

INTERVIEW WITH GILBERTE CHUNG KIM CHUNG, DIRECTOR OF THE CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MAURITIUS

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Education is about love for our pupils and giving them the best possible chance to be what they can be. I have a weakness for pupils who have learning difficulties, for those who need a second chance, a new opportunity... My compass is the child. Is this policy decision in the best interest of the child?”
- “As a global village, we must be aware of what is happening everywhere and with the digital era, sharing of good practices could be organized more often through webinars. Or a library index with main themes... Sometimes, a very simple idea can have fantastic results. Let us share.”

Could you please explain your current responsibilities and how you are engaged in Catholic education?

I am the Executive Director of the Catholic education office in the Diocese of Port-Louis, Mauritius since 2007, after a career in Catholic Loreto secondary schools as a teacher, a Deputy Rector, and a Rector/School Principal.

There are 48 primary schools, 18 secondary schools, and one technical college, which we are presently converting as a Lycée professionnel and for which we are negotiating partial sponsorship from the Government. Out of these 67 Catholic schools, 63 schools are grant-aided in the free education system, whilst two primary and one secondary schools are fee-paying. Our network covers the island and we have around 28,000 students, which represent 20 percent of the total school population.

The congregations still present in education are the Loreto Institute (IBVM), the Filles de Marie (FdM) and the Salesians of Don Boco (SdB). However, it is the Diocese of Port-Louis which now owns the majority of the Catholic schools in Mauritius.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Gilberte Chung Kim Chung, the Executive Director of the Service Diocésain de l'Éducation Catholique in the Republic of Mauritius, discusses the contribution of Catholic schools in Mauritius, some of the challenges they face, some of their innovations, and her hopes for the future.

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What do you believe are the current strengths of Catholic education?

The Catholic schools in Mauritius draw their strength from a long-standing tradition of service to the nation, irrespective of ethnic belonging and religion. From the first parish schools during the French colony (1715-1810) to the recognized schools under the British colony (1810-1968), in 1976, the Diocese of Port-Louis accepted to open its private secondary schools, which were then fee-paying, to all children of the Republic, in the free education system being offered by the Government after the independence of the country in 1968.

Our Catholic schools are still of good repute despite the fact that since we embraced the free education system and clearly stated in our admission policy a preferential option for the poor in the year 2000 after the findings of the Synode on education, many high and medium-income families stopped sending their children in 'public' Catholic schools. There are some warning signals of a decline in interest for Catholic secondary schools by families, both Catholics and of other faiths, who are "results-oriented" and do not want their children to learn with children of lesser academic abilities. But we consciously made the choice of having our 'five-star' schools which were in very high demand become schools with mixed abilities, inclusive of those children who had failed in the system. We chose social mobility for those had lesser opportunities.

However, all over these centuries, there is an acquired goodwill and a caring school set-up. Parents are convinced that, compared to other public educational providers, the pastoral care afforded to learners in Catholic schools constitutes a significant value added which will transform society.

In which areas could Catholic education be improved and how?

There is room for improvement in the field of continuous professional development. That realization does not seem to have dawned on a significant portion of our staff, for whom the so-called 'prestige' of Catholic education suffices to ensure the sustainability of our educational offer. But those who are aware are mostly interested in areas such as class and school management due to issues of discipline and behavioral problems- for which there has been an offer of training in Positive Discipline. The paradox is that the main request is on psychological development and discipline, and less on the teaching and learning process.

Another challenge is the lack of physical attractiveness of our school buildings which tend to be old and need complete renovation in some cases. Lack of funds remains a big issue. We have lately concentrated a lot of

our efforts on infrastructure. The good news are that, since the implementation of a new governance structure in 2017 as set out in our Kleopas project for Catholic schools in Mauritius, there is a renewal, a paradigm shift and there is space for innovation and creativity.

Some previous examples of our projects which prove that Catholic education can have an impact on Government policies are: (1) The recognition of prevocational schools by the Government in 2005, after our intense advocacy and showing by doing, that children whom the system failed can learn and can achieve- Today, these students are in the extended stream of mainstream schools; (2) The recognition of our mother-tongue, Kreol Morisien, as a subject in the school curriculum by showcasing results of our action and research in the area during a period of 7 years. You may conclude that both examples above are linked because language is an issue. It is difficult for children aged 5 years old to learn all their subjects from books written in English (because English is our official language) when their mother-tongue is Kreol Morisien and they hear a lot of French in the media.



Photo: Primary school staff celebrating Teachers' Day.

Have you observed recently interesting innovative initiatives in Catholic education? If so, what are they and why are those initiatives innovative?

Since 2017, we have been working on a new curriculum for Religious Education, Intercultural Education (Grades 1 to 9) and Intercultural Dialogue (Grade 10 to 13). The paradigm shift with regard to Religious Education is that from a faith-based animation of lessons, it is now the fostering of biblical academic knowledge through teaching and learning as per all required parameters (curriculum, textbooks, teacher education, etc.).

The same applies to Intercultural Education which is a completely new subject offered only in Catholic schools, even though it forms part of a competence laid out in the national educational policy document as an element

underpinning all instances of teaching and learning. Intercultural education is in the realm of the unknown for many due to ignorance or an unwillingness to partake in the fostering of intercultural values. There is always a blurred line between religion and culture in our country which is multi-cultural with a population of diverse religions such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and other religions.

The early digital learning program at the national level in all schools (tablets in Grades 1 to 4, projectors and computers and in some cases, interactive whiteboards in the other Grades) and the availability of high speed internet in almost all schools (a work in progress) has also impacted on our schools.

Information technology is now a must. At the level of the diocesan office, we have our website and all our staff members in the 67 Catholic schools have a dedicated email address. The Covid-19 pandemic has given us a push in the use of technology and Microsoft applications. With two lockdowns, we have adapted to the ways of working from home and distance learning, as far as possible. It has not been all bad, as for example, all the WhatsApp groups created have reinforced our professional relationships and have also provided a platform for School Leadership Prayer Groups.

How do you understand the call from Pope Francis for a new Global Compact on Catholic education? How do you think you could contribute to the Pope's vision?

The idea spelt out in the compact about the need to have a comprehensive societal engagement in the educational process constitutes one of the pillars of the "Projets d'Établissements" or Educational projects in line with our School Charter. It echoes with our organizational structure aiming at the eventual setting up of the 'Conseil de participation' or Participative and Collegial Council, as spelt out in our Kleopas project.

The fourth dimension of the compact - the family as the cradle of the education process, is the bedrock of our project with the family depicted as the first source of learning. Our Catholic school charter underlines the service provided to families that entrust their children to us. Another dimension, the fifth, talks about openness of educational opportunities to the most vulnerable and marginalized. This resonates strongly with us as it is our policy since our synodal decision opting for the poor. The seventh dimension about ecology is a reality in our schools via a number of initiatives from green energy (photovoltaic panels on our schools) to vegetable, medicinal and endemic gardens and waste segregation, as well as ecological literacy awareness and education for sustainability.



Photo: Staff group discussion.

What events, projects, or activities could be suggested to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a global level? What are your ideas?

It would be interesting to foster south-south regional and continental ties among Catholic education providers. Far too often we look at the northern hemisphere for models to be replicated or adapted for our context.

At the same time, as a global village, we must be aware of what is happening everywhere and with the digital era, sharing of good practices could be organized more often through webinars. Or a library index with main themes... Sometimes, a very simple idea can have fantastic results. Let us share. For example, we completed lately our Policy for Safeguarding Children against Abuse and we compared the policies from various countries. We are now working on a guideline on the appropriate use of social media. We do not have to invent the wheel if other Catholic schools can share, you are most welcome!

What are some of the priorities in terms of training and capacity building for school principals, teachers, alumni, parents, or other groups to strengthen Catholic education in your country or area?

For our staff and school leaders: strengthening of understanding of founding principles of Catholic education, pedagogical innovation, educational research, dissemination and fostering of a culture of critical reflection, networking and sharing of best practices, management and leadership of a Catholic school... Everything linked to professional and personal growth, as well as spiritual journeying...

Parents need training in parent-child relationships, communication, conflict resolution, and even education on sexuality, as very often, parents do not talk about this

topic to their children. In some families, it is still culturally a taboo subject.



Photo: Sports Day prevocational students.

Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I was a student in a Roman Catholic Aided primary school then a Loreto College for my secondary studies. Coming from a Sino-Mauritian family of nine children, my Dad who was a shopkeeper went to see the nun responsible of the Loreto College, and asked for a reduced school fee. That's how we all got our education, thanks to the generosity of Catholic schools. Then in 1976 (I was in Grade 9), secondary education became free at national level.

I had wonderful teachers and some nuns who really helped me become who I am today. The values of Mary Ward (1585-1645), founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary/Loreto Institute, have inspired me: "Women in time to come will do much", " Be seekers of truth and doers of justice", " Go and set the world on fire with the love of God"... It was natural for me to start my teaching career in another Loreto College, just after completing my A levels. At that time, in the 1980s, we could teach at secondary level without having a degree. So, for seven years non-stop, I worked whilst studying part-time, completing a Bachelor, Masters and Post Graduate Certificate in Education. I loved teaching and I asked for the pupils who were less academically gifted. The greatest reward was to see them improve their performance thanks to words of encouragement.

I was always keen to learn and serve at all levels. As a teacher, I was a Form teacher, a Section Leader, a Head of Department, and after 12 years, the school principal / rector encouraged me to apply for the post of deputy-rector in another Loreto college. I always thought I would retire as a teacher but it was a call, a vocation, a

challenge to shoulder other responsibilities. After four years as a deputy rector, I was promoted as rector. After six years of school leadership, I was invited by the Ministry of Education to work as Technical Adviser to elaborate the Special Education Needs Policy. My two years there were most enriching, and then in 2007, the Bishop of Port-Louis asked me to become the Director of the Catholic education office.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

After 37 years in Catholic education and two years at the Ministry of Education, what I will always remember is that education gives hope. Education is about love for our pupils and giving them the best possible chance to be what they can be. I have a weakness for pupils who have learning difficulties, for those who need a second chance, a new opportunity...

In all my dealings with the government, my compass is the child. Is this policy decision in the best interest of the child? And I do not waver in my stand and I communicate, and negotiate, with tact but firmness.

I believe in continuous professional development. As a rector, I embarked on a Masters of Educational Leadership with the Australian Catholic University and at 50 years old, I enrolled for a Professional Doctorate of Education with Liverpool Hope University. "*Il n'y a pas d'âge pour apprendre*" - Learning has no age limit.

I am particularly proud of what we accomplished from 2009 to 2015 when Catholic education started an Open Community School for adults. It was a second chance program for adults who did not succeed in obtaining their O and A levels. This program was an outreach project after school hours and it was a really positive experience for these adults who got to build their self-esteem and their human capital and social identity.



Photo: Open community school for adults with Tertiary education minister and sponsors.

Dedication, perseverance, resilience, pro-activeness, stoicism... I believe that in all situations, even in the worst-case scenarios, there is hope, a silver lining...

An anecdote? I like to tell new recruits about one of my mistakes when I was a very young teacher. I wrote in a

report book 'hopeless case'! The school principal called me and said "I know [she] is a hopeless case but try to write something encouraging!" It was a lesson for life for me as a teacher and later as a school leader.



Photo: Primary school students.