

**SERMON OF ARCHBISHOP GILBERT AT MASS  
DURING ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ON 23<sup>RD</sup> SEPTEMBER 2001.**

What I would like to do is to reflect on these Scriptures with you because as I said at the introduction, it can be so easily applied to who you are and what you do. The first reading, you have to understand its context. The prophet Amos is a simple guy and Israel is a long country, it is divided into north and south. He was from the south just like your new President. God does funny things, he took Amos out of his work, made him a prophet and he sent him to the North. The great theological centre of the south was Jerusalem. The great theological centre of the north was Bethel and they did not get along well at all. The Lord sends Amos not only to the north, he sends him to Bethel. He tells him that He God is very concerned about how the people are being treated by those in power and those who have wealth. He wants Amos to go north and to proclaim God's truth about caring for people simply because they are God's people. But he is very specific, in his outreach to the people there, he is exposing them for what they are doing, Amos is not talking against riches, he is talking about people who get rich and stay rich by cheating, disrespecting and manipulating others. Amos is talking about people who can't wait to get out of worship so they can get back to their business of cheating people and increasing their wealth. He is also therefore proclaiming against hypocrisy where people can take on a pious, almost round shouldered humble way of about them in worship but they are ravaging wolves as soon as they leave and the reason they are there is to be noticed. The second thing he says is that you can't cheat the poor. They would rig their scales so that the poor would come in to sell their goods and they would be cheated, thousands and thousands of them would be cheated and out of these profits, the people would be wealthy. Amos, speaking for God said "And you will be punished for what you do. I will not allow this to continue." These are issues that are as significant today as they have been throughout salvation history. A few years ago, there was a Synod in Rome called the Synod of America and in the document that came out from the Synod, for the first time since the Council, the preferential option for the poor also said that we must also respect people who are wealthy and powerful who use their gifts and share their gifts and refer their wealth and their power to God for the benefit of people. There are people who are wealthy, and some of them may be here, who have always been responsible in sharing who they are and what they have and their gifts with the poor. It is important that we recognize that, articulate it, respect it because I am sure the administration at the head table know to whom to go when they are in need of big money on the short run and those are the only people who can give it; and they do and they have done and will continue to do this. However, there are many other people who don't share their power, they use their power for themselves; who don't share the wealth, they just keep on piling it up. One of the things that has happened in the world in which we live is something that has been proclaimed by at least four popes in a row, but most articulately by the present Pope, Pope John Paul II, that the injustice in the world is creating an imbalance between North and South areas of the world and between East and West areas of the world, severe imbalances are resulting and those imbalances are not God's will.

All over the world; more and more people are being trapped in a cycle and they are good people, they are willing to work, they are talented people, they have contributions to make but they cannot get a chance to do it because there is no room in the system. We have to confront

the causes of the ministry that we do and we have to be willing to do this prudently and courageously. One way we do that is by continually studying, listening to, dialoguing about the social justice teaching of the Catholic Church. When was the last time, for example, you ever saw on the BBC or CNN or some international communications outlet any other church but the Catholic Church coming up with positions on life, sexuality, warfare, business ethics, social ethics, social justice? You have not seen that. The Catholic Church is the only one that has maintained the visibility and the forum to internationally challenge presidents, kings and princes about issues of justice, ethics and wisdom. So be very proud of who you are and don't sell out nor compromise although I understand how life can be very difficult, maintain your identity, maintain who you are.

The Gospel from Luke is not complicated. It is dealing with someone who was caught playing games and who creatively responded to what was going to happen to him. That is the lesson. Why is it that with all the talent that we have, why is it that secular people are more creative in doing and expanding in what they do than we are? When we have the truth (we believe) and we have structured ways to share that truth to people who need to hear it and need to live it, but we don't do it. We are content at in many ways a very mediocre way to celebrate Church and to protect, expand the ministries that we have. We are very quiet almost apologetic about it, we don't want to get involved in it. I will give you a good example of this. When I was on vacation, I visited my mother in Florida and that was the time when they were having all those fifty-three shark attacks, on the eastern seaboard of U.S.A. They closed the beaches and that affected the businesses that operated off the beaches. It was going to be a temporary thing, may be less than a month so the experts said (which turned out to be true). What did some of the business people do? They were not making money because the people were not on the beaches. They took straw hats, put a big shark on top of the hats and made thousands of dollars. What did they do essentially? They took advantage of a situation they had nothing to do with that was causing them to lose money and as a result, they made money. They took a situation where they were losing money and they created a situation whereby they made money. One of your many responsibilities is to present yourselves attractively to the general public and you have so much to sell. We have to find creative ways to announce ourselves, non-insultive ways, non-judgemental ways just to proclaim who we are and the good things we do and the 2000 year history in which we have done those things and move on with confidence. If people were selling shoes they would do this.

Tell people who you are, be creative in how you do it. Tell the truth, tell people who you serve and do it with confidence and let creativity enter into your ministry.

You mentioned in your reports the professionalism that is being introduced electronically in your ministry to make it better and easier. Build on that. We have to facilitate a solidarity among all peoples, all races, all ethnic backgrounds, all religions and we have to bring this together under the umbrella of God's teaching. When we had the Mass for the victims of the American tragedy, we used the readings from Isaiah which talked about the tremendous unity among God's people and solidarity and then it said "We will have one people under one God." And I said, a lot of people doubt that, not so much that they doubt God's word but they can't even imagine how this could happen. And I said to them to put the theology in context and to

give you deep confidence in that theology I said when the message was preached by Isaiah and Amos and Jesus, 7000, 6000 and 2000 years ago, most people just said well it's a dream. One of the things that you and I live with now is that every single part of the world can be in touch with every other part of the world instantly. People are coming together and are in dialogue with one another, with all the problems we have in ways that have never been possible before. Is it possible that God is creating the conditions whereby the original plan of Isaiah, the human solidarity message of Amos and the social justice teaching of Jesus can actually happen because one people, slowly but surely are being formed? How we live our lives will either accelerate that process or inhibit it. The ministry that you do in the name of the Church dealing with Catholic principles to serve but making no distinction about who is served will facilitate this process moving forward. Who knows what the world would look like in 100, 500 years but whatever the world will look like at that time will be partially the result of how we have lived our lives now. So I encourage you on the basis of the social justice message to continue to serve the people who are helpless and dependent without ever giving up challenging the reasons why they are selflessly hopelessly trapped in inhuman situations. The reading from Timothy is talking about prayer. He says something tricky here. He says we have to pray for civil rulers, and one of the reasons we have to pray for civil rulers is that they will either let us alone or help us to be what we are. The historical context of this reading is important: pray for civil rulers no exceptions. When this was written, the civil ruler was the emperor Nero who was pounding the Christian community. He was doing his very best to destroy it, but Paul lived through this and he is telling the people pray for civil rulers not for their happy and rapid death, pray for them that they will learn their responsibility, that they will learn to respect all the peoples according to the wisdom of God; pray for that. Even that sounds so unrealistic because corruption, political intrigue is part of life all over the planet. When will it ever end? We believe in the power of prayer and we believe that prayer can change the direction of history; so as we serve the physical tangible needs, the holistic needs of poor people, we must remain a people of prayer. The reason why they are broken and the reason why we see them day after day and year after year has fundamentally remedial causes. If the Governments of the world decided to confront them, something could be done. The problem is even the middle class is disappearing because one of the problems in many ministries is people allow themselves to get to a point where life passed them by and they stayed in that position and said "We are being faithful" but they were not, they were not responding to the Biblical mandate to read the signs of the times and to adjust, not the truth, but the way it is celebrated, the way it is communicated, the way it is used as the base for service. You can do this, we can do this, we have to do this as an archdiocese and if we have to give up funding to protect our Catholic identity, then the archdiocese has to come up with the money to continue to support this ministry, there is money here in Trinidad to do that. We have to ask for it, we have to explain it and we have to use it with transparency so that people understand that what they are giving is being used for that which they gave it. This is a good liturgy for this type of celebration. God gave us these readings for a purpose. I ask you to reflect on them privately and quietly and lift yourselves up for the work that you do; but never be satisfied by what you do, always look to improve the quality and outreach and communicate its meaning. AMEN