



# **ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**

Permanent Mission of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations

800 2nd Ave., Ste. 400G, New York, NY 10017 • Tel: (212) 599-0950 • Fax: (212) 599-1020 • [www.svg-un.org](http://www.svg-un.org)

## **Keynote Address**

By

**H.E. Camillo M. Gonsalves**

Permanent Representative of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations

## **Prayer Breakfast:**

**“Expanding our Christian Responsibilities to Global Issues”**

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of the Clergy, Good Morning.

At the outset, let me thank you all most sincerely for the opportunity to address you this morning. I am all too aware of the competing demands for your time, and for this many busy New Yorkers to show up on a Saturday morning, particularly one with such welcome warm weather, is a testament to your own dedication and sense of responsibility. I would also like to especially thank Father Donaldson for his generous invitation, and for his initiative in selecting this timely and appropriate topic – “Expanding our Christian Responsibilities to Global Issues.”

I would like to begin with a brief story that illustrates – on a personal level – why I consider Father Donaldson’s choice of topic especially relevant. I have recently returned from an official visit to the Republic of Turkey. As you know, Turkey is today a predominantly Muslim country. However, Turkey has a rich Christian history. In fact, the last home of the Virgin Mary lies in the hills outside of Ephesus, which is city in Turkey. Ephesus is also the city to which Paul addressed his famous “Letter to the Ephesians.” At the time, Ephesus was the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city in the Roman Empire, and was also home to one of the largest libraries of the era. Two hundred and fifty thousand people lived in the city.

Let me tell you something instructive about Ephesus. When the city was built, there was a tunnel that went from beneath the library; under the street; and emerged in a brothel. The city planners had designed the city so that men could pretend to go to the library when they were actually going to cavort with prostitutes. Similarly, 8,000 year old advertisements for prostitution are carved into the marble causeways in the ruins of the city.

Paul wrote his Letter to the Ephesians to remind them of their personal Christian responsibilities, even in such an outwardly immoral city: don’t steal, don’t drink, respect the family unit, live as God would expect us to live.

Today, New York is a modern day Ephesus, with all the vice and virtue of a major world city. There may not be underground links from the important city buildings to prostitutes, but we have learned from the Governor Spitzer scandal that there may now instead be Internet links from

important places to prostitutes. However, New York is one of the world's most important cities – a center for art, politics, culture and religion – much as Ephesus was at the time. Much as Paul reminded the Christians of Ephesus of their responsibilities amid a questionable moral climate, so too must we remember ours. And we must remember that those responsibilities have significance and obligations beyond our immediate surroundings, and remember that they are absolute, and not defined by the moral relativism around us.

Now, I am no theologian, and I am acutely aware of my limitations as a Biblical scholar. I leave to Father Donaldson the more in depth explorations of the nuances of Christian responsibility. However, there are some basic Christian responsibilities upon which we can all agree – responsibilities emanating out of love, peace, sharing, good-neighborliness, and a willingness to emulate, as far as possible, the life, sacrifices and teachings of Jesus Christ. These basic Christian responsibilities have profound implications on a global scale. As this world becomes increasingly smaller and interconnected due to technology and travel and globalization, we find ourselves as citizens of a shrinking global village – our car might be made in Japan, our shoes might be made in China, our shirt in Bangladesh. We can take out our cell phones right here in this church and speak to relatives in the Caribbean. And the decisions we make here in the United States affect wars in Iraq, hurricanes in the Caribbean, and the lives of our brothers and sisters in Africa. Today, our individual and collective actions can truly change the world in profound ways. As such, our obligation to tackle global issues in a responsible Christian manner is more important today than ever before.

I have a fundamental belief that good, active, progressive Christians know the right thing, and do the right thing whenever the opportunity presents itself. In doing the right thing, they change the world. My aim today, is not to tell you *how* to extend your Christian responsibility to global issues, but simply to highlight a few global issues that I humbly suggest could benefit from progressive Christian activism. I am confident that once these issues are brought to your attention, you will do the right thing. Today, I will focus on four issues that currently occupy quite a bit of my time at the United Nations: Development, Climate Change, Peacemaking, and Human Rights.

## **DEVELOPMENT ISSUES**

I don't believe in bombarding people with numbers and statistics, but I think that there are a few appropriate ones to mention. Today, in 2008, almost three billion people worldwide are living on less than \$2 per day, and over one billion are somehow surviving on less than \$1 per day. One dollar per day is \$365 per year. The next time you receive your monthly or weekly paycheck, or social security check, think about the fact that that one check probably represents more money than half of the world's population will see for many years – maybe even their entire lifetime.

That cannot be fair.

Similarly, 30,000 children die every single day across the world from the single most preventable disease: The disease of poverty. There are 72 million eligible children – right now – who have never been to primary school; and there are 1 billion people in this world who cannot even sign their name. One quarter of the people living in the world do not have any electricity in their homes.

That cannot be right.

This world in which we live is grossly and immorally unequal. The immigrants among us know what I am talking about, because many of us came to the United States to take advantage of opportunities that were not available to us in our home countries. Well, more than half of the world's population cannot seek opportunity on distant shores, nor should migration be the only option to escape crushing poverty. Billions of people today have their options, their prospects and their potential curtailed simply by virtue of which country in the world they happened to be born. They are trapped in an iniquitous global system of haves and have nots; a system that is rooted in profit rather than people, and that is based not on empowerment, but on exploitation. In short, we are not living in a world that is governed by Christian values of sharing and caring for the least among us.

In the book of Matthew, Chapter 25, verses 31-44, the Bible talks about the day when the Son of Man will judge the nations of the earth:

*When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:  
And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:  
And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.  
Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:  
For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:  
Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.*

*Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?  
When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?  
Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?*

*And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

*Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:  
For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:  
I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.*

*Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?  
Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.*

*And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.*

These few verses capture – in a way that I am unable to do – our moral obligation to assist the least among our brothers and sisters. This assistance, however, must not be in the form of handouts, simple charity or welfare colonialism. It must come as developmental assistance, to empower the least among us to escape their wretched condition. And it must come as sincere efforts to create a more equitable global system.

I'll give you a brief example about the type of dependency-creating welfare colonialism that I'm talking about. Many of you may have heard about efforts to tackle Malaria in Sub-Saharan

Africa by providing mosquito nets to protect people from mosquitoes that carry the disease. Protecting people from Malaria is a noble and necessary goal, there can be no doubt about that. But ask yourself, as I have asked others: Why is our effort limited to providing nets? Why don't we eradicate Malaria instead? When you provide nets, you have certainly helped. But has the problem disappeared? No, the mosquitoes are raging beyond the nets. So a system of dependency is created, instead of a system of empowerment. Those under the nets rely on you to continually provide new nets, and you are the giver of life, in perpetuity. But let us kill the mosquitoes, eliminate the conditions that create them. Let us provide medicines. Let us empower people to walk freely through their communities. Is that not a better way to help?

At the United Nations, we recognize the need for development and development assistance. In 2000, the UN approved a system of targets called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These MDGs cover a number of basic targets like poverty alleviation, primary education and literacy, health and gender equality. We gave ourselves 15 years to achieve these goals, but as you can see from the statistics I read earlier, we are not on track to meet our own modest targets. While some parts of the world – like the United States and the European Union – have already met these goals, and other parts – like much of the Caribbean – are on pace to achieve many of them, there are billions of people that the MDGs simply will not touch.

One of the primary reasons for the ongoing difficulties in achieving meaningful development is the fact that the developed countries of the world have not kept their promises to the developing world regarding the amount of financing they would provide for global development assistance. Development costs money, and the richest countries of the world recognized their duty to assist in that regard. Unfortunately, their solemn promises of assistance have not materialized into tangible help. For example, the developed countries of the world promised to devote 0.7% of their GDP to worldwide development assistance. Not 10%, not 5%, but less than 1% of their money. Even that promise, however, has not been kept. The United States, the richest country in the world, spends less than three-tenths of one percent on Official Development Assistance. For every three dollars the US makes, they spend 1 penny on development assistance.

As individuals and as churches, this inequity and indifference to suffering must offend our conscience. And as a rich country – as rich people – we can and must do more. You know, there is a well-known parable where Jesus says that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. But such is the nature of people that we never consider ourselves the rich man. We always think that Jesus was talking about people richer than we are. I am here to tell you that there are three billion people in the world today who think that each and every one of you in this room is very wealthy indeed. To whom much is given much is expected. Let us live up to our global expectations and responsibilities.

## **CLIMATE CHANGE**

The flagship issue at the UN this year is Climate Change. And climate change is truly a global issue. The pollution of one country affects the climate of another, and the only way to bring the world back into balance is with concerted global effort.

We are all familiar with the phrase “no man is an island.” Today, it is true to say that no island is an island either. Climate change, has taught us that painful lesson. The gas used and exhaust from the mufflers of the SUVs that you see on the roads here in Brooklyn will affect farmers in Africa and fishermen in Barbados. The simple truth is that the greenest and most eco-friendly country will not escape the ravages of climate change, fueled by factors beyond our control and outside of our borders.

I have no desire to deluge you with scientific proof of climate change or its seriousness. Bob Marley once sang: “Who feels it, knows it.” In the Caribbean, we all feel, and know, the stark realities of climate change.

So, in my time with you today, let me mention peoples and places you may have never heard of – although those of you from other islands will easily relate these stories to villages and towns of your own. Let me tell you about how a storm’s glancing blow destroyed homes in the village of Colonarie this year, forcing the relocation of surprised villagers who had lived in that coastal area for decades. Let me recall how the Vincentian Government was forced to construct a concrete barrier at the waterfront village of Layou, because waves were destroying the road and

washing into peoples' homes and businesses. Or about the fishermen of Calliaqua, whose age-old near coastal fishing livelihood is threatened, because fish are seeking deeper and cooler waters further away from our shores. Or the residents of Argyle, whose title deeds of recent vintage overstate the amount of land they now own, because the sea has reclaimed much of their property purchases. I could discuss the residents of the Grenadines, which have no rivers or lakes, and where increasingly irregular rainfall and salt water intrusion into ground water supplies will threaten their very existence. Or maybe I can talk about the Tobago Cays, the epicenter of our diving and yachting tourism, where coral bleaching and reef death could compromise or hard-won reputation as a marine paradise, and scuttle our plans for increased reliance on tourism.

Of course, we all remember Grenada. Thirty years ago, experts said that Grenada was too far south to be affected by hurricanes. Then Hurricane Ivan struck in 2004 and destroyed 90% of all the homes on the island. Over 70 people from Trinidad to Jamaica lost their lives. These problems and more speak to the fact that today, in the Caribbean, our citizens' basic rights to housing, property, safety, food and development are *already* being compromised by climate change.

I am fond of saying that God may have created man in his image, but he created the Caribbean in the image of heaven. As Christians, we have a fundamental responsibility to protect and preserve this planet that God created for us. Can you image a history of humanity that starts with the words "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" and concludes with "in the end, mankind destroyed it"? Again, as Christians, and as residents of planet's most polluting country, per capita, we cannot sit idly by and watch our excesses ruin the rest of the earth.

The industries and consumers and politicians of the United States can make commitments to reduce their emissions – either scientifically or through modest lifestyle changes. And the developed world can help other states adapt to the damage already caused by consumerist excesses.

In our battle against climate change, we must also remember the way in which this issue is interconnected with many critical life and death issues. And we must guard against so-called solutions that cause more harm than good. You may have heard the rush to the production of biofuels from corn and other crops. Many will tell you that biofuels are a renewable resource, and will reduce our dependency on foreign oil and fossil fuels. What they will not tell you is that it raises the price of food drastically for those who can least afford it. When you use corn to make gas, it drives up the demand and the price of corn, and lowers the supply left for food. When corn costs more, corn products cost more. Flour and bread cost more. Beef and chicken – often fed on corn-based foods – cost more. Less land is available for the cultivation of crops. And when it is all said and done, the reduction in oil usage is minimal.

So instead of developing higher fuel efficiency standards, or instead of building cleaner factories, we use crops to feed our cars instead of to feed starving people. The result is further global injustice. The people rioting in Haiti aren't driving the SUVs and running the air conditioners or building the industries that created the problem. But they are the ones bearing the brunt of our reluctance to change our lifestyle. It is a sin, plain and simple, for innocent people to be doubly affected by both climate change and its proposed solutions.

### **PEACEMAKING AND PEACEKEEPING**

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus – the Prince of Peace – says “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” No one reading the Bible can question where Jesus stands on the issues of war and peace. Yet in today's world we are increasingly witness to sinful acts of violence that simply cannot be comprehended. As active Christians, we are obliged to raise our voices against the horrors of senseless and preventable wars.

In 1994, over 800,000 people were massacred in Rwanda over the course of six weeks. No one dropped a Weapon of Mass Destruction on them. They were killed individually, by machetes, clubs and rusty guns. The world did nothing while this genocide took place. Absolutely nothing. Imagine for a moment the slaughter of every man, woman and child in Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, and St. Vincent and the

Grenadines. Or imagine the murder of everyone in Delaware; or Vermont; or Boston; or San Francisco; or Washington DC. Now imagine that no one lifted a finger to stop the carnage.

After Rwanda, the world said “never again.” We promised to act to stop future genocide. But never again is happening again right now in Darfur, where hundreds of thousands of people are being killed – not by tanks, but by men riding horses and camels. These genocides are a stain on the collective conscience of mankind.

As Christians, we must always voice our opposition to war and senseless killing. It is our responsibility to honour the most sacred of God’s gifts – the gift of life. Today, in addition to Darfur, there is a litany of places where war and mass murder are met with international inaction. Bosnia, Croatia, Burundi, Angola, Burma, Tibet, Iraq, and the list goes on. It is no longer enough for anyone to simply throw up their hands, or wonder what in the world is going on in those far-flung places. As Christians, we cannot simply see it as evidence of the last days. Our job is not to predict the last days or sit idly by and wait for the clock of history to stop ticking. Our duty instead is to actively work against evil and injustice while we are here on earth. There is no act more purely evil, and more antithetical to Christian morality, than senseless, avoidable and preventable acts of killing.

My grandmother used to have a saying: “cockroach don’t business in fowl fight.” And that saying meant two things. First, it meant that we shouldn’t get involved in issues that don’t concern us. Second, it also meant that the small and insignificant should stay out of the affairs of more powerful actors. It is the sort of justification that keeps many people from raising their voices in the face of evil in far-away places. We think that it doesn’t concern us, or we think that the conflicts should be resolved by people more important than ourselves. We are wrong. In this modern, interconnected world, there is no problem so remote that it cannot affect us. Every single war on this planet should be an affront to every single Christian on the globe. And, as representatives and ambassadors of Almighty God, Christians speak with the authority of the most important figure. There is no conflict so large that it negates Christian input and analysis.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS**

I have spoken to you today about extreme poverty and hunger, of hurricanes and floods, of wars and genocides. It will come as no surprise to anyone here that human rights abuses can be found in every corner of the globe. Indeed, human rights abuses are the handmaidens of desperation and destruction. The callous disregard of the rights of people, and the political manipulation of human rights, are issues that cry out for the intervention of ethical arbiters who view injustice through the eyes of the people affected, not the powers involved.

Turn on the news this evening. Odds are you will hear about crackdowns in Tibet; of election irregularities in Zimbabwe; or of waterboarding and torture in Guantanamo Bay. Across the planet, billions of people are denied fundamental freedoms. Rights that we assume are universal – like the right to speak, to worship and to choose our political representatives – are simply nonexistent in other countries. Even more fundamental are things we take for granted – like the right to a meal, to a basic education, or to a decent living wage – are beyond the grasp of billions of people.

I confess to you that the application and enforcement of human rights at the UN is horribly political, and may be irreparably broken. Some countries protect their friends' from censure, while criticizing the same violations when committed by their enemies. Economic clout often insulates major human rights violators from condemnation, while weaker countries are castigated for lesser infractions. And many countries simply stay silent, either because the process disgusts them or because they are afraid of their turn on the human rights chopping block.

Indeed, even in my own country, partisan opportunists and hypocrites often clothe their attempts at political assassination in the guise of human rights issues.

But the flaws in the process do not mean that we must throw our hands up while human rights abuses go on. Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere, and it is insufficient to agitate for human rights at home, while ignoring them abroad. Indeed, the very failings of the existing system are what demand the intervention of right-thinking Christians. If the world cannot listen

to the self-serving attacks and counterattacks of political actors, maybe they will listen to those who speak impartially, and with the moral authority of the church.

## **HOW TO DO IT?**

I have given you today a disturbing – maybe even depressing – litany of global injustices and crises. And I have said that there are ample opportunities and moral imperatives for Christians to expand their global responsibilities to these issues. What I have not told you is how to expand, or what to do. As I indicated earlier, I do not believe that it is necessary for me to give you a detailed recipe for doing what comes naturally to progressive Christian people. I will, however, leave you with a few brief things to keep in mind:

First, be aware of what's happening around the world, not just around the block. Many policy makers rely heavily on the assumption that you do not know – or do not care – about what is happening anywhere beyond your own neighbourhood. A sense of global awareness is the first step towards expanding your Christian responsibilities worldwide. If you know about injustices, I am confident that you will act to stop them.

Second, always remember that you have personal choices and decisions make regarding what to do and what not to do. You can support and you can boycott; protest and write; donate and sacrifice. As I said earlier, your personal choices can truly affect the world. You must remain cognizant of how little things can have a global impact.

Third, as a church, and as a progressive congregation, you have even greater power. And your power is increasing. All over the developing world, the IMF and the World Bank and other international institutions are telling governments that they need to get smaller. The prescription for progress is less government, less regulation, more liberalization. But when governments get smaller – especially in small and developing countries – it very often means that the government has to cut back on services that it used to provide. The gap between what governments should do, and what they can do is fertile ground for the church and other progressive non-governmental organizations.

Fourth, many of us in this room, as citizens of many countries, can double our impact by calling on all of our governments to change, and by showing the global awareness and interest that I discussed earlier. Further, as residents and maybe citizens of the most powerful nation on earth, Christians living in the United States have the greatest responsibility to bring all available pressures to bear on our elected officials – or soon to be elected officials – to ensure that US policies are imbued with a sense of moral responsibility and justice. Our starving, brother in Haiti cannot call the US's attention to his plight. Nor can our victimized sister in Darfur, or our victims of drug traffickers in the Caribbean. But we can.

We are all familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the central question of the tale: “Who is your neighbour?” Today, your neighbour is not simply the man or woman across the street, it is the man or woman across the globe. As responsible, progressive and activist Christians, we are morally and ethically bound to consider the least among our global family, and to lift them up. Almighty God expects no less.

I thank you