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# **43 YEARS EDUCATING IN KENYA**

The battle for young hearts and minds not only changes the lives of the students but can be a surprisingly rewarding experience for an educator as Silvano Borruso attests

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Under the impulse of St Josemaría, Strathmore College of Arts and Science opened its doors to 55

Advanced Level students on March 6th, 1961.

I had come to Kenya upon his invitation less than one year earlier, joining the teaching staff in January 1962 after one-year stint as the bursar.

I taught A level Biology for fourteen years, first for the Cambridge School Certificate and then for the London GCE Examination Boards.

Those fourteen years are unforgettable mainly for finding my feet and consolidating my profession as an educator. When *Furrow* was first published (1986) I read this revealing piece of St Josemaría's advice:

*“Teacher: may you be eager to make your pupils understand quickly what has cost you hours of study to see clearly.”<sup>1</sup>*

I had been doing just that for a good quarter of a century, verifying in person how fruitful this true educational attitude is.

Help came, no doubt, from other favourable circumstances, like the teacher's forming a unit with classroom, laboratory and prep-room. It was the students that moved, allowing for a constant upgrading and refining of teaching materials and methods. The London GCE also helped, by leaving much freedom and simply demanding standards. And classes were small (15-20 students), which created an atmosphere of cosiness never again duplicated.

The College, today School, is a Corporate Work of the Prelature, which guarantees sound Catholic doctrine and spiritual attention, but not the day-to-day running. The spirit

animating it, striking anyone who visits the place, is the Founder's.

New teachers grasp that at once. One of them was astonished to find in his pigeon hole in the staff room a duplicating job executed within an hour. He had never experienced such efficiency before. Visitors invariably remark how spic-and-span the compound looks, and how rubbish finds its way into, not around, the bins provided.

Once, an American professor came around with his family. On my offering help, he told me that a Strathmore ex-student was at his University. At the very first interview, the professor realised that the boy must have been taught in a very good school, and made a point of including a visit to it in his holiday in Kenya.

In 1977 the College began the four-year Ordinary Level course. As other

qualified people could teach biology, I switched to the Humanities, especially History, but for 15-year olds, as opposed to the mature young men of 18-20 I had spent 14 years with.

The beauty of those years was the very little regimentation, by the College as by the Ministry of Education. I drafted my syllabus, chose my subject matter, and wrote my own textbook. I taught by dictating to classes of 40 students. Their keeping attention would have been impossible with the traditional chalk-and talk method. The only exams they ever sat were my end-of-term ones.

I was in the enviable position of being able to see the fruits of another of St Josemaría's *desiderata*:

*“The wish to teach and to teach from the heart creates in pupils a gratitude*

*which is a suitable soil for the apostolate.”<sup>2</sup>*

I verified this truth repeatedly. An old student whom I met years later told me of how at a get-together in an American university he had held an audience enthralled by recounting the tactics of the battle of Marathon to a rapt audience who had never heard of it.

The year 1988 marked the end of the ‘A’ levels, decreed by an official change in State educational policy. As the scope for biology was reduced, and that for educating in History eliminated, another opportunity presented itself.

The new syllabus provided for Ethics, a non-examinable subject. I took to it like a duck to water, and in no time Aristotle and St Thomas made their entrance in the classroom. The ethics program had a section, as is natural, on virtues and vices. The exam

consisted in collecting newspaper cuttings offering five examples of the given virtue and five of the opposite vices, plus essays on personal experiences.

By the end of 1995 the material collected was so abundant, and so interesting, that it allowed me to publish *The Art of Total Living* and *The Art of Thinking*, two books that have gone into their second and third printing respectively.

But Aristotle and St Thomas managed to migrate far from the classroom independently of those books. One enterprising ex-student was so taken by the effect Ethics had on him that he took it upon himself to instruct some of the youth of his parish. Making use of the notes he had taken down, he started giving weekly classes, to a rapt audience of young people who had never heard of such things as the passions, let

alone how to practice virtue and shun vice.

I was also in charge of Catholic Doctrine, for which I too wrote my own program, split into a class of Sacred History and one of Doctrine.

The young boys coming to those classes had a very defective basis. None of them had heard of the Sin of Origin, and virtually all thought that salvation was automatic. Once, when giving a thorough account of the traditional doctrine of heaven and hell, I heard a voice behind me: “Ay ay ay ay...” and turned to see an anguished face that had just grasped what eternal damnation really meant.

I brooked no compromise with fashion, political correctness, and the like. It paid off, not in terms of examination results, but of such messages as

*I have often thought back to the fun days of gaining both academic and spiritual knowledge under yours and other teachers' guidance. I can remember one particular trip to Mombasa by train, the camaraderie and unity we all felt. I still remember one night when you showed us the different constellations and their names. Those good times will stay with me forever. Also I fondly recall the spiritual retreats we used to go to with the additional teachings bestowed upon us by all of you.*

*It is Good Friday. I am in the office trying in some way to live the Passion. My thoughts went back to when I was a child (I am 36 now) and the teachings that you gave me. You may not believe it but they still accompany me in my life and often, like today, they make me go back in time to Kenya.*

*On Friday I was confirmed into the Catholic Church and I'm finally at peace with myself after many years of uncertainty. I do believe this will be the beginning of good things to come. I was wondering: do you still have the History notes? Could you mail them to me? I would be really grateful.*

*After being here for three months I'm finally starting to appreciate what you used to teach us about people living in falsehood and hence making a lot of wrong decisions in life, and to a certain extent I can't blame them because this is what the media churn out to society. I would be very glad for a copy of "The Art of Total Living" as well as the Religion and Bible History notes. I forgot them when I left.*

*My spiritual life has been a mess for some time but I'm trying to get back on track. I did what most youths do – pretending that God does not exist and going out and doing all the things*

*He prohibits – in the name of having fun. Well, I guess problems have a way of making you think about God and currently I'm in a BIG heap of them. They are forcing me to ask whether realistic adult life is all about getting a heap of problems and once you are through with them you get another. You never get to enjoy anything at all!*

*I have decided to make it my target to read outside the material on the syllabus and look for valuable information that will not be taught in class. Thanks to your books "The Art of Total Living" and "The Art of Thinking" I feel I have cleared some of the fog in my head and acquired an appetite for reading and finding out the real story behind anything I come across.*

*For the past couple of months I have been thinking (reminiscing) about the Ethics classes of Form 1 & 2 (1988-89).*

*I vaguely remember virtues and vices. I remember though that it was the best class I have ever been taught. Where can I purchase your books?*

*Strathmore indeed developed a very important characteristic in me: self-discipline, which we learnt was a constant and continuous struggle. And that continues to be the best thing that I carried away from Strath. Other aspects include planning, the wise use of available resources, building a strong character and generally leadership skills.*

*Incidentally, it is true that your Ethics classes were really influential on how we (like me) take life. Of late I took two semesters of Philosophy at the University of Dallas, one of which was taught by Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, "The Paradoxical Structure of Existence." I obviously got an A in it, coming from your background!*

*I am struggling with this concept of why there is freedom in truth, and thereafter why there is freedom in following God's Law. It's even embarrassing to ask these questions, because I clearly remember your addressing them in high school.*

A good teacher never tires of repeating. I mailed back:

*It is important not to confuse freedom with independence, which is where the modern attitude comes from. The two coincide only in God. In creatures, they are antithetical. A locomotive is the freer the more it sticks to a pair of rails, which limit its independence, but without which it would not move at all. Loyalty to truth and to goodness are the two rails on which human nature moves. Outside them there are only illusions. Human freedom is the greater, the more dependent man is: to ties of loyalty to spouse, friends,*

*business associates, etc., which ultimately means to **truth**.*

Such messages have come thick and fast since the advent of Internet (in 1999), joining such rewarding experiences as being invited to a wedding where the beaming groom tells me that he embraced the Faith, and therefore the Sacrament of marriage, because of my classes.

It is also not uncommon, on receiving the visit of an old student, to be told that material success goes together with spiritual emptiness, so would I please accept to instruct him in the truths of the faith and either baptism or reception into the Church.

“Delighted” is the only word I utter on such occasions.

The subjects I taught were so enthralling in their own right, that despite the young age of the boys and classes of 40, not a single disciplinary incident interrupted the teacher-

student harmony in my last 20 years of teaching.

In Africa teachers enjoy a great deal of respect, both from students and their parents. The latter unhesitatingly back the authority of the former to the hilt: on one occasion a rural headmaster was asked by some do-gooders why he did not call on the father of an unruly boy to punish his son instead of caning him in his office. The man replied that if he had asked the old man to walk 10-15 kilometres from his farm and back for a case of school discipline, he would have killed his son before his eyes. Official caning was the better option.

In 2006 my teaching career came to an end. But I still tutor 32 students and write, joining the queue of those teachers of the past, from Cassian to Allan Bloom, who have left their mark in print after their passing.

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[1] Furrow 229.

[2] Ibid 230.

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