

**Commencement Address by H. E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
at the 14th Commencement Exercise of Stella Maris Polytechnic
Samuel K. Doe Sports Complex
Monrovia, Liberia
Friday, August 30, 2013**

I remember vividly how I came to be standing here today, delivering the Commencement Address for the Graduating Class of Stella Maris Polytechnic. We had convened, in early April, an interactive session with youth and student groups, to listen to their concerns and determine how we could address their grievances. Amid all of the political back-and-forth, a young man stood up. His only request was that I serve as the Keynote Speaker at his school's 14th Commencement this year.

Without hesitation, I accepted, given my own commitment to quality education. I hope that that young man is here graduating today, and I want to thank him personally for the invitation. There he is.

That verbal invitation was followed by a formal letter from Sister Mary Laurene Browne, to whom I could also not say no, given all the many times she has responded to our call to serve her government and her country. Let me use this platform to thank you, Sister Mary Laurene, for all that you continue to do in the interest of your beloved country, most especially in training young Liberians for future leadership.

Today we are graduating 509 students from this institution. If we add to that the hundreds of others that graduate from state-run and private institutions, once, sometimes even twice a year – and we know that our tertiary institutions are turning out students in vast numbers – that is laudable, for it is a measure of the human resources and strong manpower pool that is being prepared to run our country.

We note in this audience with particular pleasure that 137 students have successfully completed training in the Health Sciences – 16 at the Master's level – an area of critical need to our country.

I am very pleased to join you, Sister Laurene, the Trustees, Faculty, the Graduates and their Parents in celebrating this milestone achievement. You, Graduates, deserve to be proud for having achieved the Baccalaureate level. I have no doubt that Stella Maris has prepared you well for tomorrow's challenges, and I want to believe that you planned properly in choosing a discipline which our post-conflict sorely needs.

I am assured that, coming to a polytechnic, you know that your goal has been to develop operational skills in addition to scholarship – a goal which fits our post-war national reconstruction program and beyond. There is urgent need for emphasis on training and acquiring knowledge that has practical applications to real-life conditions. Stella Maris is, therefore, very relevant to our national development goals.

The theme of this year's graduation, "Partnering with the Private Sector: A Catalyst for Providing Quality Education," is equally central to our reconstruction and development program. When we set out, a few years ago, to attempt to purge a bloated public service, our aim was to

reduce the public sector and expand the private sector, which remains the driving force of any economy. A viable and potent private sector commands creativity and competition from citizens and partners alike.

Moreover, given the shocking headlines of recent days, referencing the mass failure of applicants who sat the examination for admission to the University of Liberia, it is imperative to speak about the quality of education in our schools today. Those of us old enough to remember, look back fondly on our school days, proud of the quality education we received. The educational system was then highly competitive and demanding. The schools, teachers, students and even the region competed for excellence. Indiscipline and insolence were dealt with very firmly. Cheating and other vices inimical to progress and productivity were not tolerated.

The foundation of the educational system was laid by private missionary institutions, with strong emphasis on moral values, uprightness and a competitive spirit. Leaders of the Republic, realizing the inability of the state to operate public schools, made it mandatory for churches to be established in Liberia on the condition that they would establish and run schools. This is how the partnership started with the Presbyterians, Methodists, the Baptists, and the Catholics that produced schools such as Alexander High, the College of West Africa, Bromley and Lott Carey Missions, St. John's and Bethany, Monrovia College, Our Lady of Fatima, and many others that blazed the path in those early days to train our young Liberian minds.

The Catholic Church made its first appearance in Liberia, in February 1842, when several priests volunteered to come to Liberia and serve the religious needs of some Roman Catholics, mainly from Maryland in the United States of America. They succumbed to malaria, as did volunteers from a second mission who followed them, but they were determined to establish a foothold, and a third mission arrived in February 1884, and laid the foundation of the Monrovia Mission. They had the support of President Hilary Johnson, who was moved primarily by their promise to provide education to our citizens. The first Catholic school for boys was opened in Monrovia in 1885. Again, they continued to work on

The curriculum of the Catholic Education System has proven over time to be one of the best in the country, providing quality education to our citizens. The church has also been very influential in healthcare delivery and in the social and moral uprightness of its members.

Since it opened in 2003, Stella Maris has been a shining example in quality education and practical training for application to our current national situation. We are proud of your achievement. We have no doubt that all of you sitting there today will accept your profession and will move on to build a better Liberia.

Let me say that while we applaud the establishment of many institutions of learning, we are also concerned about the quality of training in all institutions. We recognize that it is not sufficient to simply turn out graduates like an assembly line; rather, it is imperative to graduate young people who have received the quality of education that makes them marketable in the private sector. Today, we are told by Sister Laurene that the majority of you sitting there have already gone that next step and already are applying your time in the private sector on the basis of your skills and quality of training that you received.

The responsibility for acquiring a quality education also rests with students and with parents because no matter the investment in education, they must be willing to utilize it to the fullest. The youth, who comprise over 60 percent of our population, must demonstrate a desire and willingness to prepare themselves for the future. This endeavor must also claim the attention of parents, guardians and supporters if we all are to succeed in the goals that we set.

We need and want positive attributes in our educational system. We want schools, cities, towns and even counties to compete in producing the best students. We want our young people to rely on their ability and their brain in facing academic challenges and not circumventing the system. We want school administrators and teachers to uphold their dignity and their integrity by teaching our young people self-reliance, self-esteem and confidence.

We realize that there is no quick fix to this crisis in public education. We acknowledge that we concentrated, in the early years, on enrolment because we wanted to get the children off the farms, out of the markets, from the roads and get them into schools. We did that, and enrolment throughout the country quadrupled. The problem, we found subsequently, was that the quality of education did not measure up.

The results of the UL exams clearly attest to this and tell us now we must address that with all that we have so that we have other graduating students like the ones here today at Stella Maris graduating with the right education and a preparedness to go on into their professional life.

If only we had the resources that are required, we would populate the school system with the best qualified teachers. We would continue to bring in more and more of our partners such as the Peace Corps that are now teaching at Tubman University and teaching in our Teacher Training Institutes and the Nigerians who are also serving throughout many of our counties. But we also want to recognize the many who are here sitting in this audience, who have come and given their time, who have been able to make Stella Maris what it is today.

We need to think creatively about what we do about the thousands of young people who have not been admitted to the university: what remedial programs we can identify and implement because they, too, have to be prepared to take on the responsibility of professionalism.

Education in Liberia must evolve and not be stuck in a time warp, barely influenced by 21st century social realities of intense competition for knowledge, workers' high value on education, the rise of information technology as the source of wealth, and to prepare children to learn how to solve problems, rather than rote memory as the dominant mode of learning.

Education, especially quality education, is a magic wand; the master key that opens the door to opportunities, success and happiness. It is an instrument of empowerment, a great leveler, and a prerequisite to national development and modernization.

We will continue to forge a stronger partnership between the private and public sectors to improve the quality of education. We will continue to work with the church-based institutions such as Stella Maris to ensure that we can give to them the support they need to continue to deliver the quality teaching that has produced the students that we have here today.

Today, we renew that promise to embark on a new chapter of commitment to peace, and that peace dividend must be grounded in a solid quality education for our young people.

To the Graduating Class of 2013 – all 509 of you – I say: Go out with pride. You and your parents and supporters chose the difficult but correct path to quality education – an investment in a professional future. Utilize your knowledge well, for yourself and for your country. It is one thing to acquire an education; it is a totally different ballgame to apply the knowledge acquired to positive and beneficial use.

After today's excitement, some of you will face tomorrow's reality of finding a job; it may not apply to many of you at Stella Maris, but as you go, make sure that you apply your best in your chosen discipline. We wish you a successful and a brilliant future. I say to you, we salute you for the discipline you showed, for the example that you have set to have gone through the rigor of the courses you took to the degree that you can excel.

Thank you, Sister Laurene; thank you, Faculty; thank you, Students. I thank all of you in Stella Maris Polytechnic for being the great examples that you are, and for inviting me to share in your celebration.

Congratulations to you, the Graduating Class. We applaud you!