

**WE ARE CALLED TO
PROCLAIM
CELEBRATE AND SERVE**

THE GIFT OF LIFE

**Pastoral Letter
of the
Antilles Episcopal Conference
Rome, 29 March 2008**

Beloved Brothers and Sisters

Peace to you in our Lord Jesus Christ!

Introduction

1. The Gospel of life is at the heart of the evangelizing mission of the Church, which must proclaim Jesus, the Word of life (John 1:1). Jesus invites all people to celebrate and proclaim that they are people of life because God has redeemed us through the Cross, the source of all life. God has entrusted the Church with the responsibility of proclaiming, celebrating and serving the gift of life. The Church is to announce with great vigor, by word and deed, that human life is sacred and inviolable. This proclamation demands the promotion and the renewal of a culture of life. All Catholics, including bishops, priests, religious, laity, theologians, catechists, parents and teachers have a role to play in promoting a culture of life.

2. Faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ who came “*that they may have life and have it abundantly*” (John 10:10)^[1], we the Roman Catholic Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference once again wish to proclaim, celebrate and serve the gift of life. We wish to affirm the Church’s teaching in regard to the inherent dignity of every human being. As such, every effort must be made to protect and preserve the sanctity of life.

3. In the Incarnation, the eternal Son of God becomes man. In this event we discover not only the boundless love of God, but also the incomparable value of every human person. The Church in acknowledgement of this value must, in every age, preach with dauntless fidelity the Gospel of Life. It is in this vein that we address the faithful of the Caribbean.

4. In addition to the perennial scourges of poverty, diseases, hunger, and war, in the name of progress we witness new threats to the sanctity of life. In light of this we must express deep concern over the widespread escalation of violence throughout the region. This violence continues to cause great suffering and fear; it also promotes a fundamental and growing disrespect for human life.^[2]

CHAPTER I: CRISIS OF CULTURE

5. No one can doubt that today we face a profound crisis of culture in the Caribbean. The culture in which we all share (the violent criminal included) is marked by a general weakening of the sense both of God and of sin, the influence of moral relativism and confusion, and a growing secularization that reduces religious faith either to the private sphere of the individual, or to

^[1] All biblical citations will be taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*.

^[2] Antilles Episcopal Conference, Pastoral Letter on Crime and violence, *Justice and Peace Shall Embrace*, November 30, 2003.

public displays of intense emotion, coupled with a weak moral understanding, and fuelled by a spirituality that promises material success.

6. We wish to draw your attention to two dimensions of this crisis of culture.

First: the relationship between the subculture of criminal violence and the wider culture. This relationship cannot be neatly described in terms of simple opposition; it is much more subtle and complex.

In fact, unlike the oppositional subcultures of the anti-colonial movements of the past, our present violence is very much a part of our culture, a culture in which “*broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of the rights of individual freedom.*”^[3]

7. It is for this reason that we can describe today’s violence as being part of the “culture of death,” in which we all share. Pope John Paul II challenged us to engage in a new evangelization which is meant to disentangle us from complicity in the culture of death and to commit us to replace it with the culture of life. This is the meaning of conversion. As he put it “... *conversion to the Gospel means to revise all the different areas and aspects of life, especially those related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good.*”^[4]

8. Second: the relationships engendered by the exercise of power. John Paul II described this situation like this:

... a model of society appears to be emerging in which the powerful predominate, setting aside and even eliminating the powerless: I am thinking here of unborn children, helpless victims of abortion, the elderly and incurably ill, subjected at times to euthanasia; and the many other people relegated to the margins of society by consumerism and materialism: nor can I fail to mention the unnecessary recourse to the death penalty when other bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons. This model of society bears the stamp of the culture of death and is therefore in opposition to the Gospel message.^[5]

The need for the Church in the Caribbean to resist this powerful and pervasive culture of death is urgent. It will require, as part of the new evangelization, a more conscious and active participation of the Church in the daily life of society and a rethinking of the role of the laity.

9. Pope John Paul II was clear that what was needed was not a “re-evangelization”, but a “new evangelization.” An evangelization that was new in ardour, methods and expression, and that specifically and adequately responded to the growing secularism and materialism with their attack on the objective nature of both truth and morality.^[6] Secularism is the human effort to live, to create society, and to define the human person without any reference to God.

10. The Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*, stresses that the laity must play a central part in the new evangelization as they were specifically called to shape the secular world according to God’s will. “*Secularity is the true and distinctive mark of the lay person and of lay spirituality, which means that the laity strive to evangelize the various sectors of family, social, professional, cultural and political life.*”^[7]

It is therefore essential today that the laity are “formed in the truths and values of the Church’s social teaching, and in the basic notions of a theology of the laity.”^[8]

^[3] John Paul II *Evangelium Vitae: The Gospel of Life*. (March 25, 1995), 4

^[4] *Ecclesia in America: The Church in America*, 27

^[5] John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, 12.

^[6] *Ibid*, 6.

^[7] *Ibid*, 44.

^[8] John Paul II, *The Church in America*, 44.

11. In order to constantly enrich and permeate society with the Gospel, we must whole – heartedly celebrate and proclaim, “in season and out of season,” the truth about the human person, and work for humanity’s full redemption in Christ. In this way we all fulfil our baptismal vocation to share in the one prophetic, priestly and royal ministry of Christ.

As Christians we are to be “people of and for life;” we are to be genuinely pro-life, with a proper understanding of what this means: *“To be actively pro-life is to contribute to the renewal of society through the promotion of the common good. (However) it is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life.”*^[9]

With this understanding of “pro-life” we must respond to Pope John Paul II’s challenge that, even though we must work for the withdrawal of harmful legislation “...it is not enough to remove unjust laws. The underlying causes of attacks on life have to be eliminated.”^[10]

Chapter II: PROCLAIM LIFE

“I have set before you life and death... choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” (Deut 30:19).

Part I: The Truth about the Human Person

12. It is our vocation as baptized Christians to proclaim the truth about the life we celebrate. This is at the heart of the new evangelization. In the face of the many challenges to life, we must proclaim with conviction, understanding, and with evangelical boldness the truth about the human person.

We can summarize this truth about the human person in six points which we will develop: The inherent dignity and sanctity of human life; the inviolability of human dignity and its sanctity; the indivisibility of man’s dignity; identical in each person; the human person is a transcendent being; the human person is essentially a social being.

One: The Inherent Dignity and Sanctity of Human Life

13. “Inherent and innate” because this dignity and sanctity are given to us by God, in whose image we are made. They are not conferred by the State or by any other human authority. As a matter of fact, the State and government exist to protect and promote the dignity and sanctity of life. God’s image implanted in humanity means that we are called to share in the divine nature (2 Peter. 1:4); that we are creative (i.e. a co-worker with God) and that we are capable of love and also of reason. So that “when gentiles, who do not possess the law do so instinctively what the law requires, these though not having the law, are a law to themselves, they show that what the law requires is in their minds” (Romans. 2:14-15). This is the Natural Law and it is the basis for consensus and for united action between Christians and non-Christians.

Two: The Inviolability of Human Dignity and Sanctity

14. The Church teaches that, “The sacredness of life gives rise to its inviolability, written from the beginning in man’s heart,”^[11] so that “Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this...”^[12]

Any kind of abuse of human dignity must be seen as an affront to God himself, and must be resisted. We must also recognize a special bond of solidarity with those with whom Jesus especially aligned himself, the weak, the poor and all whose rights are violated.

^[9] The Gospel of Life, 101.4.

^[10] Ibid, 90.

^[11] *The Gospel of Life*; 40.1.

^[12] Ibid, 9.

The rights of persons must be recognized, “among which, in the first place, is the inviolable right of every human being to life.”^[13]

Three: Human life - an indivisible good

15. The Church teaches that “*Human life is sacred and inviolable at every moment of existence, including the initial phase which precedes birth;*”^[14] human life is sacred at every stage and in every situation, it is an indivisible good. No stage of life is more sacred than another.

This means that the sacredness of life is in no way related to a person’s productivity or to his being judged a “success” or “failure” in life. We therefore have a special responsibility to protect and to promote the rights of those who, because of some handicap or weakness, are disrespected.

We must without fail proclaim loudly and clearly: Respect and protect the right to life, and its sacredness, from conception to its natural end.

Four: Human Dignity is Identical in each Person

16. The Church teaches that “*there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone. It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the ‘poorest of the poor’ on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal.*”^[15]

St. James reminds us that this truth about the human person must always be observed by the community of faith. It is, in fact, required by the “Law of the Kingdom” to love your neighbour, so that if you make distinctions between persons, you break the law and are condemned by the same law.

Five: The Human Person is a Transcendent Being

17. There is more to a person than his physical being. The human person, in himself and in his vocation, transcends the limits of the created universe, of society and of history. Humanity’s ultimate end is God himself.^[16]

This means that the social order is to be subordinate to the order of persons, and not the other way round, and that the social order is to be guided by transcendent values, that is, the higher values of love and friendship, of prayer and of contemplation that Pope Paul VI described as the values which made it possible for human beings to find themselves.^[17] These values are clearly Gospel values and run counter to the prevailing materialism and moral relativism of our social order.

Love is therefore the key to human transcendence. The Scriptures describe it as the most important commandment in the Law, and Jesus tells us that the whole Law and the Prophets are founded on it. Salvation must concern the human person in all his/her dimensions: personal and social, spiritual and corporeal, historical and transcendent.

Six: The Human Person is Essentially a Social Being

18. Since the human person is created in the image of the Trinitarian God the human person is made for community. Our development as persons and the advance merit of society “hinge on one another.” This means that the human person “*is alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving.*”^[18]

^[13] Ibid, 60.

^[14] Ibid, 61.

^[15] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Veritatis Splendor: The Splendor of Truth* (August 6, 1993) 96.2.

^[16] *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, (Second Vatican Council, 1965) 26.

^[17] Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio: On the Development of Peoples* (1967), 20.

^[18] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus: On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (May 1, 1991), 41.

The Church therefore teaches that “*in humanity’s inner dimension are rooted... the commitment to justice and solidarity, to the building up of a social, economic and political life that corresponds to God’s plan.*”^[19] These issues should not be extraneous to our spirituality.

19. Again, and very importantly, the Church also teaches that the prototype of the social nature of the human being is found in the original relationship between man and woman. It is therefore the Christian understanding that “woman is the complement of man, as man is the complement of woman: Man and woman complete each other mutually, not only from a physical and psychological point of view, but also ontologically.”^[20]

Christian marriage is therefore, a natural human right and must be contracted between a man and a woman.

It is important that we fully grasp these six points, because the new evangelization requires us to relate the proclamation of this truth about the human person to the specific challenges being made on human life in our various societies. Let us now look at some of these attacks.

Part II: Challenges to Life

20. In our Caribbean societies the issue of abortion deserves special attention. It must be made clear from the outset that abortion and euthanasia can never be justified. Abortion and euthanasia are always immoral despite the law which may make such actions legal. No law can make them moral. They are attacks on innocent and defenceless life; the powerful on the powerless. As such they are always absolutely immoral and opposed to the common good.

MOTHERS

21. We urge parents, and mothers in particular, to never lose sight of the fact that the unborn child is totally entrusted to them to protect and nurture. The child in the womb is a human being. The Scriptures remind us of this – Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke. 1:39–44. In any event, the life in the womb “*would never be made human if it were not human already. This has always been clear, and...modern genetic science offers clear confirmation.*”^[21]

To those mothers who have already had an abortion, we wish to address you directly. We know that your decision to have an abortion must have been a most difficult and painful one. Perhaps, at the time, you felt yourself trapped in a corner with no way out. In such times of desperation, especially if you are alone, you may have lost sight of God’s providence, his loving kindness and his mercy, and made wrong decisions.

22. St. Paul helps us to understand such awful situations and also shows us the way out of them. “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:18-19). In his desperate dilemma he asks: “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24) Paul finds the answer in the love of God through Jesus Christ (Romans 7:24, 25). The message that God’s grace is enough for you; (because God’s great strength is revealed in weakness (2 Corinthians 12: 8, 9; also 1 Corinthians 10:13) should give you both comfort and courage to trust God’s providential love for you.

We therefore urge you now, do not despair: “The Sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart O God you will not despise”. (Ps. 51:17) It is important that you seek God’s forgiveness and grace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and also to ask the forgiveness of your child who is now living in the Lord. There are many individuals in the Church today who are willing to journey with you in what has to be a courageous honesty before God, but which is a real source of healing and reconciliation.

^[19] Compendium 40; Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 6

^[20] Compendium 37, 147.

^[21] The Gospel of Life. 60.1.

FATHERS

23. We must also say a special word to all fathers. We ask you to fully take up your responsibilities as fathers and, like St. Joseph, protect and safeguard the integrity of your families. The mother of your child will always need your support and encouragement; this is especially the case in a difficult pregnancy; stand by her. You must love and share in the nurturing of your children.

DOCTORS AND NURSES

24. We also appeal to doctors, nurses and all others who are involved in health care, to remember that they are called to protect and to heal, to defend and to value human life. No situation and no circumstance can ever justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.

LEGISLATORS

25. Members of parliament, our legislators, must make every effort to ensure that legislation always advances the common good by protecting all people, especially the weakest and most vulnerable in our midst.

This means that parliamentarians, who should be genuinely concerned about democracy, must be firmly committed to the full dignity of every human being. Otherwise democracy would not survive, and they would have failed in their duty to promote the common good. They should therefore attempt to lead their constituents to a consensus on basic human values, appealing to that sense of right and wrong that is engraved in the hearts of all human beings.

The concern of parliamentarians should always be for the common good; to shape a society in which the “social conditions allow people, as groups and individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.”^[22]

However, as we are aware of the difficulty of trying to correct the unspeakable injustice of ‘legalized abortion’ in a pluralist society with parliamentary representation, any state that protects assaults on innocent human life is in the words of John Paul II, a “tyrant state.”

...recognizes that a particular problem of conscience can arise for legislators who are faced with a parliamentary vote on abortion. In such a case the Church teaches that when it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law, an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion... was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality. This does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspect.^[23]

Whenever a legislator votes to limit the harm of an abortion law, he should take on the responsibility of constantly monitoring and publicizing its application; he should also work tirelessly for an overturning of the abortion law and should do everything in his power to see that unborn human life comes to enjoy the protection of the state.

THE FAMILY

26. As we proclaim the sanctity of life, the family must have a special place and emphasis. We make a call for greater pastoral care to be given to families, especially those experiencing

^[22] Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

^[23] The Gospel of Life, 73.

difficulties, so that families may become places where children are welcomed with joy, and where they are nurtured and taught to respect and cherish the gift of life. We cannot stress too much the importance of good and loving families in the shaping of healthy and peaceful societies. In addition, pastoral care and support must be given to single parent families.

Those involved in the pastoral care of families should provide counselling services for both parents and troubled children. They should also monitor State laws and institutions to ensure that they support family life and do not violate the rights of the family.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

27. The modern demand in some places for so-called same sex “marriages” must be seen as a challenge to the integrity of the human person and be condemned. This demand is clearly based on a totally wrong understanding of the human person and is an extreme example of the very dangerous separation of the conjugal act from procreation. Besides being incapable of transmitting human life, such unions deny the “interpersonal complementarity” that marriage requires and that can only exist between a man and a woman. It must be stressed, that the Church’s teaching against same sex “marriages” in no way justifies or condones any violence, abuse or discrimination against persons of same-sex orientation who are also God’s children. To do so, would violate their inherent dignity.

We wish to stress that any separation of the unitive act from the procreative act is morally unacceptable. This includes contraception, as well as the donation of sperm and ova, “in vitro” fertilization and surrogate motherhood.

ORGAN DONATION

28. While organ donation, carried out in an acceptable ethical manner, is to be commended, the “production” of embryos for experimentation and for use as “biological material” for organ or tissue transplants is morally unacceptable. The destruction of the human embryo is always a crime against the dignity and the sanctity of the human person.

STEM CELL RESEARCH

29. Today stem cell research is giving great hope to many people. It should be stated that the moral issue is not about stem cell research as such, but about embryonic stem cell research. The human body also contains adult stem cells which can be legitimately used for such promising research. These cells are found in blood, fat muscles, etc. A particularly rich source is umbilical cord blood preserved after a woman gives birth. Furthermore, the simple replication of normal cells or of a portion of DNA presents no particular ethical problem. What the Church condemns is the destruction of human embryos (human beings) in order to obtain embryonic stem cells. Furthermore, the Church does not accept as ethical the reproduction of individuals at the embryonic stage, with methods other than natural fertilization, for the purpose of producing either replacement parts or genetically identical individuals (cloning).

We note the incredible advances made by Dr. James Thomson at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and Dr. Shinya Yamanaka at Kyoto University by re-programming skin cells to have the characteristics of pluri-potent stem cells, eliminating the necessity of destroying embryos for stem cell research.

THE TERMINALLY ILL

30. In the matter of the treatment of the terminally ill and of those on life-support, it is morally acceptable to relieve the pain of those who are terminally ill even if the medication results in the shortening of life, because the purpose of the medication was not to bring about the death of the patient. Further, the Church teaches that when death is clearly imminent and inevitable, one can in good conscience refuse forms of (medical) treatment that would only secure a precarious and

burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted. In other words “aggressive medical treatment” may be withheld but not the appropriate feeding and sanitary care.

PALLIATIVE OR HOSPICE CARE

31. While acute care, geared toward making a sick person better, is appropriate for most people, the dying often require a different set of medical goals. Palliative or hospice care ought to be the special concern of the Christian community. With this kind of medical care (which can involve very aggressive, even if not curative, treatment like radiation or surgery for a tumour) pain control, symptom management, social support for the family, and spiritual preparation for death ought to be available for all the dying as needed.

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

32. While we must all accept that the commitment to protect life involves the right and duty of legitimate self-defence, such self-defence can never justify the use of excessive force.

Very often those who support capital punishment invoke the text, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (the “lex talionis” – Lev. 24:20). This was, of course a most important development in the Old Testament’s understanding of justice. Justice must not seek revenge. The punishment due from injustice must be rational and not excessive.

However, the “lex talionis” was not the last word on this matter. In fact, Jesus gave us the last word: “you have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you: do not oppose evil with evil ...” (Mt. 5:38-39).

Capital punishment could be defended only in cases of absolute necessity when it is simply not possible otherwise to defend society. However, “*Such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent.*”^[24] The Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference affirm that this position in the Church’s teaching does not provide the basis for the reintroduction or renewed use of the death penalty which is presently under discussion in the region. The Bishops further express their firm desire that the leaders and people of Caribbean society move toward the total abolition of the Death Penalty. Therefore, we should place emphasis on the rehabilitation of the offender rather than on his elimination. “Non-lethal forms of punishment are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.”^[25]

OTHER CHALLENGES TO HUMAN LIFE

33. Among the many other challenges to human life today, we must include sub-human living and working conditions, poverty caused by an unjust distribution of resources, the sex trade including exploitation of women and children, torture, the drug trade, arbitrary imprisonment and prostitution.

We recognize that there is a link between violence and poverty, especially the widening gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. It is very often the case that when people lack the necessities of life and find themselves powerless to effect change or to fully participate in social and public life, they are sorely tempted to redress these insults to their human nature by violent means.^[26]

Violence always provokes more violence and deepens the culture of death, we must urgently appeal to governments, and to those economically better off, to make a serious and generous response to the plight of the poor, as a matter of justice and of solidarity. Poverty often has allied forms of oppression which can incite violence on the part of those oppressed.

[24] Evangelium Vitae, 60

[25] Ibid., 99

[26] On the Development of Peoples, 30.

34. The Council Fathers warned against the excessive economic and social differences that exist between the members of the one human family or population groups because, as they put it, these differences cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace.^[27] There is clearly a great need for a stronger sense of solidarity both between and within nations.

All these various attacks on human life emphasize the need for us to understand and proclaim that to be actively pro-life we must work for the renewal of society through the promotion of the common good.

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

35. The new evangelization seeks to do this through the spreading of the culture of life and by giving hope to those locked in the spiral of violence and living in fear, to the poor, the aged, the handicapped and all whose lives are dependent on others and who might be made to feel unwanted and expendable.

We therefore work for a social order that is founded on the truth about the human person, built on justice and animated by love. This will require a great many changes both in society and in ourselves.^[28]

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourself with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Chapter III: CELEBRATE LIFE

“Ascribe Majesty to his name and give thanks to him with praise, with songs on your lips, and with harps: this is what you shall say in thanksgiving: all the works of the Lord are very good, and whatever he commands will be done at the appointed time” (Sirach 39:15-16).

36. “God is love” (1 John. 4:8), and Creation is an expression and sacrament of God’s love. Creation reveals the grandeur, the power and the sheer majesty and mystery of the God who created and sustains the universe.

Within the context of Creation God made humanity as his “crowning achievement,” for “man in his interiority transcends the universe and is the only creature willed by God for itself.”^[29]

The Psalmist, contemplating humanity’s unique place in the universe, tells us:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet...” (Psalm. 8:4-7 see also Sirach 17:1-4).

This Psalm describes the great dignity of the human person, made in God’s image and likeness. The human person is indeed fearfully and wonderfully made to have a constant and intimate relationship with God who is humanity’s ultimate end.

37. Although sin seriously affected our relation with God, it did not destroy God’s love for us, neither did it destroy our inherent dignity. St. Paul marvelled at the fact that Christ died for us when we were still sinners and weakened by sin (Romans 5:6). And again, where sin increased,

^[27] Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 29.

^[28] Ibid, 26.

^[29] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979; 13.3.

grace abounded all the more (Romans 5:20). Man is created in God's image and he is redeemed by God Incarnate.

Indeed, "when the fullness of time came, God sent his Son ... born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4) to redeem humanity and to restore in us the recognition of our transcendence. The Council Fathers could therefore assert that "by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being."^[30]

In the Incarnation Jesus gives us the basis for a genuine Christian anthropology. He shows us the truth about God and also the truth about humanity. This truth, which must be at the heart of our evangelization, is the only foundation of a truly free and democratic society. Otherwise democracy will "work" against us and become an attack on the dignity of human life.

38. It is important for all Christians to reflect on and to contemplate the great love God has for his creation; and on his marvelous gift of life to us all. This reflection is essential for us to fulfill our priestly calling to celebrate life: "*Father you are holy indeed, and all creation rightly gives you praise. All life, all holiness comes from you through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy Spirit.*"^[31]

It is through a non-exploitative relationship with creation, one of care and respectful responsibility, that creation sustains life and truly gives God praise. (Romans 8:18-23) Pope John Paul II rightly argued that the "dominion granted to man by the creator is not an absolute power, nor can we speak of a freedom to use and misuse or to dispose of things as one pleases When it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity."^[32]

39. In the Eucharistic liturgy we learn how to "touch" another human life with love and healing and how to "touch" creation with an ecological sensitivity. In the Eucharistic liturgy we celebrate life and the Giver of life, a celebration we must carry into our daily lives. We live eucharistically when our lives are marked by a deep thankfulness and when we proclaim and serve human life with sacrificial joy.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).

Chapter IV: SERVE LIFE

"Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received" (1Peter 4:10).

40. The Church has always recognized the essential relationship of evangelization to human development. Pope Paul VI described this relationship as being both anthropological and theological, because the person evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social and economic questions," and also because "we cannot disassociate the plan of Creation from the plan of Redemption, or the plan of human liberation from the plan of salvation - they are both fulfilled in the paschal mystery of Christ."^[33]

It is for this reason that spreading the Church's social doctrine is an authentic pastoral priority and is central to the very content of the message of evangelization.

"To teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message."^[34]

^[30] Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 22.

^[31] Eucharistic Prayer 3.

^[32] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concern*, (December 30, 1987), 34.

^[33] Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi: Evangelization in the Modern World* (1975) 31.

^[34] On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, 5.

41. Although building up the Ecclesial Community is an important area of lay ministry, which the laity do with their Pastors, it is not the “primary and immediate task” of the lay ministry. In fact the first, and the area best suited to the lay state, is the secular world, which they are called to shape according to God’s Will.^[35]

For the laity to fulfil their special form of evangelization, the Church’s social doctrine must become an integral part of their on-going formation, we therefore urge Pastors to study the Church’s social teaching in order to educate their people. How we respond, as a Church, to the crisis of culture we are now experiencing will largely depend on this formation.

42. A basic course in Catholic Social Teaching, to be used in parishes should be worked out around these six themes: The innate dignity and sanctity of human life; the common good; the principle of subsidiarity; solidarity; the universal distribution of goods; and the option for the poor – this last seen both as an area of service as well as of a life-style of simplicity that affirms the primacy of being over having. Such a course will allow for a better understanding and a more mature response to the many social issues facing Catholics today.

It is through the guidance of this teaching that the split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives could be overcome. This is crucial because this split completely nullifies our witness to the world and makes us unwitting supporters of the culture of death. This is why the Council Fathers assert that it deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.^[36]

43. The new evangelization must therefore begin with the Church, with us. It is a call to a conversion that fosters a new life in Christ, indeed a new culture of life, in which (1) there is no separation between faith and everyday life, and (2) the pursuit of the common good is about assimilating and spreading the values of the Gospel.

We wish to commend and encourage all those who are already involved in the ministry of “serving life,” of promoting the culture of life. We urge them to deepen their commitment, through studying the Church’s social teaching and further, to share their experiences with the wider Church community so that others may be moved to engage in practical ways of “serving life.”

Here we think especially of:

- Those who work in the various Homes, in particular those run by the Church. Homes for the aged, the indigent, for orphans and abandoned children, the terminally ill, and for those living with HIV/AIDS.
- Those who work in the area of health care, and who see themselves as guardians and servants of human life and those who work to make health care accessible to the poor.
- Those who work to improve housing for the poor. Credit Unions and other agencies that make it possible for the poor to improve their lives.
- Teachers, especially those in Catholic schools and in other educational institutions that give young people a “second chance” and that train them for employment.
- Those involved in the work of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Caritas, and other similar organizations.
- Those involved in the prison ministry and work for penal reform and for the rehabilitation of prisoners.

^[35] On Social Concern, 47.

^[36] The Church in the Modern World, 43.

44. Responding in practical ways to the needs of the destitute, drug addicts, the homeless, persons living with AIDS and their families, and all these whom Pope Paul VI described as the “new poor,” e.g. the handicapped, should include material help, a welcome in the Church community, and a defence of their place and dignity in society.^[37]

Because the media play such an important role in shaping the culture and thinking of people, we must make a special outreach to media personnel. We must help them to see that their work should be at the service of the common good. In this way they could play a vital part in the new evangelization and in the promotion of the culture of life.

45. Since we all need information in order to make the many decisions we face every day, and in order to vote wisely, it is imperative that the media recognize their responsibility to ensure the truth of the information they communicate. It is also imperative that they promote the fundamental values of human society, and resist the temptation to spread values that are inimical to genuine integral development.

We must again emphasize the need for a strong family - life ministry. Marriage preparation classes, to include parenting skills and education in natural methods of regulating fertility, should be established in every parish.

46. Those involved in this very vital ministry must also seriously examine the issues that adversely affect family life today; issues such as employment and minimum wage legislation. These two issues are important if marriages are to succeed and the family to be a “place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates.”^[38]

Pope John Paul II reminded us that “work (employment) constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life...in a way, work is a condition for making it possible to form a family.”^[39] The need for minimum wage legislation is also crucial, i.e. a wage which allows (families) to live a truly human life and to fulfil their family obligations in a worthy manner and provide security for old age.^[40]

47. As lay people seek to make practical responses to the many problems our societies, and our families, face today, some of them may be moved to get involved in the labor union movement and in the political process. This should be seen as a good thing. These are certainly important ways to “serve life,” once those involved are well grounded in the Church’s social doctrine.

“... it belongs to the laity, without waiting passively for orders and directions, to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live.”^[41]

48. Labour Unions have a responsibility to strive not only for an adequate minimum wage and decent working conditions for workers, but, in collaboration with employers and government, for workers to be properly educated and trained to cope with modern developments in the work-place.

Politicians must commit themselves to the promotion of the common good, and give special attention to those who are least able to support themselves.

49. Inevitably, however, involvement in party politics will cause disagreements to emerge among the faithful. These disagreements are often genuine and sincere, and certainly do not necessarily mean that one party or the other is against the Church’s teaching. The Council Fathers therefore

^[37] Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens: A Call to Action on the Eightieth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (1971), 15.

^[38] Evangelization in the Modern World, 71.

^[39] John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work* (September 14, 1981), 10.

^[40] John XXIII, Encyclical Letter, *Mater Et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress* (1961), 71.

^[41] *A Call to Action on the Eightieth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*, 48.

warned that it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the afore-mentioned situation to appropriate the Church's authority for their opinion. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good.^[42]

We must be clear that the Church does not offer technical and concrete solutions to purely economic and political problems. As an expert in humanity,^[43] but not in economics or politics, the Church's mission is about defending and promoting the innate dignity and fundamental rights of the human person; it is about the renewal of society and the promotion of the common good, it is about calling all people to recognize the transcendent dimension of the human person and of social existence.

All Catholic politicians and unionists must strive to support the Church's essential mission and to promote the culture of life. We urge them, and all other politicians and unionists, to do all in their power to ensure that proper support is given to families. Indeed, a family policy should be seen by them to be the basis and driving force of all their social policies.

50. We believe that the time has come for each Arch/diocese or Province to collaborate with the medical profession in establishing National or Regional Bioethics Committees to advise governments on proposed legislation in the area of medical ethics. The Church is called both to assist and to challenge local governments in complex questions of medical ethics in service of the gift of life.

Pastors, in sharing the Church's Social Teaching with the laity, must avoid any party political biases. They must, above all, avoid every involvement in party politics, since this would divide the parish community. Their role as pastors requires them to be a sign of unity.^[44]

CONCLUSION

51. The parish Eucharistic community is made up of a variety of people, engaged in a variety of occupations, interests, and ministries, all essential parts of the "Body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12-30). As such, this variety expresses the presence of the Holy Spirit and the integrity of the local Church.

We must therefore welcome and rejoice in this variety of people and of their gifts. The challenge we face is to truly give ourselves as a living and holy sacrifice pleasing to God, refusing to be conformed to the world and the culture of death, but rather striving to be transformed through the renewal of the mind to promote the culture of life (Romans 12: 1-2).

When we rise to this challenge the Eucharistic liturgy unites us in the one Ministry of Christ and strengthens us all to celebrate, proclaim, and serve life. In truth we become co-workers with Christ the Good Shepherd who came to give life, "life in all its fullness" (John 10:10).

Signed:

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Most Rev. Archbishop Robert Rivas, O.P., Kingstown
Most Rev. Bishop Donald Reece, Coadjutor Archbishop, Kingston-in-Jamaica
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^[42] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 43.

^[43] Paul VI, *On The Development of Peoples*, s 13.

^[44] The Church in America, 39.

Most Rev. Bishop Vincent Darius, St George's-in-Grenada
Most Rev. Bishop Wilhelmus de Bekker, Paramaribo
Most Rev. Bishop Charles Dufour, Montego Bay
Most Rev. Bishop Emmanuel Lafont, Cayenne
Most Rev. Bishop Gabriel Malzaire, Roseau
Most Rev. Bishop Luis Secco, Willemstad
Most Rev. Bishop Dorrick Wright, Belize & Belmopan
Rome, March 29th, 2008