, our greatest hope.”

As we leave this hall today, be assured that with God’s grace, we will accomplish our goals. Let us draw strength from Jesus’ words: “I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

May the Lord strengthen your resolve to serve and to aim high in all that you do. Do not tolerate mediocrity. Go for excellence and remember, as Aristotle said: “Excellence is not an act but a habit” – so keep improving the quality of what you have to offer. May God bless us all.