

Our Celebration of Excellence must take us to the pathways that lead to Mercy.

St Joseph's Convent's Awards Ceremony, Thurs 27 October, 2016

Good morning Ms Guerrero, Principal of SJC, members of staff at SJC, parents and graduates, representatives from the MOE and the PTA, specially invited guests, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the honour of addressing you today at your Awards Ceremony on the theme: *Our Celebration of Excellence must take us to the pathways that lead to Mercy.*

Firstly, I would like to congratulate all those students and teachers who will receive awards today. Individually and collectively, those of you whom we honour today embody the school's motto: "*Virtute et Labore*" - *By valour and exertion.* As your school rightly states: "The motto recognizes that all things can be achieved when one uses these two principles as guiding lights."

Words that come to mind in relation to this motto are: *determination, courage, perseverance, bravery, intrepidity, fortitude, hard work, effort, industry, toil and endeavour.* Hold on to these values as you journey on. The words in your School Song embrace further values and virtues that will stand you in good stead if you strive to live by them. Inter alia, it states:

"We're all here for a purpose, To prepare for life, To learn to live, to learn to love..."

Remember, Love is the greatest commandment of all - love for God and for neighbour. The words: "We're here for a purpose" reminds me of Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman's statement: "God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission...I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons."

As your school song states, you should strive to live as your school's patron, St Joseph, did – *obedient, kind and true.*

Be *obedient* to the teachings of your faith. Reject attempts that are being made to push God off the public stage and into the private realm. Hold on to your faith.

Like St Joseph, be *kind* to everyone and to all God's creation. St Basil said: "A tree is known by its fruit; men and women by their deeds. A good deed is never lost;

those who sow courtesy reap friendship, and those who plant kindness gather love."

The value system that you embrace will help you to be *true* to yourself and to your calling. Always try to be the best that you can be. Strive for excellence.

In today's fast-changing world, you may have more than one career in your lifetime. Do not be afraid to launch out in new directions as you journey on. Knowledge is transferable. Throughout my life, I have found it useful to evaluate myself regularly - discern and build on your strengths and work on your weaknesses. I have had a number of careers to date and continue to accept with humility all that God sends my way. Even when I thought I would retire, God sent me on another journey. If you commit to work in God's vineyard, as I have done, then you must say: "Here I am, Lord, send me!"

Do not be afraid to dream big. Have confidence in your ability to succeed in your endeavours - always recognising that without God's grace we can do nothing. There are many powerful examples of people who were not afraid of hard work in seeking to make their dreams a reality.

Take, for example, **Najat Vallaud-Belkacem**, who was once a shepherd girl in Morocco where she tended sheep and fetched water from a well. She is now Minister of Education in France. She and her family moved to France and through hard work and resourcefulness, she has achieved great heights.

The writer Gbenga Adebambo reminds us that it is our attitude to life that will help us to rise above obstacles in life. He says: "A winning attitude converts a mess into a message, scars into stars, bitterness into 'betterness', frustration into fuel, misery into ministry and adversity into advancement. Charles Dickens was lame, Helen Keller was the first deaf-blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree, Plato was a hunchback, Sir Walter Scott was paralyzed, Albert Einstein could not speak until he was four years of age, Franklin Roosevelt was crippled by polio and became the first president to be wheeled into the white-house on a wheel chair!"

"Where you are coming from is not what defines you but rather where you are going in life... The amazing story of Najat Vallaud-Belkacem is literarily a unique story of grass to grace... A recent opinion poll conducted by a French newspaper showed that Najat Vallaud-Belkacem had become the country's second most popular politician in France... In a time when immigrants were tagged as vagabonds, a young girl lived her life beyond the verdict of her 'shabby' background.

“Against protracted odds and stifling oppositions, she rose from a poor and humble background to becoming the first French woman ever to be appointed Minister of Education, Higher Education, and Research.” She is a mother of twins and has found “a healthy balance between her career in politics and a fulfilling personal life.” Her older sister, Fatiha, is now a lawyer living in Paris.

<https://glocalkhabar.com/youth/najat-vallaud-belkacem-from-a-shepherd-girl-to-minister-of-education>

So, like Najat, continue to follow your dreams. Remember, though, that the race of life is not for the swift, but for those who endure to the end. And on the way remember to assist others. We live in a world in which there is much selfishness and greed. Too many are only concerned about their own personal aggrandisement. I know that all of you at SJC will be true servant-leaders; shining models of selfless-service. Too often 'service' is seen as a weakness. As a Eucharistic people, we are called to serve; to encounter Christ in others.

And while we celebrate the achievements of those of you who have excelled in your examinations, let us not forget those who have failed to do so, in spite of their best endeavours. I wish to remind those students that learning is a lifelong process. By now all of you will have learned that life is not perfect. There will be disappointments as you go forward. Some of the greatest scientists, thinkers, inventors, business people, public figures, musicians, writers, artists and athletes did not succeed the first time they tried. My message to you is: 'Never give up!'...

Remember the words of the author, JK Rowling: "It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all - in which case you fail by default."

We can learn from our failures, and grow and develop. You will face many challenges as you journey on. However, your faith, and the grounding you have received both at home and at SJC, will help you to weather any storm. Believe in yourself and in your ability to face the future with confidence.

Some of you will be going on to University, others will be entering the world of work, still others may decide to defer further education for a while and follow personal interests. Whatever decision you make, remember that each situation

offers you the opportunity to learn and to grow. Today's ceremony is not the end of your journey - it is just part of your larger journey of life.

It was Nehru who said that achievement requires character, discipline, united action and the readiness to sacrifice the individual self for the larger cause. As you journey on, reflect on whether or not you are ready to do this to achieve your goals.

Corruption plagues communities around the world today. Do not fall prey to corruption. Guard your reputation, your honour jealously. As Iago said in Shakespeare's play: Othello (Act 3, Sc 3, 155-161)

"Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed."

Today, we celebrate not only your academic success, but also your achievements in the various extra-curricular activities which SJC offers. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those involved in the education of students at SJC for continuing to play a vital role in the mission of the Church; and for striving to translate the Catholic vision for excellence into reality. Thank you for assisting our youth to be the best that they can be - as children who are made in God's image and likeness. The Archdiocese and the nation expect the highest level of professional excellence from you.

As the Most Rev Peter Smith, Archbishop of Southwark has said when referring to Catholic Schools: "Excellence is not a narrow, results-driven phenomenon but rather is based on developing the whole child in the belief that the human and the divine are inseparable. Christ's example of love and service should characterise the life and work of Catholic schools. All aspects of the Catholic school - the curriculum, the relationships, the priorities, the pastoral care, the discipline, and the standards - have the potential to speak of God's loving care. It is through the daily action of many people working together that the distinctive identity, character and standards of a school emerge. Diocesan schools must ensure that pupils receive

their entitlement to a high quality Catholic education. Achieving excellence is not an option but an expectation that must be turned into a reality... Excellent schools are imbued with a sense of excitement, enthusiasm and positive energy... Every school is as unique as every child." Yes, my dear students, each of you is unique.

As we celebrate excellence, let us not forget that no student entered this school as empty vessels. Each of you brought with you God-given gifts and talents, which were nurtured firstly by your first teachers, your parents. We thank God for their contribution to your journey to excellence.

Parents, never underestimate the role you can play in meeting your responsibilities to promote the spiritual, moral, spiritual, intellectual, social, cultural, and physical development of your children. May your homes be places of holiness and happiness for all who enter; places for growing and for sharing, for music and for laughter; for prayer and most importantly, for love. May you have mutual love, care and respect for each other. Take an interest in your children's lives; guide and counsel them. Praise and reward good behaviour and reprimand bad behaviour in a manner that does not break a child's spirit or spawn violent behaviour in the child.

For example, some time ago I was in a Supermarket and I heard a woman tell her young child who wanted her to buy a pack of biscuits for him: "Put it back or I will buss two wood in yuh tail!" Remember, children learn what they live.

Thanks also to your siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and family and friends who would have encouraged you along the way.

In his Independence Day address to the nation on 31 Aug 1962, Dr Eric Williams reminded us that "the strength of the Nation depends on the strength of its citizens." Citizens don't just fall out of trees; they belong to families, so we need to strengthen family life. Strong families build strong communities which in turn will build a strong nation. St. Pope John Paul II reminded us years ago that: "The future of humanity passes by way of the family." He referred to the family as "a society in its own original right", and the "first and vital cell of society."

Our Catechism (2207-2211) states: "The family should live in such a way that its members learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor."

Parents, although we celebrate your children's achievements today, your work is not yet at an end. Nation-building starts in the home. In an age in which moral relativism threatens to overwhelm us, I urge you to continue to nurture morals and values in your children that will enable them to make informed decisions.

Dear students, beware of the dangers of moral relativism which gives people the impression that they can do whatever they like; that 'if it feels good, just do it.' Morality is not neutral. There are objective moral norms which we must embrace if we and our nation are to prosper. God implanted a moral order in our hearts and minds. Deep within us there is a voice that urges us to do good and avoid evil. Listen to that voice, even if it means swimming against the tide. Live your life with integrity and moral courage.

The lure of moral relativism is real. Edward Sri says: "According to a relativist, all truth claims are subjective, merely reflecting one's own feelings, opinions, or desires. A relativist might say, "You can have 'your truth' and I can have 'my truth', but there is no 'the truth' to which we are all accountable... Morality is not up for grabs. And in striving for excellence we must always seek to embody the truth, which, for Christians, above all reflects Jesus Christ – who is the same today, yesterday, and forever."

And while we celebrate excellence today, let us not forget the work we must engage in if we are to support families in crisis and those who did not attain their goals. Family life is under constant attack today from various social ills.

Striving after excellence should lead you to use your talents and gifts to act as role models to those in your families and your communities. Catholics are people of the Beatitudes, we must strive to be as Merciful as our Father in heaven.

May you, our leaders of tomorrow, act as responsible citizens who are committed to promote the sanctity of life and the dignity of each person, to build the common good of society - creating conditions that will enable each person to realise his/her potential. May you be creative, innovative, ethical and resourceful, and may you stay rooted in your faith as you journey on.

Excellence should lead you to pathways of mercy. But to be merciful, we must not be so puffed up that we think we are better than others. There are too many arrogant people in our world today. Embrace humility.

As St Augustine said: "Do you wish to rise?...Lay first the foundation of humility." Humility will motivate us to be merciful.

For those who are Catholics, remember Pope Francis' plea in his 2015 Lenten Message: "How greatly I desire that all those places where the Church is present, especially our parishes and our communities, may become *islands of mercy* in the midst of the sea of indifference!" This plea should resonate with us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' 5th Beatitude states: "Blessed are the merciful; they shall have mercy shown them" (Mt 5:7). St Thomas Aquinas defined the virtue of "mercy" as "the compassion in our hearts for another person's misery, a compassion which drives us to do what we can to help him" (*Summa Theologiae*).

Robert Moynihan's insight is noteworthy: "What Pope Francis is doing by calling for this Jubilee Year of Mercy is to offer to all Christians and people of goodwill the blessing of obtaining mercy by having and showing mercy to others."

Pope Francis has said that this Holy Year is "dedicated to living out in our daily lives the mercy which the Father constantly extends to all of us...The Church" he said, "is called above all to be a credible witness to mercy, professing it and living it as the core of the revelation of Jesus Christ...From the heart of the Trinity, from the depths of the mystery of God, the great river of mercy wells up and overflows unceasingly. It is a spring that will never run dry, no matter how many people draw from it. Every time someone is in need, he or she can approach it, because the mercy of God never ends (Bull of Indiction *Misericordiae Vultus*, The Face of Mercy, 25).

Matthew 25:31-46 reminds us that in the end we will all be judged by the way in which we responded to the needs of others - in whose faces we should see Christ. Pope Francis told us last year: "It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee (Year of Mercy), the Christian people may **reflect on the spiritual and**

corporal works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty.” We are asked to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. (see the encyclical, God is love (no.31).

And as you strive to do as Martin Luther King Jr. said to lift your brothers and sisters to a higher, more noble place, remember that solidarity has global dimensions in our interdependent world. So the plight, for example, of millions of refugees and suffering children caught up in the tragedy of war, must concern us also.

Social justice also requires us to speak out against injustices and unjust structures that stand as obstacles in the path of building God’s Kingdom here on earth. Our Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 201 reminds us that social justice “concerns the social, political, and economic aspects and, above all, the structural dimension of problems and their respective solutions.”

Today, we are the Body of Christ in the world and each of us must strive to live our faith by acting on the biblical mandate given to us. As the Body of Christ, let us show mercy out of love rather than duty e.g. to build community; to strengthen family life; to address poverty and social exclusion as well as deficiencies in our various institutions.

Recently, I visited Westminster Cathedral in London. As I stood before the Door of Mercy, I reflected on the words that should form our breastplate prayer:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free, and
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. (Luke 4: 18 -19).

Never let your academic and other achievements make you indifferent to the needs of others. In his Prayer for the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis reminds us that we “are the face of the invisible Father, of the God who manifests his power above all by forgiveness and mercy: let the Church be your visible face in the world, its Lord risen and glorified...Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us with its anointing, so that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace from the Lord, and

your Church, with renewed enthusiasm, may bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed, and restore sight to the blind.”

If we are the hands and feet of the living God, we must demonstrate that the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy* are integral parts of our very being. I pray that your lives will be imbued with compassion and generosity.

We live in a multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society. Therefore, when we talk about excellence and mercy, we must remember that the various faith communities that co-exist in our beloved country also embrace these values. I grew up in an inter-faith home. My father is Hindu. On Sunday 30 Oct TT will celebrate Diwali or Deepavali, the Festival of Lights. One of the main stories associated with this Festival, the story of Lord Ram, is replete with examples of excellence and mercy. Inter alia, Diwali is a celebration of the victory of dharma, good over evil, light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance.

Diwali is a time when Hindus wear new clothes, exchange gifts and sweets, give food and money to the poor, offer prayers to various deities and pay homage to their ancestors.

The rows of deyas lit at the homes of Hindus reflect those that were lit on the return of Ram, Sita, and Ram's brother Lakshman to Ayodhya after Ram had been in exile for 14 years. The story of Ram, which can be found in the epic Ramayana, teaches moral values such as faith, devotion, duty, love, respect; how to be a good father, son, brother, and leader; how to distinguish between right and wrong and so on. Ram is a symbol of sacrifice. And, as the writer, Girish Bhandari says: “Ram is the essence of excellence in every pursuit...His philosophy was that the ultimate Dharma was doing good to people. Rama in the *Uttarkand* speaks of action that seeks no reward.” (Dharma is the moral law combined with spiritual discipline that guides one's life along the paths of righteousness)

Like Lord Ram, if we are merciful people, we will act without seeking reward.

The Catholic Church continues to promote Interreligious dialogue. A Diwali message from the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue states:

"May the Transcendent Light illumine your hearts, homes and communities, and may all your celebrations deepen the sense of belonging to one another in your families and neighbourhoods, and so further harmony and happiness, peace and prosperity...may we, Hindus and Christians, join together with followers of other religions and with people of good will to foster a culture of inclusion for a just and peaceful society."

Diwali provides us with an opportunity for a true "culture of encounter." I take this opportunity to wish Happy Diwali to our Hindu brothers and sisters.

Dear students, I commend you to the Lord. May He bless and keep you always. Best wishes for your continued success. And, when you leave this school, do not forget to plough back some of your time, talent and treasure to take your school and our beloved T&T forward.

Please join me in applauding the graduating students, and all the other students who have excelled in their academic and non-academic pursuits throughout the school, as well their parents and SJC's dedicated staff who have guided and supported them. We applaud also the teachers who will be receiving long service awards. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to your vocation. Let's hear it for SJC!!!

Thank you.