

STC GURU : UNIQUELY THOMIAN

**AN INTERVIEW WITH REV MARC BILLIMORIA, HEADMASTER OF S. THOMAS' COLLEGE,
GURUTALAWA**

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Q: What circumstances saw you being appointed as Headmaster of S. Thomas' College Gurutalawa?

A:As you know I became a teacher as soon as I completed my A/Ls and continued to serve as such even after obtaining my degree. Although I answered a call to the ordained ministry and left teaching to be trained for the priesthood in 1999 I continued to enjoy teaching and found even after ordination in 2001 that it can be a very fulfilling part of ministry. In December 2006 our Bishop paid us a visit and in the course of the conversation asked if I had thought about ministry within the context of education, specifically in a church school. Having considered the proposal prayerfully my wife Manisha and I indicated our willingness to the Bishop in mid January 2007. We assumed that this would mean ministry in one of the Diocesan Schools from January 2008 at the end of my term as Vicar of Mirihana. As we were expecting the offer of a chaplaincy you can well imagine our surprise when at that meeting the Bishop asked if I would consider going to S. Thomas' College, Gurutalawa either as deputy Headmaster or if the Board's plans to recruit a Church of England priest (who had expressed interest) for the post of Headmaster failed then as Headmaster as soon as possible! This was a shock. I knew the state of Guru. I had read some of the reports. I had heard the sorry state of affairs mentioned at the 2006 Diocesan Council, but the Bishop went on to explain that things had now taken a turn for the better and that a Belgian financial expert domiciled in Bandarawela had come in to voluntarily assist the Board save the School and revive it. He did not try to gloss over the obvious problems being faced and very candidly told us what had happened. In any event he asked us to defer our decision until we had had an opportunity to visit the School as a family. I remember we drove up to Guru (our first visit ever) on a holiday in early February. The School was very quiet – numbers were still small, having gone down to less than 200 at the end of 2006. We were given a tour by the recently appointed Chaplain Revd Andrew Gnaniah (himself an old boy of the School). What we heard and saw was depressing and at the end of it we were in two minds but leaning towards saying 'no' to the Bishop – it all seemed so hopeless. And then we went to see Revd Harold Goodchild, Emeritus Chaplain, teacher of English and Boarding House Master, who had first come to Guru in 1964. Our brief encounter with him and hearing his vision for the School tipped the balance and after a few moments of quiet in the beautiful little College Chapel of St. Francis of Assisi, by the time we drove out of the gate that evening we knew that our answer to the Bishop would be 'yes' but we still wanted to speak to some of the old boys as well before taking a final decision. We met two or three until we realised that God was giving us a message and that at the end of the day it was not what others thought but what we felt and believed that counted. We met the Bishop and gave him our answer – an unequivocal yes! After this there were the formalities of being interviewed by the Board and then being told that I would have to take up duties by May or June the latest – that meant an early departure from Christ Church, Mirihana.

Q: How did you initially regard your commission and what has changed as regards your sentiments in this respect?

A:At my Institution & Installation our Bishop's charge to me was very clear. It confirmed my belief that the task to which I was commissioned was of divine origin – and I don't mean this in a pious way, I truly believe it to be so. I believed then as I do now that the Church's role in education through our Schools is a high calling – one that cannot be avoided. Our Schools were founded in faith and built up in faith to serve not just the present but the future of church and nation. Thus in accepting my charge I did so with the conviction

that the Church's role in transforming Gurutalawa into a centre of excellence in education, that a School within the Thomian family should be, can be successful.

Having taken over at Guru the only thing that has changed is my view on what it means to be a product of a school like this. I came in a Thomian intent on reproducing the ethos that I experienced as a student and teacher at STCML. Very soon however, I came to recognise that Guru offered a unique opportunity to offer the best of the Thomian system but with a difference that only Guru could offer.

Q: In addition to your principal duty you are also a teacher, a father confessor and manager of a full-fledged farm, to boot... what resources do you draw on in your multifaceted role?

A: As your question implies being Headmaster at Guru is unlike being head of any of our other schools, at least that is my opinion. This is more than just a school. It is a small community, a village in itself and by virtue of my office I am *prajapathi* of sorts. We have a Farm, a residential quarter, perhaps the largest School hostel at present, a work force et al. I suppose by 'resources' you are not referring to funds. My training as a Priest is my biggest resource. I am, by nature, prone to worry and anxiety, if not for the spiritual disciplines I have received as a Priest I would probably have run away within a month. The challenges of Guru are manifold to say the least. I remember Bishop Kenneth once saying that God gives grace enough for the Priest to minister in any circumstance and so God's grace has been sufficient. My wife and family being with me is another tremendous source of strength. I have often been guilty of neglect but their presence gives me strength. The Bishop, Manager, other Board members and senior old boys too have been constant in their solidarity and support. In my first one and a half years the contribution made by Jacques Huyghebaert cannot be over stated. I received much by way of guidance from him on matters relating to accounts and management for which I shall be grateful.

Q: Which aspects of an education at the 'School in the Hills' would you consider as being salutary for the modern young scholar?

A: Dr R. L. Hayman, the first and greatest of Guru's Headmasters had a vision of Guru's unique potential and that led to his requesting the Warden, Canon R. S. de Saram to allow him to remain at Guru after the War and the majority of exiled Thomians had returned to Mount. What makes Guru unique cannot be confined to one element. Its location and atmosphere, its spartan lifestyle, its pluralistic ethos, its emphasis on outdoor activities and its stress of all round development of sound character are features for which the school was once renowned. These I believe, are still features that mark us out as a school with a difference. I consistently reject the notion that book knowledge is the be all and end all of education and insist on a balance between studies, sports and other extra curricular activities. The College Boarding with its House System, multi ethnic and multi religious make up affords an opportunity of transcending narrow parochialism and prejudices current in society. Life in the Boarding, as I see it, is also an opportunity to grow towards responsible independence.

Q: How does the ethos of Gurutalawa differ/coincide with the Thomian ethic in general as well as the ethic of education that is evident at other schools by the same name at Kollupitiya, Mount Lavinia and Bandarawela?

A: I would begin to answer that by asking the question 'what do you mean by Thomian ethic?' If you mean the essence of being a Thomian as envisioned by Bishop James Chapman i.e. the formation of a sound all round character of the future man or woman, then I would say that Guru aims at nothing more and nothing less than the formation of integrated young minds. We differ from the parent school at Mount and the other two brother schools at Kollupitiya and Bandarawela in one significant area – we are egalitarian by default. I do not mean that the other three schools are class conscious or exclusive, but by virtue of the strict admission criteria in force they often have no choice but to reject children from more modest backgrounds. Guru

affords a chance for children to have a Private School Education irrespective of whether or not the child is an Anglican or an old boy etc . The distinctions of ethnicity, gender, class, caste or creed have no place at Guru. This has come about by necessity as I said, but it is in harmony with the original intention of our revered Founder.

Q: What, if anything, is unique about life at 'STC Guru'?

A:Our setting – lush, green and salubrious all year round. A campus of 45 acres. Our ethos – a strong emphasis on family atmosphere and community life. Our spartan life and disciplines for which we do not apologise and the training up of young people in responsible independence. Our facilities – including horses.

Q: Can you relate a brief anecdote that would, to your mind, capture the essence of your campus?

A:We at Guru boast of a campus life in which the differences that divide people and communities are not evident. Caste, class, creed, gender, ethnicity do not matter. A warm family atmosphere is our aim – one in which children can thrive and grow. I remember the O/L Class of 2007. They were a batch of students who were condemned as a useless group that would amount to nothing when I took over in June 2007. By God's grace, in what I can only describe as a miracle, when they left us in December they were heroes. Even some people who had condemned them were reduced to tears at their Valedictory Service. I recall the last night of the exam for the Sinhala medium students. The Tamil medium boys had one more day. The majority of the Sinhala medium boys had left the campus after their paper. That evening about 10 Sinhalese boys came to my bungalow with a strange request. 'Father Headmaster, we have gone through many things together as a class group, our friends (i. e. the Tamil boys) are still not finished and we would like to stay with them and leave tomorrow together.' I was humbled. The ethos of our School was illustrated in that act of solidarity.

Q: What is your vision for the school that you head, on the way forward?

A:To be the best Boarding School in the country, producing integrated young persons to be responsibly independent in adult life. The road ahead is still unclear. We have many, many problems to deal with, but as the names of our three horses remind us, there is nothing that is impossible if there is Faith, Hope and Charity.

Q: What is your prayer for the nation?

A:The prayer of so many hearts – peace, prosperity, unity and justice for all our people in a society where difference and diversity will be cherished and respected.

Q: How would you encapsulate your wish for the church in Sri Lanka in the present context?

A:I believe in the sacramental nature of the Church and as such I believe that, despite her obvious flaws, the Church is a divine society with a divine mission – to be the sacrament of God's Amazing Grace to a broken and divided country. My wish for the Church is that she would never forget this divine origin and mission.