

## STC Bandarawela Founder's Day – 21st January 2013

Venerable S.P. Nesakumar, Father Balraj, Father Charles, Members of the Staff, fellow Thomians

It gives me great pleasure to address you on the subject of Thomian Traditions and Ethics. It is all the more fitting that this topic should be considered on Founder's Day because the Founder of STC Bandarawela, Mr W.T. Keble is truly a legend amongst all Thomians. His immense contribution to S. Thomas' includes the Herculean task of founding the two branch schools, STC Preparatory School, Kollupitiya and STC Bandarawela, and also writing the History of S. Thomas' College. The extent of his devotion to S. Thomas' can be seen from his parting words when he left Sri Lanka for good in 1956: "Your children have been my life."

It is also appropriate to remember on this day the original Founder of S. Thomas' College – Bishop Chapman – who started the College in 1851 in Mutwal with just 50 students. It is unlikely that Bishop Chapman would have envisaged that from those humble beginnings the College would reach the prestigious position in national life that it holds today, with four branch schools, over 5,000 students and vibrant old boy networks – all members of the ever expanding Thomian family.

So what is tradition? The English word "tradition" comes from the Latin traditio, which means "to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping". The concept of "tradition", in essence, refers to beliefs, objects and customs, originating in the past, transmitted through time by being taught by one generation to the next, and continuing in the present day.

What then is ethics? Ethics can be simply described as moral principles that guide a person's life.

The question then arises as to whether there exists a set of traditions and ethics that are uniquely Thomian, that are passed down from one generation of Thomians to the next.

At this stage, I must mention something that Mrs Nirmali Wickramasinghe, present Principal of Ladies College, Colombo, mentioned. She had gone recently to a function at the British School in Colombo where children from many schools were present and as she entered the hall, a particular group of schoolboys sitting together in the hall had spontaneously stood up and addressing her by name had wished her a good morning. She had returned the greeting and been pleasantly surprised at their politeness and how they had known who she was. Her subsequent inquiries had revealed that they were Thomians.

The Warden of STC Mt Lavinia, Prof Indra De Soysa, who has recently come from Norway and taken up his duties, mentioned another recent incident. Just before a junior level rugby match between STC Mt Lavinia and Trinity College commenced at the STC Mt Lavinia grounds, the Trinity school song had been played. He said that he was amazed to observe that every Thomian both on and off the field who was within hearing distance had stood to attention during the playing of the Trinity school song.

I mentioned these two incidents to illustrate a point. No one told those schoolboys to be polite and respectful. There was no teacher nearby whispering to

them or pinching them to make them stand up. They did it spontaneously and possibly even without thinking about what they were doing. Their conduct, I believe, had a direct relationship to the culture that prevails at all schools in the Thomian family.

It is stories like this that make me convinced that quite apart from the easily identifiable traditional events such as the Royal-Thomian cricket match and the Carol Services held by all the Branch schools, the traditional “Thomian grit” displayed in times of trouble usually on the sports field and the somewhat frivolous tradition of giving very funny and appropriate nicknames to masters, there exist uniquely Thomian traditions and ethics which relate mostly to conduct - as to how one conducts oneself both in and out of school. These Thomian traditions and ethics pertaining to conduct are passed on from one generation of Thomians to the next and all the boys who pass through the four Thomian schools seem to absorb them since they are a part of the Thomian culture.

In this context, one of the strongest traditions in the four Thomian schools is the traditional respect that is accorded to all religions. All the boys are encouraged to practice the religion of their choice and to show the utmost tolerance and respect towards other religions. I was very encouraged to read in the book called Footprints published to commemorate 70 years of STC Bandarawela an article by a former master of the school who was about to be ordained as Buddhist monk where he says as follows.

“In my entire teaching career of almost a decade the happiest period was the three years I spent at STC Bandarawela. Though a Christian school, all religions are respected. There is no differentiation of creeds and the students, teachers and minor staff are all treated with respect.”

Another strong tradition at S. Thomas’ is the ethnic harmony that prevails in all the Branch schools. The teachers come from all ethnic groups. Also, all the boys are treated equally irrespective of their ethnic origin and they get on very easily with each other. This harmony is also reflected in the ethnic mix one sees when you look at the office bearers of any of the STC old boys associations and, in fact, when any group of Thomians, old or young, gets together.

These are huge plus points in the context of the continuing religious and ethnic disharmony, intolerance and discrimination that is going on within the larger community in Sri Lanka.

Thus, the strongest and most unifying tradition seems to be that all the schools in the Thomian family are generally recognised as producing gentlemen. A Thomian, by his conduct, usually stands out from amongst a crowd and is generally presumed to be a gentleman. This is one of the main reasons why there is still a huge demand from parents to send their children to S. Thomas’ when there are clearly other schools which are academically far superior.

The question then arises: who is a gentleman? In this context, I would like to quote some words from Cardinal Newman’s classic definition of a gentleman.

“The true gentleman carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast; - all clashing of opinion, collision of feeling, all restraint, or suspicion, or gloom, or resentment; his great concern being to make everyone at their ease and at home. He can recollect to whom he is speaking; he guards against unseasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate. He makes light of favours while he does them, and seems to be receiving when he is conferring. He is never mean or little in his disputes, never takes unfair advantage, never mistakes personalities or sharp sayings for arguments, or insinuates evil which he dare not say out. He may be right or wrong in his opinion, but he is too clear-headed to be unjust. He respects piety and devotion; he even supports institutions as venerable, beautiful, or useful, to which he does not assent; he honours the ministers of religion, and it contents him to decline its mysteries without assailing or denouncing them. He is a friend of religious toleration, and that, not only because his philosophy has taught him to look on all forms of faith with an impartial eye, but also from the gentleness and effeminacy of feeling, which is the attendant on civilization.”

The “gentleman” that Cardinal Newman speaks of is an ideal that may be impossible to achieve. However, I think it can be fairly said that gentlemanly qualities are prized at S. Thomas’ and are an inherent part of the value system of all the schools in the Thomian family.

I say all this with a proviso. It would not be correct to assume that the STC schools are oases of gentlemanly conduct in a barren landscape where children of all other schools in Sri Lanka are behaving abominably to each other. From time to time we hear of errant conduct even among Thomians. We cannot totally insulate ourselves from what is happening in the rest of the country where incidents of bullying, ragging and thuggery among students are rampant. However, by and large I think it is universally agreed that S. Thomas’ produces gentlemen and that to me is the most important tradition that all of us as Thomians must try to protect and preserve.

In conclusion, I would like to quote the parting words of Warden Buck, which are valid even today and which I would urge you to take to heart.

“You belong to one of the best schools in the world, a school with splendid traditions and a most honourable name, and I charge you to try and hand down those traditions and that name to those who come after you, untarnished and unimpaired. Be proud of being Thomians and make the College proud of numbering you among its sons. Remember that whatever you do and wherever you go, your life and your actions will reflect either credit or discredit on the College where you were trained and to which you owe so much. You have learned the best lessons in the world at STC, I trust, not only English and Classics and Mathematics, but true manliness and truth, courage, purity, and all those things that make a man, and a gentleman. Try never to forget them, but be men and gentlemen always.”

Thank you