

## **CCSJ calls for prayer and reflection on World Day Against The Death Penalty**

On Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> October the world commemorates the 10th Anniversary of the *World Day Against the Death Penalty*. This annual event was initiated in 2003 by the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty.

The Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ) calls on all citizens to spend some time on Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> Oct to pray for peace in TT/the world; for an end to crime and violence; for the victims of crime; for the adoption of anti-crime strategies that are more in keeping with the sanctity of all life and the dignity of the human person; and for the abolition of the Death Penalty.

Leela Ramdeen says: "Catholics believe that the measure of any society is whether what we do threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person. Thus, while the death penalty remains on our law books, our task as Catholics is to strive to have capital punishment abolished and to find other ways of responding to/reducing crime."

All life is to be respected and protected absolutely from conception to natural death. As Archbishop Joe Harris C.S.Sp. has said: "God is the author of life. Not you, not me, no one else. All life comes from God... All life must be respected. If we are pro-life we can't be pro-life in sections. If we are pro-life we are pro-life across the board. If we are pro-life we ensure that there are people who live truly human lives and we work for that. If we are pro-life we are against the killing of innocent life either through abortion, through infanticide, through murder. If we are pro-life we are against that. If we are pro-life we are also against killing by the State or capital punishment."

CCSJ agrees with our Bishops in the Caribbean that the death penalty does not address the root causes of crime. They say: "Capital punishment symbolises a form of despair for the effective reform of persons."

Last week's Panel Discussion (5 Oct), organised by The Institute of International Relations, in collaboration with CCSJ, Amnesty International and other partners, clearly highlighted the fact that the Death Penalty is not the solution if we are to build peaceful, harmonious communities and that we must move the debate beyond the use of the Death Penalty as a crime prevention measure. Let us reject retribution and embrace a restorative approach to the criminal justice system.

We recognise that both victim and offender are children of God, made in His image and likeness. As Archbishop Pinder, Nassau, has said: "It is important to note that while we oppose the death penalty, we embrace the victims of violent crimes; those who are hurting and grieving for their loved ones who have been killed, at times in the most heinous ways. We urge each parish to establish victim support groups and seek to meet their physical, mental, spiritual, financial and other needs."

As we seek to devise more appropriate strategies to promote citizen security, let us do as the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty states and focus on Wednesday 10 Oct "on the progress made in the past 10 years and on challenges ahead. The last decade has seen a large increase in the number of countries that have officially abolished the death penalty or eliminated the use of the death penalty in practice:

- 141 countries are abolitionist in law or in practice;
- 97 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes;
- 36 countries have abolished the death penalty in practice;
- 8 countries have abolished the death penalty for ordinary crimes.

According to Amnesty International, 21 countries recorded executions in 2011, compared to 31

countries 10 years ago. Even the USA, one of the worst offenders in the use of the death penalty, has shown progress as individual states have abolished or limited the death penalty. Many other countries have also abolished the death penalty in the past decade, including: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Bhutan, Burundi, Cook Islands, Gabon, Greece, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Mexico, the Philippines, Rwanda, Samoa, Senegal, Togo, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

However, further work needs to be done to build on the progress made, according to the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty:

- Promote national legislation abolishing the death penalty.
- Increase ratifications of the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty.
- Support international standards calling for the abolition or restricted use of the death penalty.
- Support adoption of the 2012 UN General Assembly Resolution on a moratorium: in December 2012, the UN General Assembly will vote on a fourth resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty.” (World Coalition Against the Death Penalty).

CCSJ recognizes that the causes of crime are complex and require a multi-faceted approach if we are to create a more peaceful society. If we are to renew our society, we must strive to renew the hearts and minds of our citizens. At the heart of our problems, as the saying goes, is the human heart. We will never turn things around unless we address the root causes of crime and violence e.g. poverty and social exclusion; the breakdown of family life; the proliferation of illegal drugs and guns; the prevalence of gang culture; underemployment/unemployment, corruption; inadequacies in our education system, in policing in TT, in our archaic prison system. Human hearts are affected by all these social ills.

Catholics believe that that “our faith calls us to protect public safety, promote the common good, and restore community. We believe a Catholic ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation and restoration can become the foundation for the necessary reform of our broken criminal justice system.” (US Bishops). Finally, change begins with each of us. Therefore, CCSJ calls on all people of goodwill to offer yourselves as good role models and mentors to others. If we work together we can be effective change agents. We don't need the Death Penalty to build our nation.