Speech by H.E. Mr Rajkeswur Purryag, GCSK, GOSK, President of the Republic of Mauritius, on the occasion of the launching of “Des Années Bien Pleines – Souvenirs d’un Missionnaire à l’île Maurice” by Dr. Henri Evard, on Saturday 31 May 2014, at 10.00 hrs at the Adventist College, Phoenix.

Dr. The Honourable Vasant Kumar Bunwaree, Minister of Education and Human Resources
Mr Renganaden Yetty, Mayor of the Municipal Council of Vacoas/ Phoenix
Mrs Dhanie Auguste, Manager, Adventist College
Mrs Ginette Catherine, Rector, Adventist College
Mr Breejan Burrun, PRO of the Adventist College Old Students’ Association
Respected Pastors
President and Members of the parent-Teachers’ Association
President and Members of the Adventist College Old Students Association
Teaching and Non-Teaching Staff and Students of the Adventist College
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning to you all!

Let me, first of all, convey my sincere thanks and appreciation to the organisers of this Thanksgiving Service for their invitation on the occasion of the 65th Anniversary of the Adventist College and also for associating me with the launching of the book, “Des Années Bien Pleines – Souvenir d’un Missionnaire à l’île Maurice” by Dr Henri Evard.

I understand to-day’s event has furthermore, been organised to pay tribute to late Mr Mardaymootoo Nursoo, who devoted 40 years of his life to the cause and advancement of this College.

The Management of the Adventist College could not have imagined a better way to give recognition to late Mr Nursoo, also called Tamby, for his loyal and unwavering service.

I am informed that Management has decided to give his name to a specific room at the College.

This is certainly an excellent initiative to keep alive the memory of late Mr. Nursoo.
Coming back to the book: “Des Années Bien Pleines – Souvenir d’un Missionnaire à l’île Maurice”, I must say that I was very much impressed by the historical recollections of Dr Evard narrating his living experience in Mauritius as a missionary.

In very minute details, Dr Evard has described his departure from his native Switzerland, meeting his relatives and acquaintances on his way to the Port of Marseille where he was to board the “Eridan” for the sea voyage that took him to Reunion Island.

I have had the opportunity to peruse the book.

I would not hesitate to say that it is one of the best descriptions I have read about the prevailing situation in Mauritius in the 1940’s and 1950’s.

Dr Evard’s descriptive style depicts Mauritius of those days in all its splendour, tastes and smell.

He brings all his senses in his memoirs.

Indeed, if you really want to have a true picture of what life was in those days, you simply have to read his book.

What is also of significance in Dr Evard’s book is how he managed to set up the Adventist College from scrap and how he nurtured the school during its teething stage to make of it a successful institution in the educational landscape at that time.

The arrival of Dr Evard in view of setting up a school in Mauritius received wide coverage in the local newspapers.

Because since 1914, the Adventist Mission in Mauritius was engaged in religious activities only.

The Adventist College started its operations in January 1949 with only 127 students – 46 pupils in the primary, and 81 in the secondary.

Over the years, the College grew in popularity and attracted more and more pupils from the neighbouring localities.

As Dr Evard himself points out in his memoirs, when he left Mauritius in 1953 after his first term of office, the school population had grown to 317 with 91 pupils for the primary classes and 226 in the secondary.

Going through the book, I was also happy to note that Dr Evard made it a point to include the teaching of moral education in the curriculum of the Adventist College.

Moral values were in fact inculcated to the children of the primary classes from a very tender age.
And pastoral care and human values were imparted to students of the secondary level.

As you know, teaching of moral values in our schools is seriously lacking these days.

Without moral values no education can be complete.

Moral values are common to all religions and they are no different across cultures.

Dr. Evard was imbued with moral values.

That's why he made of them his sacrosanct principles for a good education system.

He was also an embodiment of compassion.

We can feel that when he shares with us the anecdote of a poor parent – a mother in fact – who came to the school imploring him to make a discount of the school fee of Rs 10 for his son.

He naturally acceded to her request open-heartedly.

Soon after, funds came in for the construction of the new school facilities, and Dr Evard attributed this to the grace of God.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

The more I went through the book, the more I realised that Dr Evard was an “avant-gardiste”.

And this is clearly manifest in the way he looked at our education system.

For him passing examinations was not the only goal in the educational journey of a child.

It was more the holistic development of the learner – focusing on the growth of the person affectively, emotionally, spiritually and above all, intellectually.

Dr Evard had understood this, right from the beginning, and, he knew that the College he was heading was destined to be a model in the education sector in Mauritius.

Like all other privately run colleges, Adventist College also experienced ups and downs in his 65-years’ history, especially during the late 70's and early 80's when secondary education became free and state secondary schools were set up in different parts of Mauritius.

This had a serious impact in the enrolment ratio of the private secondary schools with the result that both the quality and quantity of intake dropped dramatically in many private secondary schools.
Adventist College was no exception.

Its intake for Form I fell as low as 33% in 1983 and the pass rate at SC dropped to 23%.

However, Adventist College successfully managed to weather the storm by reinventing itself, with new strategies and a revised curriculum in order to get back on track.

The involvement of parents was also crucial to turn around the situation.

Indeed, I am told that parents were invited to share their feelings and experience about the education of their children through a newly-formed Parents-Teachers’ Association as well as the setting up of various extra-mural clubs where students were given the opportunity to develop their skills, talents and competencies.

All these measures have in the long term, borne their fruit, judging by the pass rate at SC and HSC which to-day hovers at around 80% to 70% respectively.

During his second stay in our island, Dr Evard did not only develop the educational programme of the Adventist College but also headed the Adventist Mission in Mauritius.

As such, he found sufficient time to visit the different places where there was an Adventist community and in the process, helped in founding Adventist Churches in different localities like Port Louis, Mahebourg, Chemin Grenier and Flacq, amongst others.

Dr Evard writes about almost everything in his “souvenirs” – about the climate, tropical cyclones, food, the sea and its white sandy beaches, religions, in fact, about everything that touches the daily life of people in Mauritius.

Narrating his second stay here between 1957-61, Dr Evard describes his trips to Antananarivo, Rodrigues and Seychelles as well as to the remote corners of our country.

He also refers to his regular visits to the needy families who were living in precarious conditions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

“Des Années Bien Pleines – Souvenirs d’un Missionaire à l’île Maurice” is a catalogue of recollections for our younger generations.

I would commend this book to all those who are curious and interested to know about the historical facts of our country during the 1950’s.

All the ingredients are there to paint a truthful panoramic picture of Mauritius in those days.

Ladies and Gentlemen
I am overwhelmed by the quality of education that Adventist College has been dispensing to our students since its creation way back in 1949.

Let me also tell you that this College has produced students who have been very successful in their life, and one of them is even a Cabinet Minister to-day.

Also, Adventist College has continued to expand its physical facilities with the construction of additional classrooms.

The College has also reviewed its curriculum in order to introduce new subjects such as Music, Visual Arts, Food Studies, etc. ...

Today, the College can boast itself of having a student population of 820 and a yearly intake of 120 students offering around 15 subjects at HSC level.

I have no doubt that the College is well poised to become a key player in our education system.

I wish the Adventist College success in its mission and future endeavour.

With these words, I have now the pleasure to launch “Des Années Bien Pleines – Souvenirs d’un Missionnaire à l’île Maurice”, by Dr Henri Evard which I strongly commend to all our readers.

I thank you for your attention.