

Speech for CREDI Symposium on Sat 10 Sept, 2011 at UTT O'Meara Campus

The vocation of teaching in the 21st Century – the sacred responsibility of teachers to form children. By Leela Ramdeen

Good morning brothers and sisters in Christ. I want to start with a poem entitled "Unity" by Cleo V. Swarat

"I dreamed I stood in a studio
And watched two sculptors there,
The clay they used was a young child's mind
And they fashioned it with care.

One was a teacher:
the tools she used were books and music and art;
One was a parent
With a guiding hand and gentle loving heart.

And when at last their work was done,
They were proud of what they had wrought.
For the things they had worked into the child
Could never be sold or bought!

And each agreed she would have failed
if she had worked alone.
For behind the parent stood the school,
and behind the teacher stood the home!"

Earlier this year when I was in London I met a former student of mine – Trevor. What a challenge it was for me to teach in one of the roughest areas in London. Crime and violence was rampant in that area. Poverty and social exclusion there was oppressive. Family life left much to be desired. The level of expulsion of black children at that school was one of the highest in the area. The Principal and some of the teachers drove in from the suburbs and drove back to their middle-class lives on afternoons without really caring about the plight of their students. In fact, because of their low expectations of the students and negative attitudes towards them, the quality of education provided by these educators was poor.

I cringed every time I heard the Principal tell the students during Assemblies how wonderful it was to listen to the birds as she sat on her patio having breakfast. Most of the children came to school without having had breakfast. Many did not know what a patio was and most of them were denied the opportunity of hearing birdsong because of the cacophony of sound that came from those who lived in the high-rise flats in which they lived.

Having come from Trinidad where I knew that teachers in my youth cared for all students – whether one came to school barefooted or not, I was determined to assist students at that school. I convinced the Principal to give me any student whom she wished to expel. Soon my class was the only vertically grouped class in the school, with children of all ages. Planning to meet the diverse needs of these students was not easy. I had to become a ‘social worker’ also. I encouraged parents/guardians to let me visit them at home. I needed to know what was going on in the lives of these children if I was to plan effectively for them. I needed to partner with their families so that together we could help them to achieve their potential.

Trevor told me that he is the proud owner of a construction firm and owns his own house. He, and a few others whom I taught, still meet and often speak fondly of me. He said: “We still remember you because you believed in us and helped us to believe in ourselves.”

I helped turn that school around. I was then head-hunted to lead a team of teachers to promote success among students of Caribbean origin. This was the initiative of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The Authority was responding to the recommendations of The Swann Report (1985): Education For All. (See also The Rampton Report). This was the first Government report that acknowledged that there was racism in schools.

Together with my team of teachers, we encouraged teachers to allow us to video-tape some of their classes. We then watched the videos with them and analysed their classroom practice/interaction. At times one saw black children with their hands up raring to answer questions posed by a teacher. Yet they were not given an opportunity to respond. Then, when they became bored, disaffected and disengaged from the proceedings and misbehaved, they were sent to the Principal’s office.

We encouraged teachers to consider which children they interacted with during the day and the nature of their interaction. We examined the way in which they marked children’s work; the comments made – verbal and written in relation to their work; which children had their pieces of work displayed etc. Our work gained recognition in a short time. I was appointed Inspector of Schools and continued working with the team to promote quality education. It must be stated that in seeking to promote success among students of Caribbean origin, we were improving the teaching and learning process for all students.

When the then PM, Margaret Thatcher, and her Government disbanded the ILEA, God took me down another path. I was appointed Deputy Director of Education/Head of Quality Assurance in a London Borough. The rest is history.

Teachers, parents – and I would add “the wider community”, have a sacred, shared responsibility to form children – to promote their spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual, emotional, and physical development; to give them a solid foundation that will help them to make the right choices; to

achieve their potential; to prepare them to contribute to a highly technological, rapidly changing society/world as productive citizens. In many ways you hold the future of our nation in your hands.

I always tell teachers that you must love children to be an effective teacher. If there is a synthesis between your faith and your vocation as a teacher, it should be reflected in your planning and your practice. Our vocation must be love for our children – each of whom is a gift from God, created in His image and likeness – as we all are. Each child comes to us with inherent dignity which we should promote and protect. Your sacred responsibility is to model Gospel values; to be creative, innovative, teachers who have been keeping abreast of educational developments in your sector/subject area(s), and who use your knowledge and skills to enhance the teaching and learning process; to transform students' lives.

But let's step back for a while and focus on the **concept of 'vocation'**. Both Fr Joe Harris and Msgr Jason Gordon reminded members of CCSJ about this concept at our retreat a few months ago. As Catholics, as followers of Christ through our baptism, we are all called to be holy. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus tells us: "You must...be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Striving to be holy/perfect; striving to follow in the footsteps of Christ is a lifelong process. We will fall because of our human frailty and the use we make of our free will; the choices we make daily. But the sacrament of reconciliation is there to restore our relationship with God and with our neighbour. In his essay on *The vocation of a Catholic Teacher/Scholar*, **Profs. William E. May** (and see Michael J. McGivney - Professor of Moral Theology, John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America Washington, D.C.: www.christendom-awake.org/pages/may/teachers.htm) talks about various **kinds of vocation:**

1. The universal call to holiness: The vocation common to all Christians – our baptismal commitment to holiness:

"Our vocation to be holy, to which we commit ourselves in choosing to be baptized, means fundamentally that *we are to become what we already are: God's faithful children, members of the divine family, alive with God's own life, willing to do only what is pleasing to the Father.*

2. "More specific vocations and personal vocation: In carrying out their common vocation to holiness Christians are called to more specific vocations. **These include the states of life** to which individual Christians are summoned, some to the priesthood or religious life, others to marriage, and still others to the vocation of unmarried men and women in the world. The great majority of Christians are **lay people. Their more specific vocation is to seek the holiness to which God calls them in the world in which they live.** As Vatican Council II has so clearly taught us,

“By reason of their special vocation, it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will. They live in the world, that is, they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life, which, as it were, constitute their very existence. There they are called by God that, being led by the spirit of the Gospel they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like a leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially by the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope, and charity, they must manifest Christ to others. It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer (*Lumen gentium*, no. 31).

“Precisely **because lay people work out their vocation in the world, “the ‘world’ thus becomes,”** as John Paul II says, **“the place and means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation”** (*Christifideles laici*, no. 13). **Their vocation to sanctify themselves and to sanctify the world,** he continues, “ought to be called *an essential and inseparable element of the new life of baptism...[and to be recognized as] intimately connected to mission* and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church” (ibid, no. 17). In saying this, the Holy Father echoes the thought of **Blessed Josemaria Escrivá**, (founder of Opus Dei) who insisted that “everyday life is the true setting [place, *lugar* in Spanish] for your lives as Christians...It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must **sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind.**” Blessed Josemaria likewise emphasized that **we fulfill our vocation to be holy by sanctifying our work, sanctifying ourselves in our work, and sanctifying others through our work.**

Thus a more specific vocation of a Christian incorporates not only **the state of life to which he or she is called**—the priesthood, the religious life, marriage, being an unmarried person in the world—but **also the work one freely undertakes to be of service to God and neighbour.** And one specific kind of work is that of **teaching.**

In addition, God speaks personally to each and every Christian--priest, religious, lay person, doctor, lawyer, construction worker, business man, teacher—calling him or her to a unique personal vocation, inviting him or her to play a unique and indispensable role in carrying out his redemptive work. Vatican Council II insisted that each one of us has a personal vocation to carry out: “by our faith,” the Council Fathers declared, “we are bound all the more to fulfill these responsibilities [our earthly ones as Christians] *according to the vocation of each one*” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 43). And Pope John Paul II emphasized, in the first encyclical of his pontificate, *Redemptor hominis*, that, “for the whole community of the People of God and for each member of it what is in question is not just a specific ‘social membership’; rather, for each and every one what is essential is a particular vocation.... We must see first and foremost Christ saying in a special way to each member of the community, ‘Follow Me’” (no.

71). **Indeed, one of our important tasks in answering God’s call to holiness is to discern our personal vocation and fulfill it. (give example of mine)**

“Now let us consider the special vocation of the Catholic teacher/scholar. The special vocation of the Catholic Teacher/Scholar: Like other Catholics, Catholic teacher/scholars, who undoubtedly desire, deep within themselves, to be of service to the students entrusted to them, can at times fail, perhaps seriously, to be true to their vocation as persons **called to live out their Christian vocation to holiness in the classroom.**”

According to May, as teachers, your vocation is to dedicate your intelligence – all that you are and all that you do, to the service of Christ. He focuses on the following areas: **(1) preparation; (2) classroom presentation; (3) correcting papers and exams; (4) relations with students; and (5) research and publication. It really is worth reading this essay.**

I want to focus on our local situation in TT. If we accept that teaching is not just a job or a career, but a vocation, then one would not rush off as soon as the bell rings or come to school late or sign on and rush off to run some private business or to practise law (as has happened in the past, and I understand is still an issue today), or charge students for lessons after school while failing to cover the syllabus during working hours. Too often there is no level playing field for those students whose parents cannot afford to pay for after school lessons.

If you see teaching as your unique, personal vocation, then you will recognise your sacred responsibility to open the doors to a better world for the nation’s children who are in your care and help to sanctify the entire school setting in which you teach. In order to fulfil your sacred responsibility you must view each child as a child of God, with God-given talents which you should strive to develop. Remember Pope Benedict XVI’s definition of integral human development: the development of all dimensions of the individual and of each person. If we want to ensure that no child is left behind, we must read the signs of the times and advocate for a better education system. The headlines should alert us to the fact that our education system is in need of urgent attention, particularly our Catholic primary schools.

If you want to be true to your vocation as a teacher, you need to be aware of the state of the nation’s schools so that you can play your part in enhancing the teaching and learning process wherever you find yourself.

Two of the Government’s strategic goals over the years have been to promote accessibility to educational opportunities for all and to deliver a system of quality education to citizens at all levels of the education system. Our PM reported recently after attending a sitting of CARICOM that CARICOM leaders highlighted the need for us to develop innovative citizens. Sadly, there is a yawning gap between theory and practice. Our education system continues to fail many of our children. We do not have an inclusive education system in TT.

There are about 119 Catholic Primary Schools and 16 Catholic Secondary Schools. We run 1/3 of the nation's primary schools. With such large numbers of schools in TT run by the Church, it is fair to say that we should be leading the way to show the State what 'good practice' is all about. Yet, many of our own schools are failing many of their students. We must ask ourselves: Do Catholic schools in TT matter? Are they making a difference? Are we committed to promoting excellence in our schools?

You will be aware of the **Performance Enhancement Programme (PEP)** in 139 Primary Schools. This is an Intervention strategy, developed by the previous Administration to improve and sustain Student Academic Performance in Selected Primary Schools. There are 475 Primary Schools in TT and 139 were identified in 2009 for the PEP – underperforming schools. 43 of the 139 underperforming primary schools are Catholic. These are schools that over a period have been consistently performing below the National Mean on the National Tests (yrs 1 and 3 – language arts and maths), and Schools that have consistently produced students' performance below 30% in SEA.

If you are to play your part in forming students, you should be aware of what is wrong with the current system. The following are some of the common SEA challenges identified by School Boards, Principals Teachers of the 139 schools. Some of you may be working in some of the 139 schools:

Common SEA Challenges – Resources

- Staffing: Inadequate staff/ Teacher deficiencies
- Physical conditions of schools
- Staffing issues
- Inadequate resources
- Insufficient use of resources
- Lack of specialist teachers e.g. Special Ed or trained remedial teachers

Common SEA Challenges – Students

- Absenteeism
- Punctuality
- Poor reading skills/ literacy issues
- Low self esteem/ motivation

- Undiagnosed learning disabilities
- High student indiscipline

‘At-risk’ students

Common SEA Challenges – Teachers

- Absenteeism** (Teacher absenteeism is rampant in our schools – my comment). Not all teacher absenteeism is justified. Unjustified teacher absenteeism is child abuse).
- Lack of commitment**
- Insufficient training**
- Punctuality**
- Insufficient teacher training/ inexperience**
- Ineffective teaching strategies**

Common SEA Challenges – Leadership

- Weak leadership/ leadership issues
- Lack of instructional leadership
- Lack of planning
- Lack of supervision
- Absence of school plans
- No/ low expectations

Common SEA Challenges - Support Systems

- Insufficient support from Student Support Services
- Lack of monitoring and evaluation
- Curriculum overload
- Culture of school

- Test construction
- Insufficient functional PTAs

These 139 schools have been asked to focus on the following targeted areas:

- I. *Curriculum* – Teaching & Learning, Instructional Strategies, curriculum adaptation, literacy development
- II. *Leadership & Management* – Time management, School climate, conflict resolution, instructional leadership
- III. *Human Resources* – Training, Staffing (including remedial and specialist teachers), Professional & Personal Development, Discipline, Staff morale & motivation
- IV. Student Support – Guidance, Counselling and engagement through surveys, interviews, etc.
- V. Parental Support – Guidance, Counselling
- VI. Others Resources – ICTs, Facilities

Over the past few years some students who scored 30% or less at SEA have been ‘forced’ to repeat a year (408 repeaters in 2011). In fact, I understand that some students repeat more than 1 year. In 2011, 1,718 students scored 30% or less. 71.4% were males. And we wonder why there are only 10% black boys at UWI. As teachers committed to your vocation, you need to keep abreast of developments to inform your practice.

Read the article by Dan Harrison and Kim Arlington on July 15: “*Repeat years do low-achievers no good*”. They report on an analysis by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – based on the results of international reading, math and science examinations taken by 15 year olds. It shows that: “forcing low-achieving students to repeat grades is a recipe for poor performance...Ben Jensen, a former OECD analyst who directs the school education programme at the Grattan Institute, Australia, said grade repetition generally reflected a poor response to children who were failing. ‘It is reactive rather than proactive. High-performing countries target resources and programmes at low-performing students at a very young age.’”

Richard Teese, Director of the Centre for Research on Education Systems, University of Melbourne, Australia, said, “While parents of low-performing students were told repeating grades would give their children the chance to catch up, this often did not happen because they were generally not given additional support or a different programme. ‘They are simply exposed to the same curriculum and teaching process, which didn’t work the first time around. Why should it work the second time around?’

“Prof Teese said keeping back students decreased their interest in school work and lowered their aspirations, stigmatized them and made them more vulnerable to negative peer pressures.”

Yet we continue with this practice in T&T. Why are 4,000 of our children dropping out of school? Why does our legislation still state that children can leave school at the age of 12?

And at Secondary level, you will have read the article by Aabida Allaham on 25 July: Gopeesingh: Failure rate alarming. She reported on the Hon Education Minister’s findings that shows that there is “a huge gap between the number of students who successfully enter secondary schools to the ones who actually graduate with full passes. (see article).

It is one thing to say that TT provides free education for all (50% paid for post-graduate studies), but it is quite another thing to determine how many of our people can access this free education. Too many of our people are unable to access education e.g. because of poverty and social exclusion. The UNDP’s 2005 figures show that 16.7% or more than 210,000 persons in TT live in poverty on less than \$650 per month. Hon. Prakash Ramadhar said recently that the figure is about 30%. There are about 300,000 squatters living in TT – many without basic amenities. We must level the playing field for the nation’s people to be able to access education.

Social exclusion is wider than poverty. The Social Exclusion Unit, UK describes social exclusion as ‘a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown’ (SEU 1998). You cannot teach in our schools without considering these wider issues.

Our **Ministry of Education** has developed a Strategy Report. 2 of the strategic objectives contained therein states:

- a. Design and develop a quality education system
- b. Develop a high performing and dynamic organization.

Although these are 2 laudable and interrelated objectives, they will only be realised if the Ministry:

- Defines what is meant by a quality education system (remember that our Education Act says that children can leave school at 12 yrs old)
- Develop a framework for achieving such a system
- Develop strategies to identify and measure whether we are achieving a quality education system – how will we know it? What instruments exist for self-evaluation. Schools must be taught to self-evaluate, but there is an urgent need also for objective external evaluation – school inspections - see Ofsted? School supervisors are not inspectors. How

do we know if our schools are being well led and managed and providing the right curriculum and meeting the needs of students?

- Remember, that student academic achievement is only one indicator of a quality education system.
- We need Standards in Education – what students should know and be able to do at various ages. Education should not be a lottery. The new strategic plan for Catholic Primary Schools includes competencies. These should help us to promote quality education in our schools.

While the Ministry is seeking to address these issues, you, as teachers, must ensure that your classrooms are data-driven. What use do you make of formative and summative assessment in your school/classroom? Do you use such assessment as diagnostic tools to inform the teaching and learning process? What interventions exist e.g to support students at risk, those with special educational needs? And what about school and classroom design in TT? As the US architect, Patrick Bassett said:

“The current conundrum facing schools and their design is that we have Information-age kids trapped in Industrial-age schools: In a world where ideas and information are increasingly fluid and in flux, we frame (conceptualize) and construct schools that are fixed in time and space. For schools who are engaged in new thinking about curriculum and program and schedule (more flexible/less rigid, more student-driven/less teacher-centered, more experiential/less classroom-bound, more related to how students learn than to how schedules can conform to adult priorities, etc.), it is time to apply the new rubric and concepts to the design of schools. The two most precious commodities in school, aside from the students and staff, are time and space: Schools for the 21st. C. will seriously re-engineer and re-structure those commodities.”

www.isacs.org/resources/monographs/library.asp?id=175...7

One size does not fit all. So if you are true to your vocation, you will make use of Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences

1. Linguistic intelligence (word smart)
2. Logical – mathematical (number/reasoning smart)
3. Spatial intelligence (picture smart)
4. Bodily –Kinesthetic intelligence (body smart)
5. Musical intelligence (music smart)
6. Interpersonal intelligence (people smart)
7. Intrapersonal intelligence (self smart)

8. Naturalist intelligence (nature smart).

Gardner said that the traditional notion of intelligence based on IQ testing is too limited. He proposes the above 8 different intelligences to take account of a broader range of human potential in children and adults.;

To assist you in forming students, take note of Robert Marzano's *Nine Instructional Strategies* that "are most likely to improve student achievement across all content areas and across all grade levels". And see Malcolm Baldrige *Characteristics of High Performing Schools - 9 key areas:*

1. Clear and shared Focus/shared vision
2. High Standards and Expectations
3. Effective School Leadership
4. High Levels of Collaboration and Communication
5. Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Aligned with Standards
6. Frequent Monitoring of Teaching and Learning
7. Focused Professional development
8. Supportive Learning Environment
9. High Levels of Community and Parent Involvement

I urge you to reflect on your practice and commit to make the necessary changes to live up to your vocation. The 2005 OECD Report: Teachers Matters, state that "the broad consensus is that **"teacher quality"** is the single most important school **variable"**

www.oecd.org/dataoecd/39/47/34990905.pdf .

"Being a great teacher is very challenging and rewarding work. You have in your hands the power to influence and mould a student's mind. You have within you the capacity to instill in the child a love for learning, to keep an open mind and to keep questioning. You have the ability to promote confidence, stir thinking and awaken dreams..." <http://www.great-inspirational-quotes.com/teacher-quotes.html> .

And, in our current crisis in TT, I urge you to promote morals and values of your students. You can access CCSJ's Teachers' Workbook and the Values and Virtues Formation Programme Students' Workbook on CCSJ's website: <http://rcsocialjusticett.org> to assist you in this process.

I end with the words of Prof William May in his Essay: The Vocation of a Catholic Teacher/Scholar: “The vocation of a Catholic teacher is a specific way of living out the common Christian vocation to holiness, a vocation given to every Christian when he/she was baptized and freely choose *to be* a Christian, a follower of Jesus, his brother or sister, alive with his life, led by his Spirit, obedient to his loving Father. The Catholic teacher executes this specific vocation by doing well his/her work as a teacher. Only by sanctifying this work, sanctifying himself/herself in it, and sanctifying others through it will he/she be faithful to his/her baptismal commitment and become fully the being his Father wills him/her to be: a child as faithful to his Father as his only-begotten Son, filled with the Spirit of life and love.”

Each of you can make a difference to the lives of your students. My plea to you is – don’t put a ceiling on children’s potential. To manage diversity you must have high expectations of your students and positive attitudes towards them. If you love them, you will teach from the heart. May God inspire each one of you to do what you know is right as an educator. In our present crisis, we have a greater responsibility to serve, to build community, to build our nation. May God bless us all.