

JUSTICE AND PEACE SHALL EMBRACE

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE ANTILLES EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE on CRIME & VIOLENCE

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN JESUS CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

GROWING CONCERN

1. As Roman Catholic Bishops in the Caribbean, we are increasingly concerned by the suffering of our people due to widespread and growing violence throughout the region. Two years ago the Fourth Conference of Caribbean Theology was held in Guyana on the theme The Challenge of Violence. The introduction to the published papers states that the theme of the Conference seemed “to pick itself”:

“More and more in recent years violence has become part of daily life in the Caribbean. Hardly a day passes without some violent deed making the headlines”⁽¹⁾

Some years ago, the Roman Catholic Bishops of Jamaica wrote a letter on violence in Jamaica under the title Take Action for a Peaceful Jamaica. In 2002 the Catholic Church in Dominica carried out a study of Domestic Violence and Abuse in Dominica. And just recently (March 2003) Bishop Benedict Singh wrote a letter for Guyana with the title Violence is not the Answer.

NOT JUST THE CARIBBEAN

2. We also note that both Pope John Paul II and Dr Konrad Raiser, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches spoke in their Christmas messages for the new millennium of a “culture of violence” which permeates the world today. And Dr Raiser added:

“Its victims are most often those who are different: members of ethnic, racial or religious minorities; refugees; people with disabilities; or simply the poor and the marginalised.”⁽²⁾

For this reason the WCC has declared this a Decade for the Eradication of Violence. We wish to add our voices to theirs as well as invite the members of our churches to join us in a common search for solutions.

NOT ALL THE SAME

3. We are aware that not all of our nations and territories are experiencing the same level of violence. We are especially concerned for those countries where many kinds of violence - criminal, domestic, political, racial - have created serious social unrest. We are

thinking in particular of Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad where violence seems to have reached new levels that are threatening national stability. But our concern extends also to the smaller countries where the problem is perhaps not so widespread but seems to be growing. No one is exempt from the new forms of terror and oppression inflicted upon us by members of our own society. In recent times, violent aggression and hatred have even been directed at our own priests and sisters. Each day the news media report terrible acts of inhumanity against our children, our women, our neighbours. There is anxiety about our security and about the future.

OUR PAST HISTORY

4. The history of the Caribbean peoples has been a story of the long struggle for freedom: emancipation from the oppression of slavery, independence from colonial powers for self-determination. It has often been a painful story, filled with injustice, bloodshed and suffering for its people of many origins. But there have also been triumphant moments of liberation and accomplishment. Yet the path to freedom has not yet been fully travelled by our Caribbean people. As we look around, we continue to see inequality, poverty, exclusion, prejudice, hatred, high levels of crime and horrendous acts of violence. These are challenging us to take responsibility for our society and to seek ways to address its social problems. As Christians we need to try and understand the situation in the light of our faith and see what remedies it offers. For, as St Paul told the Galatians:

“When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (3).

SLAVERY AND VIOLENCE

THE STORY OF ISRAEL

5. The story of Israel in the Bible is the story of God’s promise to establish a free nation in a promised land of prosperity. **“With a mighty hand and outstretched arm”**, God delivered Israel from the slavery of the Egyptians. (4) The promise of God was a covenant. Israel would experience true freedom in the saving power of God if they remained faithful to his commandments. There would be peace and prosperity if the people of Israel lived justly, according to the Law.

6. But the freedom of Israel from the slavery of Egypt was short lived. While they were free of the Egyptians, they remained slaves to sin, slaves to an unjust social system denounced by St Paul which maintained:

“distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female”, rather than acknowledge that **“all of you are one in Christ Jesus”** (5).

Hence the commandments were broken, the covenant violated, and the promise unfulfilled.

SOCIAL SLAVERY

7. The grave sin of social slavery, and of colonialism as well, is that they are systems which dehumanize the person. They imply that a particular people, because of race, colour, nationality, gender, age, class or religion, are non-human or marginal. They are

mere objects to be used for the gain of the oppressor. They attempt to destroy the dignity of a people by giving no value to the sanctity of their lives.

CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

8. In the same way, criminal violence threatens to take away the dignity of the victim(s). It treats the person as an object to satisfy some desire: the hunger and struggle for material goods, for status, for money, for power and control of territory or people. To act on these desires is to return to a situation of slavery. It is to return to the oppression of Egypt and Babylon, or in colonial times to the so-called “New World”, where persons were treated as dehumanised objects.

THE COMMANDMENTS OF THE COVENANT

9. The commandments of the covenant were to protect the sanctity of life and the rights of God’s people. But Israel discovered that the Law of the Covenant was not by itself powerful enough to avoid the slavery to sin, fear and death. So the Jews longed for the Messiah who would once again bring freedom and dignity to the nation. The prophets spoke of this Messiah in terms of a new covenant, the Kingdom and the reign of God bringing justice and peace. Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke of the Law being written in the heart, and the spirit of God being placed within a new heart:

“I shall cleanse you of all your defilement and all your idols. I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you, and make you keep my laws and sincerely respect my observances.” ⁽⁶⁾

THE NEW COVENANT OF JESUS

10. In Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the New Covenant was made. Freedom came through the power of God’s Spirit being placed in those who had faith in Jesus. The new commandment, empowered by the Spirit of God, was love:

“My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love.” ⁽⁷⁾

In love, the other person ceases to be an “object” to be exploited or used. In love, the other person is the image of God, a son or daughter, full of dignity and sanctified by God. In love, there is no slavery, no violence. In love, there is power for liberation, and there is justice and peace.

REACTING TO VIOLENT CRIME

IN THE PAST

11. Crime and violence are not new. The earliest social history of our Caribbean nations and territories begins with the excessive brutality and coercion of slavery. And the centuries that followed are marked with violent disorders and revolts. In our Caribbean societies, fear and anger, injustice and oppression have historically provoked violence in response to violence. It is what Dom Helder Camara used to describe as “the spiral of violence.”

THE TEMPTATION NOW

12. In our present situation of growing crime and violence, our first reaction may be to “fight fire with fire”. To control violence and to curb crime, we propose more law enforcement and more punishment. And so in some of our nations, the military have become regular agents of civil order, police at times resemble a paramilitary force, brutality and even extra-judicial killings are given a blind eye or even publicly condoned. And, playing on the popular fear of crime, capital punishment ¹⁰ is used as a political platform to increase popularity and give the appearance of “taking action” against escalating violence.

THE DANGERS OF THIS CHOICE

13. The popular choice is to declare a war on crime. We enlist the security forces to be our combatants and our poverty stricken ghettos become battlefields. We chose this violent response even though we are aware that large numbers of innocent people (usually poor women, children and young men) will become its accidental casualties. We chose it perhaps even aware that we place our security forces at great personal and moral risk. And thus we are lured into the endless cycle of violence that leads to greater alienation, more intense anger, continuing oppression and fear. Worse still, we begin to resemble the oppressors of the past and we lose sight of our covenant with God.

A SOLUTION THAT MAKES THE SITUATION WORSE

14. It is not surprising that we chose retaliation rather than redemption, punishment rather than prevention. It is hard to know how we can best respond. We are influenced by a world that has been filled with violence since the beginning of time. Choosing another way does not seem practical, even though we know violence has not been and never will be the way to true peace. In fact, when we look at the past twenty to thirty years, we see that stronger state violence has not led to more stability but to an increase in the volume and intensity of violence. Our solution to the problem may well be a further cause of the problem. And it goes right against the specific teaching of Jesus:

“You have learnt how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance.” ⁽⁸⁾

If we want to find a genuine solution to the present problem of crime and violence, we need to look first at the causes of violent behaviour.

THE CAUSES OF CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

WHO ARE THE VIOLENT?

15. To find the causes of violent crime, it is helpful to know what type of person the average violent criminal is like. A portrait of the overwhelming majority of those in prison for violent crimes would be: a male between 18 and 29 years of age. He would be functionally illiterate with no work related skills and virtually no work experience. He would come from an urban slum and have no assets, with little access to basic necessities (food and shelter) on a regular basis.

WHY ARE THEY VIOLENT?

16. This portrait helps us to identify some important factors our sociologists usually link to recent increases in crime in the Caribbean (9):

- * increased urbanization and high population density (decline in agriculture);
- * increased income inequality between rich and poor;
- * increased migration (and corresponding family disintegration);
- * increased deportation from other countries of convicted criminals;
- * increased unemployment (a growing urban wageless class);
- * declining living standards;
- * level of economic discrimination (exclusion based on skin colour, family ties, regional identity, language differences, social circumstances and religion).

THESE ACCOMPANY BUT DON'T CAUSE VIOLENCE

17. The experts do not claim that these social conditions **cause** violent behaviour. But they do affirm that some or all of them are present in situations of increasing violent crime. Individuals remain relatively free - and morally responsible - for their behaviour. Still socialization and the social context remain important. Different types of behaviour are most often learned or imitated from others. Children who have learned violent patterns of behaviour (through violent treatment) will express that violence if the situation encourages or rewards it.

THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

18. So, along with the social conditions listed above, early education and experience in the family is also extremely important. And the two are not unrelated. The violent behaviour children experience or witness in the home, at school, in the street, is further reinforced through the electronic media. Numerous studies on the effects of television come to the same conclusions. Violent behaviour viewed on television is imitated by children, especially when the violence is shown as rewarding, justified and even humorous. In a similar way video games often encourage a "person-as-object" attitude, intrinsic to all forms of violence, which also affects children.

VIOLENCE FROM EXCLUSION

19. Certainly one of the principal causes, some would claim the underlying cause, of much regional violence is the feeling of frustration, betrayal and even alienation felt by many, especially the young, in a post-independent Caribbean. At the time of independence expectations were high and there was hope of becoming involved in a process of development leading to a real transference of economic and political power in a truly participative society. But this has not happened. Many of the social structures from colonial times are still in place and are just as exclusive, even if the colour of those controlling them may have changed. In the tourist islands, for example, many nationals feel themselves to be second-class citizens in a world dominated by luxury hotels and cruise liners, owned by overseas consortia and crowded with foreign tourists. And in the

larger territories, especially Guyana and Trinidad, racial violence masks the fact that here again much of the economic power is owned and controlled by outside forces.

THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION

20. Perhaps this is inevitable in our globalised world where small developing nations count for so little. But it puts an extra burden on governments and those with influence to implement measures ensuring a higher degree of participation in society and its benefits, especially for the poor and marginalized. If this attempt is not made, there is danger of injustices becoming institutionalised and of the violence spiralling out of control. For, as Archbishop Romero of El Salvador said of a small and not so different country on the other side of the Caribbean:

“I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to the violence, we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, the exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally.” ⁽¹⁰⁾

INCLUSION ESSENTIAL

21. Pope John Paul II confirmed this analysis in his World Day of Peace message for 1985:

“It is essential for every human being to have a sense of participating , of being a part of the decisions and endeavours that shape the destiny of the world. Violence and injustice have often in the past found their root causes in people’s sense of being deprived of the right to shape their own lives. Future violence and injustice cannot be avoided when the basic right to participate in the choices of society is denied.” ⁽¹¹⁾

THE DRUG TRADE

22. The conditions described above are not unique to the Caribbean, to the wider group of developing countries, or even to some developed countries with acute problems of criminal violence. Some of these are linked with each other by a steadily growing and alarming factor, itself directly responsible for much violence. It is the expanding role of the Caribbean in the international drug trade. While drug production (largely marijuana) has been limited to Jamaica, Trinidad, Belize and later the Bahamas, the use of Caribbean islands for the trans-shipment of cocaine and marijuana has more recently involved Guyana, Trinidad, Haiti, Barbados, the Dominican Republic, and some of the smaller Eastern Caribbean states. The trans-shipment of narcotics is very lucrative but also very competitive, territorial and dangerous. And it is almost always related to arms use and sale. This has led to the proliferation of guns in our islands, placing them in the hands of unemployed, impoverished youth who are more and more being incorporated into international crime syndicates.

THE PROLIFERATION OF GUNS

23. The result is a trend that is growing across the Caribbean: the rapid formation of large, urban, unemployed, youthful, at-risk populations in whose impoverished communities the illegal drug economy (and the proliferation of guns) has become a

normalized part of the process of socialization. So embedded in it has the gun and crime “culture” become, that gun possession may carry with it a kind of status and masculine identity that compensates for an otherwise powerless existence. This is further encouraged by the entertainment media of the West that glorify the power of the gun.

MANY CAUSES

24. It should be clear from the above that the problem of crime and violence in the Caribbean has many and complex causes. It is not just a question of psychological or moral disorder on the part of a few disturbed individuals. It is related to a network of sources and causes ranging from the social origins of our societies to the social conditions of poverty, unemployment, exclusion and exploitation that we see all around us. It is fuelled by an illegal narcotics trade and reinforced by the influence of the media. Finally it can be said that our common response to increasing levels of crime - policies favouring more aggressive law enforcement and more severe punishment - contribute to the cycle of violence rather than diminishing social disorder.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

COUNSELLING

25. Individual counselling is often recommended for those involved in acts of violence, particularly for children who are beginning to manifest the behaviour of their elders. It may be important for whole families to receive such counselling since offenders are likely to be victims of violence within their families. Such individual and group counselling also benefits from conflict resolution programmes that can be, and have been in some places, effectively integrated into an ordinary school curriculum, catering to both students and their families. Education, outreach and counselling for youth are all vital to the prevention of violence, both for those already in trouble as well as those merely at risk.

THE FAMILY

26. However a culture of violence is not only grounded in family-based patterns of abuse. As we have seen, the breakdown of informal and formal social controls is often identified as a cause of violence in our societies. Urbanization, industrialization and patterns of migration have all threatened the ordinary social controls that would come from belonging to a nuclear family. But the benefits of a nuclear family as a healthy environment for socialization should be consistently promoted without ignoring the economic strain that families face and the consequent strategies for survival that threaten ordinary family life.

EDUCATION AND THE MEDIA

27. The development of our children requires the careful monitoring of several powerful influences: family members, peer groups, educational institutions, and the media. The Church has an important role to play in the formation of society’s conscience, but particularly in the communication of Christian values and non-violent responses to children at risk. Special attention to youth programmes is needed, especially service programmes that foster respect, cooperation, equality and dignity in the pursuit of the

common good. Governmental organizations would also do well to promote similar youth service programmes.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND POVERTY

28. As mentioned above, even persons who have learned patterns of violent behaviour will not tend to express these unless social conditions favour such responses. The social conditions identified above as significantly contributing to a rise in crime (increased unemployment, poverty and disparity, migration, as well as high levels of economic discrimination) provide economic and structural motivation for engaging in violent crime. In short, material gain, the social organization of crime syndicates (gangs), and the ready availability of guns and unemployed youth provide the conditions and incentives for criminal activity and violence.

29. To address basic social inequalities and injustices such as these may seem a daunting and long-term task, but poverty alleviation is possible even if poverty eradication seems improbable. And the costs of increased security may be high enough to argue that new and creative strategies of resource allocation may be worthwhile even in the short term. Moreover negative social conditions can begin to be changed through very practical short-term policies such as work projects (high impact, short-term jobs) in violent neighbourhoods, anti-drug campaigns, gun amnesties, sports programmes, etc.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND PUNISHMENT

30. The strategy of aggressive law enforcement and severe punishment needs review particularly where basic human rights have been compromised by police brutality, excessive force and disproportionate punishment. In a situation of high crime and unprecedented violence, it is not popular to speak of the reform of our enforcement and penal agencies. On a practical level, however, it is questionable whether the large amount of resources being spent on security measures are in any way effective. It may well be that our present response to crime is contributing to a culture of violence that further threatens our social order.

SECURITY FORCES

31. We need security forces to restore and protect civil order. Excessive force and the abuse of state power should never be a policy option. The use of the military for domestic peace-keeping and the promotion of the police as a quasi-military force are likewise questionable government policies. The way is left wide open in such situations to many forms of economic and political corruption. In some cases, the militarization of society has actually created rogue “communities” controlled by criminal elements with independent structures of law and order. National intervention in these communities has on occasion required the excessive force of police actions that resemble invasion, with high casualties of innocent persons.

OTHER MEASURES

32. Law enforcement agencies must always be accountable to the government and, by extension, to the people of the land. Civil organisations and the participation of citizens in a structured legal order are indispensable ways of preventing further intolerable levels of social violence. The equal application of the law, community policing, rehabilitation programmes in prisons, the abolition of the death penalty, police reform, the

decommissioning of the military are all proposals designed to reduce state violence as a contributing factor to a generalized culture of violence.

SOCIAL COSTS AND INTERNATIONAL DEBT

33. We are aware that all the measures advocated above will require funding, some of them extensive, in countries that are already finding it hard to budget for essential social services. It is here that the existence of massive foreign debts becomes acutely relevant. For, as the Synod of the Americas noted:

“The gravity of the situation is all the more evident when we consider that even the payment of interest alone represents a burden for the economy of poor nations which deprives the authorities of the money necessary for social development, education, health and the establishment of a fund to create jobs.” ⁽¹²⁾

We add our voices to that of the Holy Father in calling on the wealthy nations and the international financial organisations to continue searching for solutions that will aid those countries that most need them, especially with regard to the sort of services outlined above.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

OUR CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

34. In a joint letter on violence in Jamaica, the Roman Catholic Bishops remind us that a Christian response to crime and violence is not to cry for vengeance but to forgive as the Lord forgives:

“Jesus was not teaching mere passivity in the face of violence, but was teaching the transforming possibilities of love. This is a love that must be expressed in addressing the conditions that give rise to violence and crime: the unemployment, poverty, lack of educational opportunities, decay of family life. Jesus did not resist the evildoers, but redeemed them with his love, which he expressed in many ways, in acts of forgiving, healing, feeding.” ⁽¹³⁾

OUR CHRISTIAN MISSION

35. This is also the mission of our church. In times of great social unrest, there is a public expectation that the Church will contribute significantly to the healing and development of society. The expectation is well founded since social justice is a constitutive dimension of Christian faith and a fundamental condition of our covenant with God. The people of Israel were waiting for a leader who would deliver them from the bonds of slavery. The Messiah would bring about a time when the reign of God would begin and:

“Justice and peace will kiss.” ⁽¹⁴⁾

The Church inherits from Jesus Christ the mission to proclaim and establish the Kingdom of God. Our salvation in Jesus Christ always has a social dimension. The community of believers is an important leaven in society, bringing peace and justice to a world wounded by sin and slavery.

WAYS OF CARRYING OUT THIS MISSION

36. There are many ways of carrying out this mission. At times the Church assumes a prominent and highly visible responsibility for the education and socialization of our nations' children, promoting Christian values contrary to those characteristic of a culture of violence and death. As part of this educative process, it tries to emphasise the rights and responsibilities of citizens and the Christian duty of working for the common good. The Church can also play an active and direct role in creating and implementing programmes for alleviating poverty, counselling, etc. In several countries of the region it is already involved in such projects aimed at helping victims of violence escape a destructive milieu and reshape their lives. As one example among many, we can mention SERVOL (Service Volunteered for All), started in Trinidad but now with different names active in other Caribbean countries, which helps thousands of children, youths and adults to find a new future. This is the sort of work that deserves priority and imitation throughout the region since it is the type of contribution the Church is ideally fitted to make. Finally the Church must always stand up prophetically in defence of the common good and against government policies where these violate the requirements of social justice.

“BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS”

37. The Church is more than a community of believers. We also form the mystical body of Christ who is the Prince of Peace. We therefore share in his mission to bring true peace to the world. This does not consist merely in the absence of war or violence. For Christians peace is not only an absence but also a presence, the presence of God among us. As the body of Christ, possessing his Spirit, the Church's prayer and worship are powerful contributions towards greater peace in the world. And our Christian communities, if faithful to their calling, should also be strong arguments for justice and peace, incarnating the presence of God among us. This is the most effective witness we can give to the love that promises to transform our world from a place of hatred and injustice to a place of peace and freedom. This is the heart of our mission, the mission we inherited from the Lord.

CONCLUSION

OUR VIOLENCE

38. We would like to end this brief letter which we hope and pray will make a genuine contribution towards greater peace and justice in our countries by quoting once again the words of our fellow Bishop from El Salvador, Oscar Romero, himself a martyr to peace and justice:

“We have never preached violence, except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to a cross, the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome our selfishness and such cruel inequalities among us. The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love, of brotherhood, the violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work.” ⁽¹⁵⁾

Let us pray, all of us, that this may be the only violence we ever accept or practice.

Signed:

Archbishop Lawrence Burke, *Nassau*
Archbishop Edgerton Clarke, *Kingston*
Archbishop Kelvin Felix, *Castries*
Archbishop Maurice Marie-Sainte, *St. Pierre & Fort-de- France*
Archbishop Edward Gilbert, *Port of Spain*
Bishop Paul Boyle, *Mandeville*
Bishop Ernest Cabo, *Basseterre & Pointe-à-Pitre*
Bishop Vincent Darius, *St. George's*
Bishop Charles Dufour, *Montego Bay*
Bishop Malcolm Galt, *Bridgetown*
Bishop Robert Kurtz, *Hamilton*
Bishop Gabriel Malzaire, *Roseau*
Bishop Osmond P. Martin, *Belize City*
Bishop Donald Reece, *St. John's-Basseterre*
Bishop Robert Rivas, *Kingstown*
Bishop Louis Sankale, *Cayenne*
Bishop Luis Secco, *Willemstad*
Bishop Benedict Singh, *Georgetown*
Rev. Father Wilhelmus de Bekker, *Administrator, Paramaribo*
November 30th, 2003 1st Sunday of Advent.

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