

***THE FOUNDER OF THE SUNSHINE AWARDS  
PAYS TRIBUTE TO HIS ALMA MATER  
AND ITS FOUNDER***

***THE 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
OF ST. BENEDICT'S COLLEGE***

***AND***

***TRIBUTE TO DR. DOM BASIL MATTHEWS***

***Founder of St. Benedict's College***

***(Posthumously)***



***"TRIBUTE TO ST. BENEDICT'S COLLEGE***

***AND***

***DR. DOM BASIL MATTHEWS"***

***(Posthumously)***

***By***

***Gilman T. Figaro, Sr***

***Chairman/Founder of the SUNSHINE Awards***

***Gulf City Auditorium  
San Fernando, Trinidad, West Indies  
Saturday September 16, 2006***

*Address to St. Benedict's College 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and Tribute to its Founder, Dr. Dom Basil Mathews, Awards Dinner*

By

**GIL T. FIGARO, SR.**

**CHAIRMAN/FOUNDER OF THE SUNSHINE AWARDS**

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Mr. Chairman, Honorable Acting President of Trinidad and Tobago, Members of Parliament, other Distinguished Guests, Members of the Faculty of St. Benedict's College, Past and Present Students, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is really an honor and privilege for me to have been asked to be a keynote speaker on this very special occasion as we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our alma mater, St. Benedict's College, and the legacy of its founder, the late Fr. Dom Basil Mathews. St. Benedict's

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College holds a very special place in my heart, and has played a most significant role in my life. I am sure that this is also true for many of you, hence your presence here tonight.

St. Benedict's College, as an institution, played an instrumental role in my development as a young man and as a young student. This would not have been possible without the dedication and hard work of all my teachers and in particular, the defiant, stubborn, inspirational guidance and the dynamic leadership of the school's founder, the late Dom Basil Mathews, who also happened to have been my godfather.

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I say defiant and stubborn because if he had settled for what the establishment and the Ministry thought of him and imprisoned himself in the castle that the color of his skin fashioned in those days, we would not be here today. Make no mistake about it – he was a black man, a brilliant man, a man with a vision, a man who was conscious about the importance of education and a man who helped and focused on the poor and underprivileged. Let me also point out, that I have heard over the years many descriptions of Dom Basil Mathews. I refuse to dignify some of those descriptions of this brilliant man with a response, but I want to go on record tonight with a

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Response to some of them. Let me begin by saying, that history is replete with the lives of outstanding men and women who, defiant and stubborn, changed the world into a better place for all of us. **Rosa Parks** was one who challenged the status quo and defied the establishment. **Martin Luther King** also challenged the status quo and defied the establishment. **Nelson Mandela** challenged the status quo and defied the establishment. Our own son of the soil, **Dr. Hollis Chalkdust Liverpool**, challenged the status quo and defied the establishment. So too did **Mother Theresa**. Let me also tell you that they all challenged the status quo and defied the establishment for

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the benefit of the poor, the disadvantaged, the denigrated, and sought to uplift fellow human beings. If they did not challenge the establishment we might have never experienced in our lifetime, one man one vote, apartheid might still be flourishing, we might have been, still be at the back of the bus and I might have never had the opportunity to earn a Masters degree and so much more in the United States of America.

That man, Don Basil Mathews was a great man, for because of how he lived, many of us have forgotten that he was a priest and, I should add, a good one too. As a

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priest, he was committed to the spiritual and traditional values of the Catholic Church. He instilled in his students cherished, societal values and made us wear our college badge with pride and joy with the text inscribed under the logo, '*nihil omnino Christo,*' which means '*Christ is above all.*' He was very charismatic and the tone and inflections in his voice commanded your attention. He baptized and gave first communion to many young boys and girls, right here in San Fernando. He counseled the families of many broken homes and showed them, through God there's light at the end of the tunnel and there is a silver lining in that dark cloud of poverty. I

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remember him saying to my father, who was just a common laborer, a jack of all trades and master of none, "*when one door closes, it's not the end of the world; just focus on the ones that are opened.*" He, in combining his priestly calling with his teaching reminded us that Christ was both teacher and priest. Thus did Dom Basil Matthews temper the spiritual with the humanistic for he, was different from the norm of the common priesthood then, in that he understood that although the church might have been the only form of consolation for the poor, it was not enough. Hence, his attention to sports and other mundane activities. I often wonder, why this brilliant man

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was overlooked for the post of Abbot or Archbishop of Port of Spain. So, today my Benedictine brothers and sisters, this tribute is very fitting and long overdue. Let no individual, organization or institution tell you that this great man of humble beginnings should not be honored.

In spite of all the institutional discrimination and disrespect for the lower classes that characterized his day, Dom Basil Matthews opened the doors of St. Benedict's College on **September 11, 1956**, bringing an educational opportunity to poor families, whose children were unable to attend the more affluent and "so-called prestigious"

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schools in the country. That is a date I will always remember for many reasons, including the fact that my last child, Gregory, now 23 years old, was born on September 11.

As an educator, Dom Basil Matthews was perhaps a man before his time. A brilliant scholar, with a PhD. from Fordham University, he was also a man with a unique vision and exhibited

many disciplines. He recognized the need to have quality education accessible to all children regardless of race, or their financial means; and he spent the rest of his life making that his goal. Today, when I

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read about the accusations that Christians are discriminating against non-Christians, as gleaned from

court decisions, I merely reflect on the current religious mix, at my alma mater. It is positive proof then that Dom Basil Matthews built St. Benedict's College for all students, in spite of the rejections he faced because of the color of his skin. He helped his students develop confidence in themselves and in their ability to achieve their goals, whether as doctors, lawyers, teachers, plumbers, carpenters, mechanics, cooks, or in whatever field of work they became engaged.

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I entered St. Benedict's in 1966 and graduated in 1971. Let me also remind you, that at that time St. Benedict's

College was described as **“the football school.”** I know many parents who, while they were completing the application forms for their sons to write the Common Entrance Examination (at that time); did not include St. Benedict's College among their first three choices. Keep in mind also, that many students attended St. Benedict's College, but not by choice. Why? Because we were described as “the football school.” We were winning the college football championships. We were not winning scholarships. We were seen not as a school for academics,

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but as a school for football. St. Benedict's College was not a school their sons could attend to make them proud. GCE results were not the best. All these things underscored and justified the reason for the label given to us by those in society who could have helped make a difference. We were looked down upon and considered the academic rejects. Isn't it interesting my friends, that it was football that gave a global lift to Trinidad and Tobago during the recently concluded World Cup Competition? Thanks to the Soca Warriors. To them, I pay tribute. Now, do you know that Dom Basil Matthews was condemned for giving us a day off when we won one of the intercol football championships? Think about this, how many

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public holidays this country now enjoy, and some because of football? I daresay then, that Dom Basil Matthews was ahead of his time in terms of his vision for the role sports plays in education.

My friends, my time at St. Benedict's College was a double privilege – being a student at this noble institution, and having as my godfather, the man who was the founder and leader of the school. Let me share with you how it was that Dom Basil Matthews became my godfather. My mother, may she rest in peace, always told me, that when my god-mother took me, at three-months old, to the San Fernando Roman Catholic Church to be

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christened, the man who was chosen to be my godfather did not show up. Dom Basil Mathews was in the church at the time. He said to my godmother, "don't worry, I'll be his godfather." Throughout my youth and my adult life, he was a loving and caring godfather, who always showed an interest in my education and my general welfare. In most instances, you and I know how many chosen godparents are never again heard or seen: I feel particularly privileged because Dom Basil Matthews chose me to be one of his godsons and never abandoned his responsibilities, spiritual or otherwise.

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I remember when I first attended St. Benedict's College; the availability of water in the school was sporadic. I remember there were days when Dom Basil Matthews would send us home because it was too hot for us to stay in school. This was a poor school in a poor village that did not, at that time, have streetlights. I also recall that the more prestigious schools did not have to deal with these types of hardships. In spite of these difficulties, Dom Basil Matthews persevered. Through it all, he encouraged his students to never give up, to persevere, find their talent and make positive contributions to society. I remember him saying to us one day at Holy Mass, "if you

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should doubt anything, doubt your limits and always keep in mind the sacred Latin dictum: – ne discre multa, sed multum, which means, "learn everything but much of one thing." In his own puny way here, he was teaching us the wisdom and need for specialization.

Dom Basil Matthews achieved so much with so little. He had no money, he had no technology, and he had no CNN. All he had was the blessings and guidance of our Good Lord, his trust in us, his determination to lead and teach his students how to play the cards of life that were dealt and the will to overcome the battles of discrimination. Remember, he was just the leader with a

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vision for his institution, St. Benedict's College. Today, at the disposal of our leaders they have technology, they have CNN; they have ability to fly to the United States for medical treatment, in four hours, and they have money, and yet for all, the healthcare system in Trinidad and Tobago, in comparison with countries with fewer resources, leaves much to be desired. Even the phone system at the general hospital in Port of Spain was disconnected a few years ago for non payment of bills. Doctors are prescribing medication that the patient cannot obtain in the country. In some cases no accountability to equate with the responsibility given. Books for school children are being prescribed and they are not available in

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the country. Here is a country, my brothers and sisters, that is surrounded by water, yet some rural areas still depend on a truck to deliver water, in year 2006. During carnival, we hug up and wine up together, but after carnival, as Brother Valentino so rightly said, we are divided by race

and class. You know, Dom Basil Mathews also said, the reason why he worked so hard for his students and his school was because a fish always decays from the head, hence he took the lead. Surely, with the enormous resources at our disposal today, we can do so much more, not just for our children but for all our communities and our nation.

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I personally will be eternally grateful to Dom Basil Mathews and to St. Benedict's College for all the lessons, academic and otherwise, that I learned during my years at this school. As I look at today's generation of students and the difficulties they continue to face in this country of ours, I can only pray that Dom Basil Mathew's legacy would be an inspiration to present and future leadership to strive for excellence, whether at the national or community level.

Fifty years ago, on **September 11, 1956**, Dom Basil Mathews opened the doors of St. Benedict's College, in the district of La Romaine, San Fernando, to a world of

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aspiration, hopes and dreams for the poor, in the rural south Trinidad, with the promise of an education. Today, unfortunately, when we think of September 11, our first thought is of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States. However, as we celebrate St. Benedict's College 50th anniversary, let us recall the vitality, energy and dynamic vision that Dom Basil Mathews brought to that day, 50 years ago, and make it our inspiration to move forward with renewed commitment to bring about positive change to our schools, our communities and our country.

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As a school, we were able to achieve academic and athletic excellence because Dom Basil Mathews instilled in his students the desire and will to excel. This is the legacy of that brilliant man, Dom Basil Mathews. St. Benedict's College, stands today as a testament to his vision, dedication and hard work.

I would be remiss if, before closing, I did not pay my respects and special tribute to the late **Hilda Huggins**, St. Benedict's College cook for so many years. I will always remember her, so too Franklin, our bus driver and manager of the snakette; **Buela Dean**, school secretary almost from inception; **Patrick Edwards** and **Reginald**

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**Renwick**; my brothers, my mentors, my friends even my comperes. **Norman Joe** our bond still exists, **Ian Artherly**, **Clevil James**, **Irving Pemberton**, **Mervin Franklin**, **Edison Doyle**, and all those whom I cannot mention because of time, I value your friendship and I thank all of you for contributing so much to the best days of our lives. Special thanks to my uncle and mentor, **Dr. Hollis Chalkdust Liverpool**. I know that you are here tonight, not only because of Gil Figaro, but also because of your admiration and respect for Dom Basil Mathews, who as you said, made you discern African history a bit clearer.

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I say a special thanks to the people and village of LaRomaine, San Fernando for being there for and with us through the many years. Thank you much.

I must also thank **Alvin Weeks, Patrick Edwards** for I know how hard you have worked to make this day a reality. The Past Students Association, The Parent Teachers Association, the sponsors, and supporters for working together to make this week's activities a celebration to remember.

Let me in closing, thank you all for joining with us to celebrate a man of many talents, a man of many

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disciplines, a man of God, a man among men, a GREAT MAN! **Dr. Dom Basil Matthews.**

Thank you for having me and may God richly bless you !

*Gilman T. Figaro, Sr*  
*Saturday, September 16, 2006*