

## **Addressing the need for morals, ethics, values and virtues in society**

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Good morning brothers and sisters. Let me start off by stating that that if we wish to develop our people – our greatest assets, and our nation, we must address urgently the need for morals, ethics, values and virtues in society. We must do so at all levels of society.

Since we are focusing particularly on the Primary School sector we need to consider whether our curriculum – both overt and covert/hidden, is addressing these issues effectively. There is no doubt that the hidden curriculum in your school sends a powerful message to all who enter it.

We know that the document produced by Dr Senah some time ago on values education – via the HFLE curriculum, is not being used in most of our schools and that the idea of ‘infusion’ of values education in the curriculum needs to be addressed. Are our schools so concerned about preparing students for exams e.g. SEA, that teachers focus mainly on subjects that are tested and ignore the need to address the issues under discussion – or even to infuse these issues in the curriculum that is tested?

I wish to share one of the activities included in the CCSJ’s Students’ Workbook for our *Values and Virtues Formation Programme*. (p.36):

Peter: “Hey, yuh want ah drink?”

John: “Not me boy, I doh think I could handle alcohol.”

Peter: “Oh come on, one drink won’t hurt you. It’s fun.”

John: “Fun? You see how many accidents we have on de road due to drink driving? Alcohol could ruin your life?”

Peter: “I doh care bout dat. It does feel real nice when I drink. It’s cool fuh so. Boy try it nah?”

Students are asked what they think John should do. They are encouraged to complete the scenario by writing and/or drawing a conclusion and to dramatize their completed script – in groups.

How often do our students get the opportunity to engage in activities that will nurture values and virtues in them? The curriculum on offer to our students must take into account the kind of vision we have for society. As is stated in Proverbs (29:18): “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

You will recall that in Lewis Carroll's (Charles Dodgson 1832-1898) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), there is a moment when Alice meets the Cheshire cat. She asks:

"Cheshire Puss, would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to go", said the Cat.

"I don't much care where", said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go", said the Cat.

Do we have a clear vision of where we want to get to; of the aims of education? Are we in agreement about the kind of person we wish to 'raise' and the kind of society that we wish to build?

If we are to promote the spiritual, moral, mental, physical, social, and cultural development of our students; if we are to prepare them for life and to become **critical thinkers**, to achieve their potential and to contribute to the development of T&T/the world, they must have equitable access to quality education. We must reflect on the difference between equity and equality.

I know from listening to the Hon. Minister of Education on TV recently that he is concerned to promote values and virtues in our schools. Therefore, it is essential that this is reflected in the Education Draft Strategy Report (Oct 28, 2010).

The **Education Discussion Group**, of which I am a member, has submitted recommendations to former Ministers of Education in the past for consideration about issues relating to e.g. school and classroom design, the need for homework centres and lunch rooms in schools, and for internal and external assessment procedures for our schools. (This group comprises key educators in our society – such as: Jennifer Sampson, Prof. John Spence, Jeanette Morris, Dr Edrick Gift, Michael Bradshaw, Jennifer Doyle, David Subran, Marcia Riley, Parvatee Anmolsingh, Hazel Reis, Michael Alleyne, Lisa Ibrahim Joseph, and Ramona Khan.)

In **January 2008**, EDG submitted comments to the then Minister of Education for consideration when the Ministry was reviewing T&T's Education Act (see my article in The Guardian for a more comprehensive response by EDG to the review of the Act. The article, entitled: *Setting standards in Education*, can be accessed via the following link:

<http://legacy.guardian.co.tt/archives/2008-01-31/LeelaRamdeen.html> )

Inter alia, EDG suggested that

- a. The compulsory school age should be amended to include all persons between the ages of **five to 16 (not as it is at present – can leave at 12)**
- b. **Comparative religion should be introduced in the curriculum of all public schools.**

\*\* I wish to focus now on **morals, ethics, values and virtues.**

**Schools are not value-free spaces** and children do not walk through the school gates as empty vessels. Many of the problems that exist in society are brought into our schools by students, teachers, parents and all those in the education system. If we are to create values-driven schools and classrooms; if we are to promote integral human development, that is, the development of all dimensions of a student and of every student, then we must incorporate morals, ethics, morals, virtues and values in the covert/hidden and the overt curriculum of our educational institutions. If these are to permeate every aspect of school life, they cannot be left to chance and must be addressed specifically.

St John Chrysostom said: *“What greater work is there than training the mind and forming the habits of the young?”*

What kind of training have our youths had: those who bring knives to school in their school bags; or those who join gangs; or those who commit crimes; or those who bully others; or those young girls who consider it a trophy to have a boyfriend who has a gun; or those who cannot resolve conflicts amicably; or those who are the perpetrators of domestic violence? And are we socializing our youths to accept domestic violence? For example, some time ago at a panel discussion on domestic violence, a young girl said to me: *“If yuh love de man, yuh go take de licks.”*

The curriculum must also seek to address immorality, lawless behaviour etc. that exist in the wider society. Let us dream big. Let us dream that our youths can help us transform society. But if this dream is to become a reality, we must ensure that the intended, the offered and the received curriculum will empower them to transform themselves and others.

If we are to determine whether our efforts are taking root in the hearts and minds of our students, we need to put in place in our schools quality assurance systems. Even if we address morals, ethics, values and virtues in our curriculum, unless we have both internal and external assessment procedures in place, we will never really know how our students and our schools are doing. This is an issue that the EDG has been highlighting for a number of years.

I used to be Deputy Director of Education/Head of Quality Assurance in a London Borough, and I know the value of implementing quality assurance systems in schools. The problem we have here in TT is that we do not have standards against which one could assess the performance of our schools. There is no common picture of what children should know and be able to do.

We need **standards** that define the knowledge and skills students should possess at different stages of their school life. As the National Research Council, USA said (2001): "Standards serve as a basis of educational reform across the nation as educators and policy makers respond to the call for a clear definition of desired outcomes of schooling and a way to measure student success in terms of these outcomes"

See example of standards – Illinois Learning standards (USA):

[http://www.isbe.state.il.us/common\\_core/default.htm](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/common_core/default.htm)

### **How do we define morals, ethics, values and virtues?**

**Moral education**, relating to character building, should pervade the whole curriculum. One **definition of “morals”** is that they are: “Of or concerned with the judgment of the goodness or badness of human action and character.” Another says they are: “Standards of conduct that distinguish right from wrong.”

David Subran, a member of the Education Discussion Group, has written an excellent paper on Moral Education. He says: “Lawlessness has aroused national concern in TT. However, intelligent interventions by our socializing institutions, such as the education system, could rescue us from this turmoil. Yet, our education system focuses on traditional subjects, and largely ignores preparation for peaceful living, although the fundamental beliefs expressed in the Educaiotn Policy Paper (1993 – 2003) recognize moral development as a prime aim of TT’s education system. That document mandates the education system of TT to develop a spiritually, morally, physically, intellectually, and emotionally sound individual, and asserts that ethical and moral concerns are central to human development and survival. Furthermore, fundamental constructs such as decency, justice, respect, kindness, equality, love, honesty, and sensitivity are major determinants of the survival of our multicultural society (p. xvii).”

He says: “Morality refers to the principles we use to distinguish right from wrong; however, what is right or wrong is often unclear”. His article considers how moral identity develops. He outlines “views about developing and implementing a moral education programme in TT’s schools”.

Last week (1&2 April) the Commission which I Chair, The Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ), held a 2-day workshop at the Centre of Excellence for all teachers of Post-SEA students in RC Primary Schools. The aim was to prepare them to deliver the Values and Virtues Formation Programme in the curriculum. I will elaborate a bit more about this later

During the session, Msgr Jason Gordon, Vicar for Administration in the Catholic Archdiocese, presented *A Christian Moral Framework*. This can be accessed on our website – just google *CCSJ Trinidad* and you will be able to access the website (<http://rcsocialjusticett.org>) Msgr Jason rightly said:

*“Morality is not only about the actions we do. It is about the whole disposition and orientation of our life.”* We must not leave our morality home when we go to school, to work, to shop etc.

**ETHICS:** We need to help our students to be able to reason and to become ethical decision-makers. In his paper, Msgr Jason quotes **John Deigh** (in Robert Audi (ed), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1995) who says that **ethics**:

“...is the philosophical study of morality. The word is also commonly used interchangeably with ‘morality’ to mean the subject matter of this study; and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group, or individual, Christian ethics”, legal ethics, medical ethics, journalism ethics, environmental ethics are examples.

According to Msgr Jason, “a basic and important question in the study of ethics is: ‘Where do our moral values come from?’ This question has 2 possible answers: that values are OBJECTIVE or SUBJECTIVE...(Looking at history, we can see that pre-modern societies saw these values as objective, and as universal, absolute and unchanging.)

While Catholics believe that there are **objective moral norms/truths** that are valid at all times and everywhere; that God is the source of all moral truth and that He imprinted a moral order in our hearts and minds, we are aware that in our current society/world, **moral relativism** is rampant. Often the message that our young people receive via the media, their homes, and even in their schools, is: “If it feels good, do it.” Msgr Jason goes one further. He says today the motto of many is: “Just do it!”

And that is why, when my friend found her son watching pornography on his computer in his room and she scolded him, he retorted: “Buh yuh doh say anything when Daddy looks at porn!” Children learn what they live. If Daddy could do it, so could he: “Just do it!”

We want to lead students to **behave ethically**, that is, to behave in a manner consistent with what is right or moral. The question is, how do some people see ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?

Today many have lost a sense of God and a sense of ‘sin’; a sense of right and wrong; of good and evil. The writer, William McGuffey, wrote: "Erase all thought and fear of God from a community, and selfishness and sensuality would absorb the whole man or woman."

I am sure we will all agree that justice, kindness, wisdom, freedom, respect, peace, courage, love and hope fall in the category of being 'good'; while cruelty, folly, slavery, selfishness, murder, *cowardice*, hatred and despair are considered to be 'bad'.

Which ones will we promote in our students? Some of you may know the story of the TWO WOLVES:

"One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

He said, "My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all.

"One is Evil - It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false, pride, superiority and ego.

"The other is Good - It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather:

"Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

What are we 'feeding' our students?

**Ethics**, says Msgr Jason, is about 3 things:

1. "Good – the thing desired, the ideal
2. Right – the opposite of wrong as defined by some law
3. Ought – personal obligation, duty, responsibility.

**VALUES: How do we define Values?** The New Zealand Education Office Ltd. Has produced a very helpful document entitled: "*Taking the high ground: Virtues and Values in Catholic Schools*". In it values are defined as: "internalized sets of beliefs or principles of behavior. Not all values are consonant with moral or ethical behavior, even though they may be strongly upheld. Nor do people necessarily act in accordance with the values they hold.

Pope John Paul II said (1995): "The value of democracy stands or falls with the truths and values which it embodies and promotes. But these **values themselves must have an objective content**. Otherwise they correspond only to the power of the majority or the wishes of the most vocal."

Our students need to know that among the many so-called "moral truths" bombarding their minds, there are **objective** moral truths/norms that are valid at all times and everywhere.

Catholics believe that God is the source of all moral truth and that He imprinted a moral order in our hearts and minds. This belief helps us to form the consciences and build the characters of our youths.

One of the problems of living in an age of individualism and moral relativism is that for many, values are subjective and have no objective content. Pope Benedict XVI talks about the “*dictatorship of relativism.*”

See article : <http://moral-relativism.com/>

#### **“Moral Relativism - What's It All About?”**

Moral relativism is the view that ethical standards, morality, and positions of right or wrong are culturally based and therefore subject to a person's individual choice. We can all decide what is right for ourselves. You decide what's right for you, and I'll decide what's right for me. Moral relativism says, "It's true for me, if I believe it."

**VIRTUES:** *We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly.* (Aristotle 384 B.C.-322 B.C., Greek philosopher and scientist.)

This statement highlights the need for our students to have opportunities in the curriculum to practise morals, virtues and values.

The document referred to earlier (from New Zealand) **defines Virtues** as: “qualities of moral goodness or excellence. Many virtues can be derived from universally accepted principles. To be effective, they need to be nurtured and practiced so that individuals live by them, not merely believe in them.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that: *Virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself/herself...* “The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.” (St Gregory of Nyassa).

CCSJ's Values and Virtues Formation Programme (V&VFP) aims

- To promote authentic integral human development, that is, the development of the young person in all his/her dimensions and of every young person in our Catholic Primary Schools (Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth*, 2009);
- To teach young people about “values, virtues, morality and personal and social relationships” in order to form their consciences and build their character;
- To “form young people of the Archdiocese and Nation so they can choose truth and authentic values for their lives”;
- To help young people “find ways to enable themselves to live a full and productive life which embraces the common good.” (Archbishop Edward J. Gilbert C.Ss.R.)

**CONCLUSION:** I am sure you will agree with me that in many ways our society is in need of healing in many areas. I don't know if any of you have seen some of the **glossy magazines** that have been produced to share scenes of our carnival with the world. Many of the photos are grossly indecent. We need to adopt a multi-faceted approach to tackle the problems we face. Decency and modesty are worth promoting.

As CCSJ states in our teachers' guide for the V&VFP: *"We all recognize that the moral compass of each student will be shaped by a number of factors such as family, peer-group, community/society, the media, and from their own experiences as they journey through life."*

The challenge for educators is to equip students with life skills; to offer them a sound foundation, that, hopefully, will build their character so that they can reject aspects of our culture that are contrary to virtuous living. Let us develop a curriculum that will help them to become critical thinkers; to be able to make responsible decisions and to become productive citizens who will use their knowledge, skills and ability to help build our nation/world. They have a role to play in transforming our society/world.

Educators should seek to instill in the hearts and minds of those in their care, morals, values and virtues that will help them to stand firm when they are buffeted by the gale force winds of secularism, individualism, materialism, selfishness, and moral relativism. Give them the tools that will help them to reject aspects of our culture that are contrary to the aims of education and to live virtuous lives. Let us pray for our teachers as they seek to live their vocation and to work as partners with parents in developing all dimensions of our children and of every child.

And while our schools seek to teach character education, promote morals, virtues, values and good citizenship, we adults must strive to model positive values and virtues; to live our lives as exemplars so that our youths may wish to emulate us. I thank you.