

FAREWELL TO JACQUES HUYGHEBAERT

HEADMASTER'S WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Our Bishop-Visitor the Bishop of Colombo, Members of the Board of Governors, our Chaplain Emeritus Fr Harold, Fr Saman, Mr Jacques Huyghebaert our Guest of Honour this morning, Sectional Heads, Members of Staff, boys and girls.

It is with joy that I welcome our Bishop-Visitor, Bishop Duleep of Colombo and Members of our Board of Governors to the School today. It is almost two years now since most of you have been able to come to see us and we are very grateful to you for this visit that strengthens our resolve to keep on keeping on. Your visit today has a two fold purpose – to visit the School to see how far we have progressed but also to perform the important task of saying thank you to Jacques Huyghebaert for the vital role he played in the revival of S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa.

I remember very well the conversations I had with the Bishop, Mr Rajan Asirwatham, Hony Secretary and Mr Christo Gonawala, Manager of the School in early 2007 when I had been invited to consider coming to Guru and was trying to get an idea of what the situation was on the ground. All three of them mentioned the Belgian financial trouble shooter called Jacques Huyghebaert who had intervened at the end of 2007 with a bold proposition to save Guru from being closed down. I was told that Jacques would continue to journey with the School if I wanted him to after I took over and in fact all three of them strongly urged me to consider keeping Jacques on as his knowledge of the situation and his expertise would be of great value. I readily concurred. I believe the Board asked Jacques to remain as Advisor after I took over. I also recall vividly that at my induction our Bishop referred to Jacques as a Guardian Angel – an Angel sent by God to save Guru.

However, it was only after I had been in the hot seat for a few days that I fully came to appreciate the man for what he was. I can honestly say that I would not have got by the first six months of my time as Headmaster had Jacques not been by my side to advise me, particularly on matters to do with the accounts, infrastructure development and other aspects of management. I valued his guidance and although I sometimes took decisions contrary to his advice as I thought necessary, he never felt hurt or rejected but would say 'well, you're the Headmaster its your decision...'

Jacques had some very radical views on how this School should be run – views far ahead of our times, but views that have been an inspiration. Some of his views were too hard for some to agree with or to follow. He always spoke his mind and never gave in to pressure. He never took no for an answer and the word impossible was a word he refused to use. He was not easily fooled and was a very good judge of human nature. He was not always liked and often there were people who strongly disagreed with his ways of doing things, but this did not deter him from doing everything in his power to raise the School from where it was at the end of 2006. His marketing campaign successfully raised our numbers and we are still following his advice that we keep the numbers up to keep the school afloat.

I have spoken from this podium on at least four occasions when I had opportunities to thank Jacques for his role in reviving Gurutalawa as we are gathered here to do today. I don't think words can fully express what has to be said nor fully repay the debt all those connected with Guru owe this unassuming but dynamic man. He has put some of us to shame by his commitment to this School. Being a man of independent means he never asked the School for anything in return – no not even an allowance for fuel for all the travelling he did on Guru's behalf. He never asked for an allowance for his services. He gave of himself to build the School.

It is interesting that often in the history of our School at Mount Lavinia or at Gurutalawa the names that shine brightest have been those of non-Thomians. And so it is with the recent history of

Gurotalawa. The year 2007 for example will never be forgotten because of a man called Jacques Huyghebaert and any history written of the the last 10 to 15 years will have to acknowledge this undeniable fact. J. L. D. Peiris was another non Thomian who did much for S. Thomas' both at Mount Lavinia and Gurotalawa for which he was conferred with the honour of being called an Honorary Thomian. I do not think it would be out of place for us at Guru to honour you in the same manner for you have displayed the qualities that we look for in Thomians. You will always be welcome at Guru and even though you may not have membership of the OBA we will always consider you an Honorary Thomian.

So Jacques, thank you. Thank you for doing what you did for us as a School. Thank you for having been an advisor and friend to me and thank you for your vision of what this School can be.

May God be with you and your family always.

Esto Perpetua.

HEAD PREFECT'S SPEECH

Our Bishop the Rt Revd Duleep de Chickera, Members of the Board of Governors of our College, Father Headmaster, Mr Jacques Huyghebaert, Father Harold Goodchild, Father Saman Jayasooriya, our Sectional Heads and other Supervisors, our Teachers and my fellow Thomians.

We are gathered this morning at this special assembly to say thank you and farewell to a very important and special person – Mr Jacques Huyghebaert who from January 2007 to December 2008 played a very important part in the life of this School.

He came to us at a time when our School was facing many difficult situations. I remember clearly that when we closed School for the Christmas holidays in 2006 we were not sure that there would be a School for us in January 2007. We came back for the first term and soon we realised that our School was going to be saved. By the end of January we began to see Jack Sir, as he was to us, coming every day and in February we were told that he was going to be our Acting Headmaster.

The early part of 2007 were critical days for all of us, but Jack Sir began to put things right and he started to develop the School bit by bit. He wanted to know how many students there were in School so he introduced a short assembly outside the Hall and then the Office every morning for us to gather to be counted and then for us to sing our National Anthem before we went to class. He began to get more and more boys to the School and soon we needed more beds and hostel space.

In June although we got a new Headmaster he stayed to help us and guide us as our Advisor and he was then responsible for looking after the various building projects that were started. He also restarted the Farm cultivation project and donated horses to the School to raise our image. Many new boys joined the School because of the horses.

We saw that he was very stern but we also saw that he was humble and kind. Jack Sir, all of us who were here before you took over owe you a big debt of gratitude, because if you had not come to Guru there would be no Guru today. So on behalf of all the students of our College I wish to say thank you and that your name should be honoured by all Gurotalawians for what you have done for this School our alma mater.

So thank you sir and may God bless you always.

Esto Perpetua.