



## Gerard Arthur Pantin

Mr. Chancellor,

In welcoming our honorary graduand, we focus our attention today on the plight of the poor and dispossessed, those who are powerless and afraid, whose very condition negates their basic human rights. Mighty indeed have been mankind's efforts to relieve poverty in fulfilment of the long-held dream of social justice for all. Equally mighty have been its failures in this cause, so that we are left in contemplation of that sad aphorism:

*The poor we always have with us*

more so now that that great social experiment in dialectical materialism, with its simplistic answers to the complex problems of human society, lies everywhere in ruin.

Amidst this prevailing gloom, however, has appeared a glimmer of hope which has emerged from the pioneering work of a relatively small band of enlightened intellectuals working from an intensely human perspective. We call to mind Yunus of Bangladesh and de Soto of Peru and the late educationist, Dudley Grant of Jamaica, to name a few, who individually and collectively have established the simple axiom, that the poor need to be actively involved in alleviating their own poverty. It is from among this noble band that I present Gerard Arthur Pantin priest of The Roman Catholic Church, scholar, teacher, community worker and founder of the Servol Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago.

Father Gerry Pantin, as he is best known, was born in 1928 into a devoutly religious middle-class family. He is the eldest of ten children several of whom have made their own separate marks of distinction in public life. With them and a devoted mother he experienced the trauma of the premature death of his father while still at the tender age of twelve. He was then attending the Belmont Intermediate School, but he secured a scholarship and proceeded to St. Mary's College. Such early promise of scholastic achievement flowered at the secondary level, culminating in his winning an Island Scholarship in the Science Group in 1947 and being awarded the Jerningham Gold Medal for achieving the highest mark in the Cambridge Higher School Certificate Examination. Those who knew him then remember a worldly and exuberant boy, a boy scout and able sportsman, whom everyone believed was destined for the medical profession. But he had a change of heart which inclined him towards service in the work of the Church. In order to remove any residue of uncertainty, he decided to put to the test his mettle for this calling by spending a year with the Holy Ghost Novitiate in Canada. There he was subjected to strict spiritual and physical discipline which often entailed hard manual labour in that harsh northern climate. But this experience of asceticism confirmed his resolve to enter the priesthood and at the end of the period he began the long journey of preparation when he joined University College, Dublin, to read for the Bachelor's degree in Chemistry, Biochemistry and Biology. Not unexpectedly he graduated with honours, and quickly acquired Diplomas in Education, in the History of European Painting and in Philosophy.

After a year of teaching he moved to Fribourg University in Switzerland where he became fluent in French and qualified for the Licentiate in Sacred Theology. Switzerland also brought new and different experiences. He carried out special studies of Marxist philosophy and was privileged to meet and speak with refugees fleeing the cruel suppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956. By 1959 he was a fully fledged priest, well-prepared to return to Trinidad, to his alma mater, St. Mary's College, to take up an appointment as a Science Teacher. The next eleven years saw him bend his considerable energies to teaching, to organising games, to working with the Christian Family Movement, in sum, to being an efficient and devoted priest. It was all very predictable.

Presently the fury of the Black Power unrest burst upon the Trinidad scene, challenging bonafides of the Church and invading the hallowed spaces of its cathedral, insistent in its demand for social justice for the poor. This event brought to a precipitate end the settled rhythms of Father Pantin's routine. His conscience rudely awakened by what he saw, he realised that almost all his efforts in service to the society were directed to the more privileged - the upper half - while he knew little of the needs of the seething mass at the bottom of the economic scale - those most in need of assistance. It was a challenge he had to face. Conscience prevailed, so he sought and obtained permission to be relieved of his teaching duties to go into those areas of poverty which had been the focal point of the demonstrations to offer his services to their communities.

Accompanied by Wes Hall, the celebrated West Indian cricketer, he took his first uncertain steps into this new world in September 1970. Pantin and Hall, an odd couple indeed -

*... climbed where lank electric lines  
and tension cables linked its raw brick hovels  
like a complex feud  
Where the inheritors of the middle passage stewed  
five to a room still clamped below their hatch  
breeding like felonies  
Whose lives revolve around prison, graveyard, church*

As expected their intrusion met with abuse, not least by the leaders of the Black Power movement, who, in an article entitled 'Sock it to Pantin' poured scorn on their efforts. Yet these two companions persevered and within the four months before Hall's departure, had established meaningful contact with the people and developed a technique for assisting the poor which Father Pantin now calls "Respectful Intervention". Its essence is that those who seek to help should admit ignorance of the needs and priorities of the recipients, should listen patiently to what they have to say and should insist that they share the cost and effort of an undertaking.

From these modest beginnings, and with the assistance of a few individuals drawn from the communities, together with a group of ten military personnel from the Defence Force, the Servol Organisation - Service Volunteered for All - was born. That was twenty years ago.

Father Pantin is careful to explain that the basic issue which underpins the various ideas addressed, is that of power. To use his words:

*The powerless stand defeated and apathetic while  
decisions are taken about them which seriously  
affect their lives and on which they are not even  
consulted.  
... the object of all our educational and social  
effort should be to help people take charge of  
their lives.  
... to put it simply we have to give them power  
over their lives.*

Under his inspired leadership the organisation has grown from strength to strength, spreading unobtrusively outwards and upwards from the 'bottom half', throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Through its board of directors, its several committees and its army of dedicated members, it runs life centres, centres for early childhood and adolescents, agricultural projects and cooperatives. It has established health clinics,

sporting facilities and schools for the handicapped and much more. A parallel organisation FUNDAID lends money to or guarantees loans for clients of SERVOL. More recently SERVOL has been appointed agent of the Ministry of Education on a variety of activities while working with other ministries in setting up human development programmes. It also acts as a regional centre for similar programmes in 15 different Caribbean territories from Panama, through the islands, to Guyana.

His inspired work has taken wing and touched the hearts of kindred spirits throughout the world so that today the organisation is dignified by international recognition. Substantial financial support has come from international foundations, in particular, the Bernard Van Leer Foundation and while lamenting the imbalance inherent in these arrangements, he recognises his debt to these sources.

He has a special message for university graduates and staff alike. It is that the classical theories, ideas, research methods and conventional wisdoms of the scholar often have little currency when applied to poor communities. Before embarking on such work, he exhorts us 'to inhale the heavy air of a group of people working closely together to make an idea work, to witness the daily difficulties of managers and the endless stream of problems and crises, and experience the physical and emotional exhaustion of what is involved in a community project.' But in spreading his message he often infuses a spark of humour, never more so than when he quotes from Henry Thoreau:

*There is no odour so bad as that which arises from  
goodness tainted. It is human, it is divine carrion.  
If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to  
my house with the conscious design of doing me good,  
I would run for my life.*

Blessed with a fine intellect and a personality in which there is a remarkable coincidence of humility, courage, patience and devotion to duty, he has charted a new course in rough and dangerous waters with a power and conviction which command us to follow. In our recognition of his contribution to our Caribbean community we are reminded of Bacon's paradox:

*If a man begin with certainties he shall end in  
doubt but if he will be content to begin with  
doubts he shall end in certainties.*

Mr. Chancellor, I request you, by the authority of Senate and Council, to admit **GERARD ARTHUR PANTIN** to the Degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.