

**ARCHBISHOP GILBERT'S ADDRESS
AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2001**

I'd like to begin by thanking you in my own name and in the name of my predecessors for the work that you do for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and of the region. Steve keeps on reminding me that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Dominica was established by Trinidad and Tobago, and I realize the outreach of Trinidad and Tobago throughout the Caribbean is a significant outreach. This week, about eleven of the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference will be in Trinidad for a whole week of meetings. Different committees are having their annual meetings. They come to Trinidad not only because the Secretariat is here on Gray Street, but they come here also because of the tremendous amount of resources that are available in Trinidad and the commitment that is here and I thank you for that. I don't think that is a false statement because you know more and better than I do how many people depend upon you for their existence, not for their comfort, but for their existence; and I congratulate you on that ministry.

When I speak, I usually try to bring some issues of substance for consideration, and in my brief address to you, I'll do just that. I'd like to bring up things that are concerns to me. I've already been here five months. I promised that I wouldn't be making any major changes before January 2002 because I'm in the process of listening to a good many people, but I would like to bring some generic concerns that are getting more and more clear to me, and one of them affects what the Society of St. Vincent de Paul does.

My concern is that I'm beginning to meet with people who, like yourselves, share in the social ministry/human development ministry of the Church who are beginning to say to me "We are not going to be able to continue much longer". It is a compliment to them for the twenty to thirty years that they have been involved, they have done wonderful work and they have taken care of thousands of people. The challenge to the church, which will be operative until the Lord returns in glory, is to continue the social ministry and human development outreach of the Church to all the areas that we presently do, and if it is prudently possible, to expand and extend them. My concern is that many of these groups either didn't pay enough attention to the continuity principle or it is the will of God that we begin to look at a more creative way to respond to the needs of these people.

I'm not specifying groups or people, but just this week, I had three groups in my office who told me that they're running out of options, it is not financial, it is people, it is continuity, it is the increasing complexities in ministry that the outgoing President referred to in his address to you. I'm trying to alert you to the fact that life can never be assumed to continue, we have to work at that, we have to be in dialogue with one another, we have to support one another, because you can never assume that just because you were able to do something ten years ago, or you're able to do it now and do it well, that you'll be able to do it ten years from now. No business can operate on that basis and neither can the church. In giving you examples, in addition to the references your present President made of my concern for the number of people who are truly in need of the care of the Church (as distinct from the care of the Government), I see it as a very important issue. You have to look at your short-term and long-term continuity, the quality of your ministry; the outreach is beyond the present dimensions and you have to do your best to protect and facilitate growth in that.

In relation to what your President said about “anything that we can do for you, let us know”, I haven’t got specific things right now but if the present dialogue about the operation of long-term social and human development services to the nation that are run by the Catholic Church continues to develop in this direction, I may be back to you to see what you can do in terms of picking up the slack. I’m glad that you have here the largest group in an Annual General Meeting, there is a fair mixture that business and church people in terms of structures would say would provide you with continuity. I think that one of the things the Church has to do is ask all groups to look at their continuity from the viewpoint of identity, vocation, and your participation in ministries that are much broader than the Archdiocese and that are absolutely co-extensive with the Catholic Church.

That brings me to my second point. As you know, one of the things that I’ve been very strong and visible on and I’m in dialogue with a lot of people on, is “how Catholic are the Catholic schools?” What I want to do with you this morning is to ask “how Catholic is the Society of St. Vincent de Paul?” You might say, “what a foolish question, we will have Mass in just a little while, we have sung hymns, we have said prayers”. My question is to stimulate another question: How do you form your new members?

How do you educate and provide continuing education in vocational issues, the issues that are your identity, your vocation, your service to the Church? I suggest to you that it can’t be assumed. You can never assume that the next generation understands everything that you understood when you began and when you were trained. That has to be passed on very carefully. I’d like to take the heat off you by giving you an analogy that has nothing to do with you but it proves the principle. The religious communities in the church, in the breakdown following the Second Vatican Council assumed that the members coming in had the same Catholic background as the members who were already present in those communities before Vatican Council II, and they were not. Family structure and Catholic education had begun to break down, and the people coming out of both of these situations asking for entrance into religious communities could no longer be assumed to be in the same condition as those who came in twenty years before. Therefore, I ask you to give attention to your new members, to continuing education and formation of your present members. I’m sure Fr. Harris works on that at the days of recollection he gives to the group.

As you know the Antilles Episcopal Conference Bishops put out last year a pastoral letter on catechesis and the reason they did, was they realized that there was a crisis in people understanding their faith and understanding their vocation all over the world, but also in the Caribbean. We have begun to address that by stressing that every education/formation programme has to have four components. The first of these components we call “content”, and that speaks to your identity. If we sent out a questionnaire or test this morning to be corrected by your new President, and we asked you ten questions about the history, the vocation, the identity and the theology of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and its ministry, I’m sure everybody would assume that you could set that off without any difficulty. The test would be “Can you?” Not the old guard, but the people who are in the field now and the people who are

just beginning. For example, in the international circular letter, of which part was read at the beginning; as the speaker was reading, I was reading ahead and I was looking down at the footnotes, which are very interesting and heavy but very doctrinal; and as an old teacher, I like to read things that have footnotes because it gives you the source material of the text, and it enables you to do your own research on your own at your own pace.

Now I realize that there are a lot of good and hard working people who are not good readers, but one of the things you have to do, and the leadership of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has to do is to ensure vocational clarity, the content dimension of who you are has to be continually repeated, because it leads into the next area: you have to be formed, shaped by, be responsive to and be comfortable with your content, who you are. That formation leads you to a point where you have to make a decision to serve the Lord, not just as baptized and confirmed people, but as people who, within the context of that baptism and confirmation, have made the decision to reach out in a persevering way to care for the poor. That gives you a mission, but what frequently happens in the ministries of the Church is that it doesn't happen in that chronological order. What happens in the ministries of the Church is that you see something you like and find attractive, and you find that this is helping people; so you say (because you are a nice person) "I'm going to share that". So you say to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul or your local parish priest "I'd like to help in that particular thing". Be very careful that you don't stop there, because if you stop there, what you can very frequently wind up with is a job, you're doing something tangible that is helpful to people, but it doesn't necessarily reflect consciously who you are, and a willingness to grow and deeper in that vocation; so the tendency becomes that you do things ten years from now exactly as you did them ten years ago. But there is a whole changing atmosphere, there is a whole development of spirituality, there is a whole international development (as we saw last week) of things that are contributing to poverty and hopelessness and brokenness that can take away hope from people, and that is very bad and dangerous chemistry. And we have seen many times where that chemistry has exploded.

As you know, I have changed the rules of the Synod where it looks like about 1,000 persons instead of less than 150 people. That is going to give every parish, every worshipping community of every parish, not only the right, but also the obligation to participate in this, because we are the Church. We have to talk to one another as we plan our future, and because things develop so fast now in church and state and in the unit community throughout the world that you can no longer make twenty year projections. You have to shorten that to three and five year projections, continually evaluating what you're doing and asking "Is this working?"

This is one of the things we have to do in Church, and one of the areas we have to do it in is the area of human development and social justice. The visibility of the Catholic Church in these areas is very important. What we have to say about many issues, as challenging as it is, is very different from what a lot of other people have to say. And this gets back into what it means to be Catholic, and whether we really believe the message of the church, even though it is difficult at times for some persons at some periods of their lives. We believe that the message of the Gospel are the seeds for building an international community that will be truly receptive to the spirit and responsive to the Lord. I invite you as an organization and as people

who come from the various parishes of the Archdiocese to really work at preparing for this Synod, and even battle to become members of it.

I've been in administration for thirty of the thirty seven years that I've been a priest and I used to get a lot of people angry for saying this but I know it works. I say it to you and I don't want you to get angry at me, but even if you do, I want you to think about what I said. I don't need vegetables, people who just sit there, I need thinking hard, critical people in the good sense of that term, to form the nucleus of leadership in the Archdiocese and to reach out willingly to all the problems that we have to face, that are going to have social implications, that will be more intense than they are right now; because every scientist in every field is giving the same message; it is going to get worse before it gets better. Therefore we have to proclaim ourselves, proclaim our message very clearly because how we do things is different, or should be, from other people, even other Christian traditions.

As you look at that, I wouldn't be surprised if some individuals have assimilated the secular values on issues such as life, sexuality, family, perseverance, fidelity which are not highly appreciated in many areas of secular society, and are given lip service in many areas of the theological society and are bedrock for Catholic community. That's why I'm taking this somewhat heavy approach on a Sunday morning, because you are a very influential community, and you're going to leave here and have outreach and contact with thousands of people, and I want you to think and to talk and to be able to be as faithful as you can be to your vocation and to your ministry as Catholic.

My final point: One of the important choices and responsibilities of the Catholic Church is to model the Incarnation, the visibility and tangibility of the Incarnation, the access we have had through Jesus to God and the community that formed around Him. One of the steps that have been brought about in your organization that has been reported twice since I've been here is the decision about public relations. Another assumption that people make is everybody understands you and who you are and what you do and why you do what you do. That is an assumption. Public relations is a ministry to put out the values, the visibility, the mission, that continually lifts up the Church and makes the Church visible in the mainflow of Society.

One of the challenges we have all over the world is to continue our social mission and accept the assistance of Church and private sector with no strings. We are not to compromise who we are, what we do or what we stand for to get that help, as once you do that, you begin to die. It is so easy to do that because when you have bills to pay, you have to find the money to pay them. It is a very important factor to test the quality of your theological spine, of how firm you are in Catholic values, to say: "we can get a big hunk of money from Foundations but to get it, you have to change your position on life" or "we can get a big hunk of money from Foundations to do certain things in certain areas which have to be done; but to get it, you have to terminate your relationship with the Catholic Church". I realize that flexibility is a part of administration and a part of growth and development, and as people would love to use us, I

would have no objections if our administration of St. Vincent de Paul use them to do good things, but without selling out. As soon as you sell out, you begin to die.

So, I call you to fidelity, to continue the remarkable works that you do; but we live in dangerous times, and the danger is not only in the present international crisis, the danger is that identity, of the church, commitment to the teaching of the church and the principles on which we form community are not known by a lot of people who say they are Catholic; and my job is to help them through the Catholic school system and through many other ways to become Catholic, and your job is to ensure the Catholicness of you and your ministry is alive and stays alive and is passed on to a new generation.

Thank you.