

## Interview with Leela Ramdeen by Maureen Arneaud



Maureen  
Arneaud

**LINK UP!** Leela, as you know, we are launching our Peace and Justice Newsletter on the theme of Human Dignity, and we are honored to have you as our first interview, as an acknowledgement of all you have done to build up this ministry for our Archdiocese and for our country. And so we put our first question to you . in terms of human dignity, how do you *see yourself as a person?*

**LR:** As a Christian I see myself first of all as a "Child of God". I was made in his image and likeness, I was redeemed by Jesus Christ and I am called to be in communion with God. The dignity that I have comes from God. Nobody can take that away from me. It doesn't matter whether I'm rich or poor, whether I live in Beetham or Westmoorings , it's mine. It's a permanent part of my being.



Leela Ramdeen

But I am called to live with other people too, because they also have dignity. When you think of dignity, you have to think of your duties to God, your neighbor and also to yourself. The permanent character of my dignity is essentially linked to the dignity of other people. We are connected. And our dignity is connected. If their dignity is trampled upon, mine becomes tarnished.

**LINK UP!** Now given that there's always room for growth in Human Dignity, what do you think it is that *builds up, sustains and nurtures it?*

**LR:** Although human dignity is a permanent part of our character, given by God, it is also a goal, an achievement. This means that we must be constantly be seeking to realize our human dignity. There is a lot of work to be done at parish level to nurture and sustain human dignity. We need to teach people what human dignity means e.g. seeking truth, resisting sin, practicing virtue and repenting when we succumb to temptation and sin.

Justice involves more than Charity. While it is important to offer direct services to people who are oppressed, we have to do more than that to promote human dignity. We have to become advocates and be a voice for the voiceless. We must promote human life which is under attack daily e.g. euthanasia, abortion, human trafficking and poverty. Over 360 thousand people in Trinidad and Tobago are living in poverty - living on less than \$1 US a day! Parishioners have to go beyond giving food to the poor. They have to ask "Why are the poor, poor"?

**LINK UP:** And after you ask "Why are the poor, poor?" what do you do?

**LR:** We must lobby our local MPs, Councillors and other Officials in positions of authority. We must form teams and start working at a local level - as members of the parish LINK Social Justice program are doing. We must speak out where we find that there are people who have no running water, poor roads, inadequate housing, few employment opportunities etc.

Teams such as that in St Augustine Parish are doing good work e.g. with the help of Government grants and community help a room and an indoor toilet was built for an old lady, Miss Doris. For years she had had to walk a long distance, come rain or shine, to a latrine. This is justice in action. To promote the dignity of people, we must approach those in positions of authority to demand that they use the wealth of the nation for all - and in particular to help those who have little or no share in the wealth.

**LINK UP:** And what are the threats to Human Dignity in Trinidad and Tobago

**LR:**I'll give you a simple example that was in the newspapers and on the radio recently. A young girl was having her first baby. She was admitted to San Fernando hospital. She believes that because her family is poor she was treated abominably by some staff there. Her baby died. She was given a bed that was too high. She had difficulty getting on and off it. She asked for assistance to go to the bathroom but received none. She fell twice on her way to the bathroom. She was shouted at and told to sit in the corridor if she could not get on the bed etc. The whole scenario does not paint a picture of a caring community; a community that values the dignity of the human person; a community that respects life. The threat is a lack of respect for life.

The whole crime scene is another threat to human dignity. People should not have to live their lives in fear. People are killing each other without a second thought. And those who are bringing in the drugs and guns seem to have no conscience. Don't they care that they are tearing our society apart?

The lack of social development systems that will create conditions to allow people to realise their potential is another threat to human dignity. The *Pride in Gonzales* social justice project, led by Fr Jason Gordon, is a model of what can be done in communities at risk to restore human dignity.

**LINK UP:**What would you as a woman .and as a Trinidadian, Leela, what would you want to protect most, give the rest of your life to even, regarding human dignity .?

**LR:**That's a hard one, because there are so many. People are our main assets, so I would want to develop our people. At a basic level we all need some reference point to guide our lives. We need a framework of morals and values. The principle of human dignity is the bedrock of all our justice and peace work. When there are little or no morals in society, then we soon find ourselves going down the slippery slope. For example, just look at how our people are dressing and behaving, not just at Carnival time. Family life is in shambles up and down the country. Children in our schools are indisciplined - and so are some of the teachers.

**LINK UP:** So what is the link between justice and the human person?

**LR:** St Augustine said "Justice is giving people what is their due". We live in a nation where, in spite of our wealth, people's basic needs are not being met. The economy should work for all our people. Many don't have basic amenities such as water, education, roads, electricity, health care, food, shelter. That is what we are all 'due' if we are to promote human dignity.

Pope Paul VI said, in his encyclical "On the development of Peoples": "Development is a new name for peace". Human development is critical. Respect for the human person means more than "feeding hungry belly". Human development sees the person as a whole. Each person needs to develop spiritually, physically, socially, culturally, mentally, politically, and educationally - it's *the whole person!*

And unless we link justice to all these aspects of the person, the violence and anger will continue and there will never be wholeness, there will never be peace.

If you want peace work for human dignity, work for justice.

**LINK UP:** Thank you Leela, for the life you have given, for the hearts you have encouraged, for the principles you have defended . All done in His name.