

## **Confront crime with prayer and action**

Archbishop Edward J Gilbert is calling on Catholic faithful, as members of the wider national community, to play their part in reducing crime as he outlined the Church's role and strategy. "Everybody has to get involved", stressed Archbishop Gilbert, speaking at a press conference last Wednesday, July 30 in the main studio of Catholic Communications Studios at Archbishop's House.

The archbishop said the archdiocese is willing, and has begun, to collaborate with the protective services.

Noting that the archdiocese began looking at its role in reducing crime for the past six months since the end of the Synod in January, he said the Church will participate in a National Day of Prayer being organised by the Inter Religious Organisation for September. He also announced that at this year's final Marian Devotions on October 12, at Our Lady of Laventille Shrine, the nation will be "formally entrusted" to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The archbishop noted, however, that prayer while powerful, is not enough. "Prayer can touch those involved in crime. Trinidad and Tobago is a believing community... but it can't stop there. Crime can't be addressed only with prayer. We must do things..."

He announced that the Church has begun collaborating with the Defense Force, allowing a 50-member contingent to use Our Lady of Laventille school as a temporary base of operations during the holiday period.

He also told the gathered media that a priest and deacon (Fr Dwight Merrick and Rev Christian Chambers) have been appointed to Our Lady of Fatima church, Laventille, to increase the visibility of the Church in the community and meet the needs of the people.

Three priests are also being made available for "the pastoral care" of Defense Force members, Catholic as well as those of other faiths who are interested. Cathedral Administrator Fr Allan Ventour was one of the priests named. He said the Church is equally willing to work with the Police Service to meet the pastoral needs of its officers.

Seated at the head table with the archbishop were Clive Belgrave, representing Catholic Communications; Episcopal Delegate for Education, Hazel Reis; Taresa Best, researcher, Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ); and Episcopal Delegate for Social Justice and CCSJ chairperson, attorney-at-law Leela Ramdeen.

Ms Ramdeen read a prepared joint statement from the Archbishop and the CCSJ, expressing the Church's concern about the escalating crime problem.

"Our response to this scourge is a moral test for our nation and a challenge for each citizen... 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."

She continued that the aim should be to reject "the culture of violence and death... and embrace a culture of life." Together we can promote crime prevention, restore a sense of community and build the common good, she said.

Both victim and offender must be recognised, Ramdeen said. "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.”

But, she added, victims and offenders are children of God and their dignity “should be protected and respected.”

Addressing recent proposals outlined by National Security Minister Howard Chin Lee and Acting Police Commissioner Everaldo Snaggs, Ramdeen said these focus on symptoms and not the root causes of crime.

“Short term answers to deeper social problems will not work. We need to develop short term, medium term and long term strategies.” To succeed in addressing crime, the role of the family, school, community and media need to be examined.

She announced that one of the Commission’s main ongoing projects is in an unnamed community, “bringing together many elements of that community... to take back their neighbourhoods and reduce the crime in the area.”

The community level – the grass roots - is where action must begin, Archbishop Gilbert reiterated. He said many would like to see police officers on the streets, becoming familiar with the community and its people.

In his brief comments at the start of the press conference, the Archbishop announced the introduction of a religious education curriculum in Catholic secondary schools come the new school term.

Hazel Reis told *Catholic News* the curriculum is being adapted from a similar programme run in New Zealand, and is being developed to meet the specific needs of students from Form One to Six. Some of the issues to be addressed include self-esteem, relationships and non-violence.

**- R Syms**