

BRO. CLIVE BELGRAVE'S ADDRESS AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2001

Today's Annual General Meeting is a little different to last year's. During the course of that year, we had lost the services of our President, and earlier on, we had lost our Archbishop; and it was the first Annual General Meeting in living memory when the Archbishop was not present. I'm happy to say that the atmosphere is quite different because we have a new Archbishop who is present and one whom I am sure will follow in the tradition of his predecessor and be totally supportive of the Society and its work.

Today, we are also installing a new President. The past year has also given us an opportunity to demonstrate both the maturity and the strength of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul because we have passed through what can best be described as a very testing period with flying colours. There really have been no hiccups in the work of the Society, we have not come across any particular problems and our work has continued unimpeded, and in fact in some areas, there has been definite growth and development. For all of this, I think we owe a debt of gratitude to the members of the National Council, the National Executive and the general membership for demonstrating what the Society in Trinidad and Tobago is all about.

While Steve has given a comprehensive Secretary's Report, I want to touch on a few items which I think are, for me, of particular importance. During the course of the year, we had a number of conferences of the Society aggregated. I had the pleasure of presenting one of those letters of aggregation to the community in Tacarigua, and other members of the Executive have made similar presentations to conferences in other parts of the country who have received these letters of aggregation. I want to urge those conferences that are not already aggregated to proceed with the necessary action that would ensure your aggregation in the shortest possible time.

There are two developments in the Society which I think gives me and members of the Society cause for optimism. One is the fact that we have been able to establish a Committee that does ministry at the Y.T.C. in Arouca. It is a prison ministry, which is a cause that was espoused by our late Archbishop for many years and where we found it difficult to make any kind of breakthrough. I am happy to say that we have a vibrant Committee that is involved in the prison ministry.

The members of the National Executive receive their reports on a regular basis and it is clear they're doing a tremendous amount of work there. We are continuing with our efforts to get into the Adult Prison which as you know has proved to be very difficult proposition for many reasons.

The other Committee that I think needs commendation is the Public Relations Committee which I am sure all of you are aware of has been producing a monthly newsletter for us with great regularity and with great promptness. I think that the members of that Committee (I think that most of them are young) deserve our congratulations for their dedication and the support that they are providing for the membership of the Society in terms of keeping us informed.

As most of you know, we turned the sod for the Home for the Aged in San Fernando earlier this year. Just let me let you know that we have had a meeting with the Ministry of Social Development and we asked the Government to look at providing us with some financial assistance so that we can get that project started in the shortest possible time. Having regard to what has been happening on the political scene, I don't think that that is a priority right now and therefore we have not had any response to that request. We have however had an indication that we are likely to receive from Government some support for our Cyril Ross Nursery and that would be a very welcome development for us.

We have also been proceeding with the refurbishment of Nazareth House. Those of you who have had the opportunity to visit this facility in recent times would have noted the almost complete conversion of the property from a run down building to one that better suits the needs of the poor that we are endeavouring to assist.

When next you visit the Geriatric Home in Diego Martin, you may find yourself pleasantly surprised to not have to climb all the stairs, because we expect that by next month, the lift which has been very generously provided by the Fernandes Foundation in terms of finance will be in full operation. Work is going on apace at the Geriatric Home to put that lift into operation.

The final thing that I'd like to mention is the fact that we have made great strides in terms of the computerization of our records in our offices. Very shortly, we expect to be on-line and those of you who use modern facilities would be able to be in touch with the Secretariat via E-mail. That will make the process of communication a lot easier and we as a Society would also be able to interact more effectively with the Society all around the world using the latest modern techniques. This is all in keeping with the Society's thrust of keeping abreast of development and being focused on what we need to do.

Having said that, I want to just say a few words about our new Archbishop. Naturally, as Executive of what is perhaps the largest social action organization in the Church, we took the opportunity to meet with His Grace and to bring him up to date with the work of the Society in Trinidad & Tobago. He has visited us at Nazareth House, he has seen the complex there and he has indicated to us that as soon as his schedule permits, he will be visiting our various institutions, so members can look forward to an informal visit from His Grace at some time where institutions are located, and I ask that the members of the conferences in those particular areas avail themselves of the opportunity to meet with His Grace on a one to one basis when he does make such a visit. We have of course as a Society pledged to His Grace our support for him and for the Church in terms of carrying out our mandate for social action in the Archdiocese and perhaps today he will share with us some of his thoughts in terms of how we can be of support to him in his ministry in looking after all the needs of the Archdiocese of Port of Spain.

I also want to say a few words concerning the fact that we have a new President. I regard the election of this President as a very positive development for the Society in Trinidad & Tobago, and particularly as Bro. Wong Doo comes from the south of Trinidad. I had reason to do some research recently to appear on a programme with Fr. Rudy Mohammed to talk about the Society in Trinidad & Tobago from historical days to the present time, and in the course of doing that research I discovered that when the first Central Council was formed in Trinidad and Tobago (equivalent to the National Council of today), the first president of the Society was from south Trinidad. That was something of which I was unaware and something that I discovered.

It made me reflect on the fact that when I joined the Society myself, South Trinidad was perhaps the most effective arm of the Society in the country, and I remember here brothers from the south, Bros. Pena, Haskell and Boodasingh. Most of you have never heard of these names, but as a young person joining the Society, they were a source of inspiration to me. It has been a source of concern at the level of the National Council that the energy, commitment and the drive that the south used to demonstrate to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has been somewhat lacking over the last few years, and I think it is propitious that the membership of the Society finds itself with a President from south Trinidad. I sincerely hope that south would take the opportunity to re-invigorate itself, to revitalize the work of the Society in this part of the country and to take its rightful place in terms of the operations of the Society in Trinidad & Tobago.

I want to congratulate Bro. Anthony for accepting this responsibility because one of the problems, and I use the word advisedly, that we face in the Society is the unwillingness of a lot of our members to accept office. It is something that I've never been able to understand because I have always believed that when you join the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, you put yourself at the service of the poor and at the service of the Society in whatever role you're called upon to play. If in the collective wisdom of the membership, you are considered a fit person to perform that role, then I think in all humility and sincerity, we should accept these appointments and do our best within the limits of our capacities. I may have said this at a previous Annual General Meeting, I know I have said it on a number of occasions when I thought it was appropriate, and you'll excuse me for saying it again. I remember a particular conference of the Society that had a long standing President and that conference never seemed to be able to find a successor, the President continued holding office for quite a considerable length of time. It so happened that the President was transferred by his company to Port of Spain to work and he had to move to Port of Spain and therefore the conference found itself with no option but to find somebody to take over. It may be one of those strange coincidences, but the person they turned to happened to be a carpenter who most people never paid too much mind to, and it was astonishing to see what that person was able to do to the conference in a few years in terms of revitalization and new members. Purely by personal example, he was able to revitalize a conference that was barely dormant, that couldn't find a leader, nobody thought that they were in a position to serve. That has always been for me a very intrusive experience of what serving in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is all about.

I want to again congratulate Bro. Anthony for accepting this office. I think he knows that he has the support of all those who have served at the National level if he chooses to use those people, and also I'm sure that he has your support. Certainly his acceptance of office ought to serve as an example to many of us here because while he has been a long serving member of the National Executive, he is by nature a very quiet, reserved, almost withdrawn sort of person and I'm looking forward with some interest to see how he is going to wear this new mantle. It is challenges like this that bring out the best in people and I'm really looking forward to continue to work with him in terms of advancing the cause of the poor in Trinidad & Tobago.

Let me just digress to say that for myself, I want to express my personal thanks to the members of the National Council, members of the National Executive and also the general membership of the Society for the support I have received during my term of office, particularly during this last term which was totally unexpected. If Bro. Anthony receives the kind of support that I did, I have absolutely no reason to doubt that his term as President will be a very successful and productive one, and I hope that you will all join in making that possible.

It is my pleasant duty to invite His Grace to inaugurate or install our new President and subsequently to address you at this the first Annual General Meeting that he is attending.

Thank you very much.