

## **PASTORAL LETTER**

### **AN ARCHDIOCESAN CONVERSATION ABOUT CRIME AND VIOLENCE**

My Sisters and Brothers,

As the members of the Catholic community gather together in the many Churches of the Archdiocese to give thanks to the Father for the birth of Jesus, we are acutely aware of the social context within which we are celebrating Christmas. Violence and death have touched many people in our nation. Painful memories and emotional scars are becoming common. A sense of powerlessness and vulnerability is developing among the people. Caution and fear are the constant companions of so many people as they journey through the day. Healing and hope are needed.

What can the Catholic Church do practically to reduce crime and violence? What can it do to give people hope? What can it do to begin the healing process? I believe that, similar to God's plan at Christmas, a visible sign is needed by the people to give them hope. I believe that, similar to the Bethlehem star, the sign must guide people to the Savior. I believe the visible, guiding sign must be a communal sign.

We are beyond the time when statements from Church or State leadership, no matter how perceptive and well intentioned the statements are, will change the situation. It is time for the community to speak as a community. It is time for the community to gather together for listening, dialogue and mutual support. It is time for the community to make the decision to take charge of its life. It is time for the community to begin developing a multi-dimensioned plan of action for recovery – with short and long term goals – that local communities can implement themselves thereby taking responsibility for their own future.

#### **The Role of the Catholic Church**

The Catholic Church is only a part of the national community. However, it has a very extensive infrastructure throughout the Nation. The Church must make more effective use of its infrastructure to initiate and sustain an Archdiocesan Conversation About Crime and Violence in the nation and the effect that crime and violence have had on the nation's quality of life. The Church must help the people to become the visible, guiding communal sign. It must help them gather so they can discuss values and ethics and the process to rebuild in the context of the wisdom that flows from faith and from their personal and communal experience.

What is this infrastructure of the Catholic Church to which I refer? It is the parish system, the school system, the social institutions of the Archdiocese. It is the Presbyterate and Religious Communities, the Public Associations of Christ's Faithful, the Ecclesial Communities, the Charismatic Renewal, the Synod and the post Synodal Councils, Commissions and Secretariats. It is the Retreat Houses of the Archdiocese, the Chaplaincy at UWI, the Pastoral Centre, Catholic Radio, the *Catholic News* and Trinity Television. The Catholic infrastructure has daily contact with an enormous number of people. That infrastructure can and must be used to help address crime and violence in

the nation.

### **The goals of the Archdiocesan Conversation**

The goals of an Archdiocesan Conversation about Crime and Violence are multiple. Some examples are:

- 1) To allow people to begin to share their hurt and fear in a secure, prayerful setting where the values of Jesus are accepted and lived;
- 2) To give people a forum to begin healing by listening to each other – not just listening to the words - but to the pain, fear, frustration and anger with which the words are spoken;
- 3) To help people share their views on the ‘how and why’ such a significant change has occurred in the life of our nation;
- 4) To motivate people to protect each other in and through community;
- 5) To encourage people to formulate plans together to rebuild the values of the Nation.

### **Issues for the agenda**

There are no predetermined procedures to be followed in the proposed Archdiocesan Conversation. Each part of the infrastructure must remain free to begin in its own way. However, I think there are some agenda items that are intrinsic for a good beginning:

#### 1) *Prayer*

Since God is the Lord of history, prayer is a realistic strategy for the believing community. Prayer puts us into contact with the Holy Spirit and it reinforces values. Prayer is part of a process. Therefore, prayer cannot be sporadic; it must be constant and persevering. If people are to become the visible, guiding communal sign of recovery, then the prayer of the community must itself be visible. Each part of the Catholic infrastructure should consider how, over the short and long term, its commitment to a programme of persevering prayer to obtain God’s help, will become visible.

#### 2) *Social Analysis*

All informed people understand that there are no quick fixes to the present situation. To develop informed plans for recovery, we must analyse, as accurately as possible, the cause and effect dynamic at the root of our present situation. The recently published Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference on *Crime and Violence* will be helpful to those engaged in dialogue about how we arrived at our present state of disorder and, by implication, what we must do as a community to shape our

future.

### 3) *Pastoral Outreach*

#### **3.1-Home Visitations**

Since many people have been traumatised by violent death in their families or have had personal experience with violence, they must be offered holistic assistance. To allow people who have been traumatised to remain alone is not wise. Home visits by small teams of people to provide support and show concern can help the healing process and avoid the dangers of possible irrational responses caused by uncontrolled anger.

#### **3.2-Support Groups**

People dealing with emotional pain are not healed in one session of counseling and spiritual direction to deal with their emotional and spiritual needs. Healing takes time. It normally requires specialised skills. Parishes and schools, due to their almost daily access to people, are in a privileged position to provide this form of support.

#### **3.3-Family Life**

Undoubtedly, the international breakdown of family life has also affected this nation. The challenge of rebuilding the family as the basic unit of society may appear to fall into the category of a long-term solution. However, the Archdiocesan Family Life Commission has developed some strategies that may provide some hopeful beginnings for family renewal in a short-term view. Another source of renewal for family life is taking advantage of the presence of grandparents. Their values and life experience can provide guidance and help ease the pressures on contemporary families.

#### **3.4-Education**

Value education has both academic and formational components. Both aspects are either aided or inhibited by the environment of the school. Once again, the educational approach to changing behavior may appear to be in the category of a long-term solution. Yet both the Catholic school system and parish based catechetical programmes can provide immediate access for young people to clarify concepts and to participate in dialogue sessions about crime, violence and, most importantly, about the lifestyle that makes violence appear to be so attractive to some young people.

### **Specific requests for collaboration**

I request:

- 1) That the Catholic community of the Archdiocese of Port of Spain accept my invitation to participate in an Archdiocesan Conversation about Crime and Violence in our Nation.

- 2) That by February 3, 2004, the Episcopal Delegate for Education in dialogue with the Archdiocesan Social Justice Commission and the professional facilitators in process, who serve on the Synod Implementation Committee, provide the Principals of Catholic Schools with guidelines for dialogue on Crime and Violence to allow the school population to participate in the Archdiocesan Conversation;
- 3) That by February 3, 2004, the Episcopal Delegate for Catechetics in dialogue with the Archdiocesan Social Justice Commission and the professional facilitators, who serve on the Synod Implementation Team, provide the Catechists of the Archdiocese with guidelines for dialogue on Crime and Violence to allow the young people in catechetical formation to participate in the Archdiocesan Conversation;
- 4) That the Parish Priests/Parish Administrators in collaboration with the Archdiocesan Social Justice Commission facilitate the Archdiocesan Conversation in their parishes and chapel communities;
- 5) That all the Religious Communities in the Archdiocese join in the Archdiocesan Conversation within their communities and encourage the many people they serve in ministry to participate in the dialogue.
- 6) That all the Councils, Commissions and Secretariats of the Archdiocese along with the Public Associations of Christ's Faithful, the Ecclesial Communities and the Charismatic Renewal participate in the Conversation;
- 7) That all recommendations for the subsequent phases of the Archdiocesan Conversation be forwarded to the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council by April 2, 2004. Please use the Archbishop's Office as the mailing address.

## **Conclusion**

When believers gather to pray and plan together, when they take the time to minister to each other and serve the wider community, a communion is formed that reflects the communion we have with our Triune God. As Pope John Paul II has frequently taught solidarity is the fruit of communion.

It is my hope and prayer that one of the long-term results of the Archdiocesan Conversation about Crime and Violence will go beyond the immediate issue we are discussing. I pray that a strong sense of solidarity will emerge within the Archdiocese and between the Archdiocese and the nation. I pray that a sense of communion and solidarity will strengthen our resolve to implement the initiatives of our Synod and deepen our relationship as an Archdiocese with the regional and universal Church.

**Most Reverend Edward J Gilbert CSsR**  
**Archbishop of Port of Spain**  
**December 25, 2003**