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**Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**SPEECH AT THE CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE GRADUATION**

**Kshatriya Hall Thurs. 14th Nov., 2013**

**Desvoux Road, SUVA 1100 Hours**

Your Grace the Most Reverend Peter Loy Chong;

Reverend Priests and Religious;

School Management and Teachers;

The Graduants;

Parents and Guardians;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I’m delighted to be here as Chief Guest at the 2013 Graduation Ceremony of Corpus Christi College – one of the great institutions of Fijian education.

The College was founded 55 years ago and this is the 53rd graduation ceremony.

So for more than half a century, the Roman Catholic Church has been training primary school teachers here for Fiji’s schools and I want to thank it for its service to the nation.

I especially want to direct my comments today to those of you who are graduating as teachers. Because you have the good fortune to be doing so at the most exciting moment for education in Fijian history.

In the 2014 Budget last Friday, I was proud to announce that for the very first time, we are introducing free education for primary and secondary students and a loans scheme for tertiary students.

This commitment of more than half a billion dollars from a total budget of just over two billion dollars is one of the most important things we have ever done as a nation.

It is more than just relieving the burden of education on ordinary Fijian families, generations of whom have gone to bed at night worried about how they will pay their children’s school fees.

It is the best investment we can make as a nation in the future of our young people, the quality of our schools and the quality of our teachers. And it is the best investment we can make to fulfil my Government’s vision of Fiji as a clever country, a nation peopled by those with fine minds and fine skills.

Any nation that is willing to invest almost a fifth of its national budget in education is a nation that takes education seriously. No Fijian child is going to be left behind. Poverty will no longer be a barrier to education. Everyone will get a primary and secondary education. And no-one who wants to go to University or learn a trade will be prevented from doing so because they can’t afford it.

Put simply, we are positioning Fiji not only to be a smarter country to improve our own living standards but to assume a leadership role in the region and improve the living standards of all Pacific Islanders.

So to all you graduates here today, this is the vision we want you to embrace, to share. This is the task that, together, we can accomplish.

In the process, your own careers are going to be a lot more satisfying as you see more resources pumped into the education system. And of course, we hope that over time, this investment attracts many more people of quality into the teaching profession.

Of all the vocations, teaching is among the most noble. As you all know, it is not simply about imparting knowledge – vital as that may be. Young children, especially, need to be taught a range of broader life skills and values – to think creatively, to develop a spiritual dimension, to be considerate of others, to be caring, to regard themselves as both individuals and members of a team.

In the new Fiji that we are building together, we also want more emphasis on genuine fairness – the notion that every Fijian, whatever their background, is the same as anyone else and deserves the same treatment. While we respect and celebrate our different cultures and beliefs, we are all equal under our new Constitution, with the same rights and obligations. And we are One Nation, with opportunity and justice for all.

This is the basis of all the great democracies, which we intend to become ourselves when we hold our election next year. And so is the notion of patriotism, of being instilled with a love of country. In our case, always putting the nation’s wider interest before our own - putting Fiji First.

You have a solemn duty as teachers to instil these values of nation- building in our children. Here at Corpus Christi, the values of care and inclusiveness are already part of the fabric of this institution. Take them out into the nation’s classrooms with you as you leave.

In conclusion, I want to again congratulate the 34 students who are about to graduate.

The entire nation joins me in thanking you all today for dedicating your lives to the teaching of our children.

Always be compassionate and caring but also firm in instilling the highest standards of personal behaviour.

Above all, teach them well. They are our nation’s future and the bedrock of our vision to make Fiji Great.

Vinaka vakalevu – thank you.

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