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SR ROBERTA, TIRELESS SERVANT-LEADER

Today, I pay tribute to Sr Roberta O'Flaherty, a Religious Sister of the Holy Faith Congregation, who was awarded the Humming Bird Medal Gold during the Republic Day National Awards Ceremony at President's House. I was honoured to be present, along with Sr Juliet Rajah, to witness this momentous occasion.

This award is well-deserved for someone who has rendered loyal and devoted service, beneficial to T&T for 52 years. Pope Francis has rightly asked, "What would the church be without religious sisters and consecrated laywomen?"

Indeed, what would society be without them?

Each of us is born into this world with gifts given to us by our Creator. We have a choice, either we hide these gifts under a bushel and live mediocre lives, or we use them to serve humanity. It was Gandhi who said, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

Sr Roberta chooses to serve. Sr Roberta arrived in T&T from Ireland in October 1971, to join other Holy Faith Sisters. The then Arch-bishop, Count Pinbar Ryan, had invited the Sisters to assist with our education work in the Archdiocese and they responded favourably. From the time she arrived in 1971, Sr Roberta was involved in the education sector.

For a number of years, she was principal and taught at St Catherine's Preparatory School, Sangre Grande; St. Monica's in PoS; and Our Lady of Loreto Secondary School, Pembroke Street.

She then served at Servol for 13 years as coordinator and teacher trainer at the Regional Training & Resource Centre. During that time, she also supervised trainee early childhood educators throughout T&T, and other Caribbean countries. Sr Roberta was a founding member and, until her retirement, executive director of the Credo Foundation for Justice (CFJ), which was established in 1996 and on which I am a director. The goal of Credo Residential Development Centres is to protect boys and girls 10-18 years, and to reduce the number of those who are socially displaced and abused, by providing places of safety with developmental and remedial opportunities, while also empowering families and creating awareness of social injustices against children. Over the years, magistrates have been sending children from various parts of T&T to CFJ's centres via the Children's Authority and Children's Court. Overall, the residents at the centres reflect T&T's diversity, in terms of religion, status and ethnicity.

The centres are:

1. Credo Centre Nelson Street opened in 1997
2. Sophia House, 2-4 Park Street opened in 2004
3. Aylward House (2000) and Ruah (2010) were two transitional centres for boys and girls preparing for independent living. Unfortunately, they had to be closed in 2017 due to lack of funding.

During her tenure as executive director of CFJ, Sr Roberta and her team catered for the varied needs of children and their families, from various parts of the country. She had the ability to motivate staff to work towards achieving CFJ's goal of giving children a second chance for a happy and productive life.

Her work reflected her deep love and empathy for the children in her care. She did not shut the door on them when they left at 18. Instead, she put measures in place to prepare the children for life in the outside world. She and her team "tracked" those who left; keeping in touch with them and assisting, where necessary.

Sr Roberta's commitment to strengthening family life led her and her team to work tirelessly to reconcile many of the children with their families.

In the early years, Sr Roberta and helpers used to pace the streets, inviting socially displaced children to visit the centres for a change of clothing, to have a shower, and to enjoy a meal. Many of these children remained at the centre. She was fearless and worked in so-called "hotspots" where many fear to go.

Sr Roberta also served for about 21 years as a board member of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice and as a member of St Theresa's Social Justice Group, Woodbrook.

In June 2007, she received the Port-of-Spain Corporation City Day Award for her contribution in the field of community service. I pay tribute to this tireless worker in the Lord's vineyard. Thank you, Sr Roberta, for your love of our people and for the lasting legacy you have left. Like Sr Roberta, let's never tire of working for a more just world in which children can flourish.