

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa  
Graduation – 25 October 2019  
Nairobi, Kenya

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION FOR QUALITY EDUCATION: BRINGING THE AFRICA WE  
WANT

Your Excellency Rt. Rev. Charles Kasonde, Chancellor of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Your Excellency Rt. Rev. Maurice Muhatia Makumba, Chairman of the University Council, Very Rev. Prof. Stephen Mbugua Ngari, Vice Chancellor of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Members of the University Council, Distinguished Guests, Parents, Guardians, Sponsors and Graduands\*, Faculty and Students of CUEA, Ladies and Gentlemen, Karibu.

The world is small. We live in a time when I can travel from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the USA to Nairobi, Kenya in Africa – across seven time zones, and from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern at the Equator, in fifteen hours. We live in a time when I can span those time zones and the hemispheres by way of email, and iPhone, and video technology, and find at the other end, a colleague and a friend, indeed, many colleagues and friends. We live in a time when I can sit in my home on a Sunday morning and learn about your joys and sorrows, your victories and your defeats, by accessing the news in any number of ways.

Two Sundays ago, I awoke to the news that your countryman, Eliud Kipchoge, made history by becoming the first runner to finish a marathon in less than two hours, in one hour, 59 minutes, and 40 seconds. He did that in Vienna, Austria. And although I was quite impressed by the feat itself, I

was more than interested in Mr. Kipchoge's response to the media. He said: "I am here to inspire everyone that it can be done." Later, in a tweet, he wrote: "I don't know where the limits are but I would like to go there." I thank your countryman, Mr. Eliud, for pushing me to dream about stretching and pushing the limits of our humanity.

When your Vice-Chancellor invited me to address you on this amazing occasion, he encouraged me to speak on this topic: Research and Innovation for Quality Education: Bringing the Africa We Want. For twenty years, I have been watching what has been happening in Africa, especially in the countries where four American universities have teamed up to collaborate with universities such as yours to educate Catholic women religious in order for them to serve their people better. Today many of those Sisters are in this cohort of Graduands. The irreversible transformation that had occurred is significant and indelible. But listen – you think I am talking about the transformation I see in Africa. No, that's not it. I am talking about you, the people of Africa, who are transforming us. Let me tell you about transformation, ours and yours.

When we, in our elitist cultures, had the newest technologies; you, our neighbors to the south, corralled the wisdom of the ancients.  
When we, in our smugness, began letting go of the faith that nurtured us from birth; you, in your humility, embraced the spirit of God within you.  
When we, in our entitlement, ravaged the resources of the land, polluted the waters that cleanse us, and compromised the air that we breathe; you, in your inclusive heart, attended to the creation around you with care and tenderness.

And so, in addressing the title – *bringing the Africa we want* - I caution you. What IS the Africa you want? You must search deep within your souls for the answer to that question. The answer is not *out there* somewhere. It is not in the technologies that divide us, such as social media and the weaponry of war. It is not in the politics of conflict and supremacy. It is not in material things that stem from greed and godlessness. It is not in the glamor and glitz and razzle-dazzle of the world that stimulate the mind and empty the soul. I ask you again. What IS the Africa you want? You must search deep within your souls for the answer to that question because that is where you will find it.

I return to the topic I was given: *Research and Innovation for Quality Education*. It is a common belief that education empowers people. And for centuries the university has been the laboratory that plants seeds of creativity and vision and change. It can be argued that the first University was founded in Bologna, Italy, in 1088; however, records indicate that the University of Al-Karaouine in Fez, Morocco, was actually founded in 859 (by a woman I might add) and is still operating today. Whether we are talking about those universities, Oxford, Princeton, or the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, we place our hopes in the system to do good for the social and cultural units where we find ourselves, to change them for the better, and to stretch our minds, not only our bodies, to the limits of our humanity. Why then, is there not peace in the world, why then do people suffer at the hands of other people, why then do those who are rich get richer while those who are poor get poorer? Today, Graduands, you will leave this institution of higher learning with a credible and viable degree.

You will each be armed (so to speak) with the tools you need to become a famous researcher or to become an entrepreneur in your own right. That in and of itself is noteworthy and commendable and we are here assembled to congratulate you. However, I put another multi-faceted question to you. Will you use your education to promote peace in your hearts and homes and neighborhoods; will you advocate for people who are brutalized because of a perceived class or inequality; will you protect the earth and all of creation; and will you lift people wherever you can from their impoverishment? If the answer to that all-encompassing question is yes, then your learned capacity to do research and be innovative will bring about the Africa the world wants and hopefully, the Africa that you want.

In an earlier comment I mentioned being transformed by the people of Africa and your accomplishments. Allow me to be truly honest with you. The so-called developed countries of the globe have been frankly startled by how the great continent of Africa has taken a prominent place in the world in the last few decades. I read in the Financial Times about a Kenyan gentleman from the Mau Forest who saw a car for the first time in the 1950's and thought it was a moving house. Today, at 86, that gentleman has seen and experienced tremendous changes in his life and lifestyle and everyday he communicates via mobile phone with his children, grandchildren, and friends. In addition to communicating, this Kenyan uses his mobile phone for shopping, banking, and investing. He talks about the old days over honey beer (some things never change) and "is interrupted by incessant chirruping, not from birds but handsets bringing news to the forest from the city."

A Kenya-born educator and former chair of the innovation committee for economic development at Harvard, Calestous Juma noted shortly before he died in 2017: “The mobile revolution has given hope to Africans that they too can be dynamic and innovative players in the global economy.” This phenomenon of moving from pre-technology to digital technology, is known as the theory of leapfrogging, and has happened as people in countries such as yours have bypassed the now dinosaur technology of landline phones, blackberries – the precursor to the smartphone – iPods, hand-held recorders, and headsets.

Speaking frankly, you are now poised to be leaders in the economic, entrepreneurial, agricultural, and industrial world. This is some of what I have already observed:

- **Technological advances.** You have leapfrogged old power generation technologies in favor of renewable energy in solar and wind power. This power is rolled out more quickly than fossil fuels and because it operates both on and off grid, can reach rural communities and remote villages. Kenya is the leading global producer of geothermal power.
- **Entrepreneurial endeavors.** *Safi Organics* is a company here in Kenya run by Samuel Rigu,. Rigu is a young entrepreneur, who discovered that by slowly burning rice husks and maize combs and then adding vegetal ingredients and minced limestone, he can create a charcoal fertilizer that when used in farming prevents soil acidification. Farmers who used this product yielded a harvest increase of 30%, due to the fact that their soil retained its water and nutrients over time. This creative approach and others slowly but

surely mitigate the devastating effects of climate change in vulnerable areas, such as sub-Saharan countries.

- **Trends.** Futurists claim that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is yours for the taking. In fact, Mr. Charles Robertson, the lead author of the popular book, *The Fastest Billion*, predicts that by the year 2050, and most of you will still be alive, the GDP (gross domestic product) of this continent will exceed the combined GDP's of the US and the EU at current prices. But you say – our people still struggle, there are still civil wars, many indigenous people are poor and illiterate, but he defends his position by pointing to history in other parts of the world, and I quote: “History...shows that the need to adapt and adopt is strongest among people who face the most challenging environments and that necessity is, indeed, the mother of invention. It was true of war-torn famine riddled Europe in the Middle Ages and it has been true for [Asian countries]. But when the turning point arrives, by whatever mysterious routes it is reached, the ascent is often rapid and spectacular.” Furthermore, the authors note that only 20% of Africa's sub-soil minerals have been discovered; thus make a convincing case that your rise in the world is virtually inevitable.

Technological advances, entrepreneurial endeavors, encouraging futuristic trends. These have been my observations of sub-Saharan Africa.

Everything about what is happening in your lives today, including and especially the education you have received in this university, positions you for an incredible life-changing, impactful, successful, and happy life. History has brought you and your country to the threshold of a bright new day.

Before you go, allow me, a friend who until now was a stranger, to remind you of something you have read many times – the Mission statement of your soon to be Alma Mater: *To promote excellence in research, teaching and community service by preparing morally upright leaders based on the intellectual tradition of the Catholic Church.* And this where, as we say, the rubber meets the road. I know that excellence has been the hallmark of what you have done here in research and scholarship. You are prepared educationally for the Africa of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. No one can take your education away from you for it is now a part of your breathing in and breathing out. On the other hand, you can choose to be morally upright persons whose lives are guided by Catholic intellectual thought. Or you can choose to denounce that path.

At the foundation of your excellent education at The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, you have come to know that knowledge stretches the limits of the mind. However, and more to the point of this education, the tenets of our Christian faith stretch the limits of our humanity. Take these lessons with you and keep them close to your hearts:

- Human dignity is the basis of all human rights
- All persons have an obligation to foster what is good – not only what is good for them but what is good for all, the Common Good
- We are called to respond in justice to those who are poor and marginalized
- We are moved to stand with all persons who are oppressed in any way because our human family transcends all differences

- It is our responsibility to protect, nurture, and preserve the resources of earth, the environment, our time, talents and gifts, finances, all of God's gifts to us
- Caritas – love – is the essence of God's relationship with all of creation

As I recall my initial experiences with Africa, this is what I believe about you.

You are true to the people of your villages. You share what you have and welcome all into the heart of your communities. You honor your traditions and preserve your cultural mores. You believe that God dwells in all of creation and you reverence earth. Your nuclear family reaches out to your extended family in love. You respect your elders and welcome children as gifts from God. You are hard-working and doggedly responsible.

Today I have put before you the pieces of a puzzle. It is a complex, challenging yet beautiful puzzle, and you, Graduands, have what it takes to put it all together. The name of the puzzle – *bringing the Africa we want!* Here's what lies before you. You are embarking on a journey, on a continent that will surpass many nations in technology and finance by the year 2050. Through your education you now have the tools to navigate the landscape and become leaders in every sector of this new world. Your education is undergirded by the precepts of Catholic intellectual tradition in such a way that you can choose to be guided by strong moral judgement in every possible circumstance. Your African culture and values are rich in meaning and strong in purpose. All these are the pieces of the puzzle. I

cannot say it more forcefully. You need all of them to *bring the Africa you want*. Your education will get you a career and some money to raise your family. It's a start, errant at best. Your education and the tenets of Catholic Social Thought will get you a career, some money to raise your family, and a moral life of service to others. Not a bad outcome. But your education, the tenets of Catholic Social Thought, and an adherence to the intrinsic cultural values that are your birthright will get you a career, some money to raise your family, a moral life of service to others, and a lasting peace in your heart and home that can never be taken from you. Always be true to yourself. This is how you transform me and the world. Don't let the glamour of prosperity steal the foundation of the answer to the question *What is the Africa you want?*

Eluid said it best: "I don't know where the limits are but I would like to go there." Go there, I say to you today, for you have the answer to the questions within you.

- Graduands is the term used to describe students before they receive their diplomas.

Sister Mary Persico, IHM, EdD  
President, Marywood University  
Scranton, PA, USA  
[persico@marywood.edu](mailto:persico@marywood.edu)  
@sisprez