



# 200 Years Young

A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of Australia  
to the leaders, staff, students and families  
of Catholic education in Australia



Catholic Education  
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS  
*Faith in the future*



## An extraordinary achievement

Two hundred years ago the first official Catholic school opened in Australia.

Since then Catholic education has grown to the point that it now educates around 770,000 primary and secondary school students, in more than 1,750 schools, with nearly 100,000 staff. These are sponsored by dioceses and parishes, religious institutes and public juridic persons, and groups of parents. Six thousand Catholic catechists participate in the religious education of 200,000 children in government schools and parishes. Over the last few years, hundreds of Church-sponsored early learning centres have been established, educating many thousands of preschoolers. Around 50,000 tertiary students are now enrolled in our two Catholic universities with their several campuses. It is an extraordinary achievement!

Catholic schools are a jewel in the crown of the Catholic Church in Australia, with few parallels in other countries. Alongside families and parishes they are the Church's principal meeting point with young people. They are integral to the Church's mission of transmitting the faith to the next generation. It is there that many young people encounter Christ, intensify their knowledge and love of God, and are formed as future contributors to Australian society. We hope all our students will emerge from our schools with a deepened sense of the sacred and greater appreciation of the true, the good and the beautiful. Catholic education is steadfast in its commitment to evangelisation, catechesis, religious education and spiritual and moral formation.

Catholic schools are also a major part of Australia's educational ecosystem. They are the equal of other schools regarding educational programs, student achievement, teacher professionalism, facilities and

innovation. They have provided high-quality education to generations of young Australians, now numbering in their millions. They stand as a beacon in our society, for their contribution to the common good and to the nation's social capital. They have helped nurture a more just, tolerant and cohesive society. Catholic education is determined in its commitment to excellence and equity.

In this bicentenary year more than one in five Australian students attends a Catholic school, and many others a Catholic preschool, college or university. There are Catholic schools in most towns and suburbs, and university campuses in most capital cities. The students come from diverse backgrounds and beliefs. They are no longer all from poorer families, as so many were in the first century and a half of Catholic education. Despite our continuing preferential option for the poor and concern to be more accessible to First Australians, refugees, those with disabilities or other disadvantage, our schools now boast children drawn from every part of our society. Yet for all their diversity, they form a community with a common purpose and shared mission. As Christ said that He had come "that they might have life, life to the full" (John 10:10), we seek to draw out our students' gifts, address their challenges and enable them to experience fullness of life.

Catholic schools have long held that education should be directed not just towards personal enrichment for the individual student but also to community contribution. Unsurprisingly, therefore, one of the great successes of Catholic education has been how many of its graduates have gone on to put their character, skills and knowledge at the service of others: as civic leaders or judges, leaders of industry, professions or trades, and in many other ways. Many have gone on to be spouses and parents, establishing their home as 'a domestic church', contributing to their parish and volunteering in their local

community. Many, too, have joined 'caring professions' such as education and healthcare, or a life-long religious vocation, as priests, sisters or brothers.

The extraordinary success of Catholic education did not occur by chance: it is fruit of the sacrifice of past generations and divine grace. We are heirs to that rich legacy, borne out of sincere belief, inspiring vision and unwavering resolve. The bicentenary of Catholic education in Australia invites us to remember the past with gratitude, be inspired by that story in the present, and look forward with faith in the future.

## From humble beginnings in 1820-21...

For the first half century of colonisation, Catholics in Australia were denied priests and sacraments, churches and church schools. They had to teach their children at home or entrust them to schools and teachers mostly of other faiths. The early Governors promoted education to safeguard 'the rising generations' from lives of lawlessness and to promote social cohesion and stability. A pre-eminent concern was that children not develop the undesirable habits of their convict forebears! Literacy and other skills also promised to make them more useful to the new society that was emerging. Though there are gaps in the historical record, it seems that some Catholics also ran or taught in little local schools, but these did not survive.

A watershed moment for Catholic education in Australia came with the arrival in the colony of the first official Catholic chaplains, Philip Connolly and John Joseph Therry, in May 1820. Theirs was the unenviable task of building up a Catholic community whose members mostly lacked wealth, education or prospects – and so any ecclesiastical infrastructure. Among Fr Therry's first decisions was to establish a school in Parramatta. This was the



first 'official' Catholic school and it was already operational by January 1821, with 31 pupils enrolled and Mr George Morley (also identified as George Marley) employed as their teacher. The present St Patrick's Primary School in Parramatta and Parramatta Marist High School both claim descent from this first school.

Interestingly, the school was not exclusively for Catholic children. As was the policy for the subsequent two centuries, the first Catholic schools were open to all, even if those schools were uncompromisingly Catholic and gave preference to parishioners. As the settlers spread through the continent, they brought with them their faith and aspirations for Christian education – long before there was any talk of government schools and often before there were priests or religious. By 1839 there were 19 Catholic schools in New South Wales alone. Victoria's first official Catholic school opened at Port Phillip in 1839; Tasmania's at Richmond in 1843; Queensland's at Brisbane Town in 1845; Western Australia's at Swan River in 1846; and South Australia's at Penola in 1866. In 1858 Archbishop Polding established the first Catholic university college, St John's, in the University of Sydney.

Until large numbers of religious sisters and brothers arrived on the scene in Australia, it fell to Catholic laywomen and men to staff the small parish schools, often in a single room, with boys and girls separated by a curtain. Every week the space might then be cleared for Sunday Mass. Eventually certified Catholic school teachers in registered schools were paid modest salaries by the colonial governments, and crown land was provided for some Anglican, Protestant and Catholic schools. But church schools struggled to provide sufficient facilities and teachers, and conditions only worsened as enrolments increased. As secularism progressed in the Australian colonies, the mood was increasingly against funding church schools; instead the government would provide education that was 'free, secular and compulsory'. As a result of the Public Instruction Acts of the 1860s, '70s and '80s, the future of Catholic schools in Australia was in real doubt.

The Catholic community bucked against this trend. Archbishop Vaughan of Sydney was outspoken in defence of Catholic education. Fourteen bishops, a vicar apostolic and an abbot from around Australia

gathered in Plenary Council in 1885 – with three bishops from New Zealand and others – and they announced their common determination to give families the choice of a Catholic school in the face of rising secularism and enduring sectarianism. The clergy, religious and the lay faithful were equally resolute. After the Benedictine monks (1833) and Sisters of Charity (1838) came to Australia, they were soon joined by the Christian Brothers (1843), Sisters of Mercy (1846), Jesuit Fathers (1848), Good Samaritan Sisters (1857), Sisters of St Joseph (1866), Presentation Sisters (1866), Dominican Sisters (1867), Marist Brothers (1872), Loreto Sisters (1875), Brigidine Sisters (1883), Patrician Brothers (1883), Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Sisters (1885) and other congregations. These established, led or staffed most of the Catholic schools with the help of lay staff.

When the Church in Australia recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of the canonisation of St Mary MacKillop, many commented that this great champion of Catholic education would be well pleased with the scale and reach of Catholic schooling in Australia today. Despite the relative poverty of most of its members, the Catholic

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community in her time set about its ambitious project of establishing in almost every parish a church with a presbytery and a school with a convent. These were mostly poor schools and they took in the poorest children, often from remote parts of the country. Many Indigenous children were also educated in missions, orphanages and outback schools. Both the missionaries who taught them and their own families recognised that faith and education were vital if the dignity of the First Australians was to be recognised, if their young people were to be given every opportunity, and if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage were to be valued by all Australians. More often than not it was religious sisters who led the way in providing Catholic education for all comers, poor or not-so-poor, with courage and generosity. In this bicentennial year the Bishops of Australia wish to record our gratitude for the extraordinary contribution of the religious institutes to education in Australia.

After decades of building, the Catholic education system faced new challenges due to the large numbers of 'baby-boom' infants and of migrants

arriving after the Second World War, the decline of many rural centres and multiplication of new suburbs in the cities, and the reduction in religious vocations from the 1960s onwards. There were as many as 70 students in a class and second-rate facilities even by the standards of that day. 'Parents and Friends' groups began lobbying for state funding. When the Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese found itself financially unable to comply with directions to improve the facilities in its Goulburn school, the local bishop instructed the families to shift their children to the local government school. Unable to accommodate them and facing a major public reaction, Prime Minister Menzies introduced some state aid for church schools. This was amplified in the following decades under the Whitlam, Howard, Gillard, Morrison and other governments. Not only did this correct an historic injustice towards Catholic families in Australia, it allowed for Catholic schools to aspire to first-rate facilities, teacher training, pedagogies and curricula for all students.

From the 1960s onwards diocesan systems of schools with central offices increasingly took responsibility

for the planning, governance and financial control of schools, the employment of lay principals, and accountability for government assistance. Eventually national, state and territory commissions evolved to deal with grant distribution and other matters. The number and size of Catholic schools continued to grow and increasing numbers of other-than-Catholic families entrusted their children to Catholic schools. But the picture was not entirely rosy. To our great shame, child sexual abuse reached crisis proportions in the Catholic Church and other institutions in the 1960s to '80s and was fortunately acknowledged from the 1990s onwards through to the final report of the Royal Commission in 2017. This damaged many children and families, as well as the credibility of Church institutions, including schools, in the eyes of many. As these failings have been steadily corrected at a systemic level, the trust of families is being gradually rebuilt.

Meanwhile a Catholic tertiary education sector was also evolving. From early in the twentieth century more than a dozen Catholic teaching and nursing colleges were established

around Australia, first for providing nuns and brothers with formal qualifications and then for educating lay people also. In the 1970s some of these amalgamated as state-wide Catholic Colleges of Education, and eventually they were merged or replaced by two Catholic universities. The University of Notre Dame Australia (1989) now has campuses in Fremantle, Broome and Sydney (Broadway and Darlinghurst), and the Australian Catholic University (1991) has campuses in Adelaide, Ballarat, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney (Blacktown, North Sydney and Strathfield) and Rome. In a relatively short time these two universities have experienced considerable growth, not just in student and staff numbers, but also in research, reputation and results.

Around the same time Catholic residential colleges were established in several state universities: St John's (1858) St Leo's (1917) and Duchesne (1937) in the University of Queensland; Newman (1918) and St Mary's (1918) in the University of Melbourne; Sancta Sophia (1925) in the University of Sydney; Aquinas College (1950) in the University of Adelaide; St Thomas More (1955) in the University of Western Australia; St John Fisher (1963) in the University of Tasmania; St Raphael's (1964) and St Paul's (1969) which became Saints (2006) in James Cook University, Townsville; John XXIII (1967) and Ursula (1968) in the Australian National University, Canberra; Mannix (1969) at Monash University; St Albert's (1969) in the University of New England, Armidale; and Creston (1970) and Warrane (1971) in the University of New South Wales. Catholic chaplaincies also flourished in many universities.

When seminaries and clerical religious houses were established to form local clergy, they commonly had in-house philosophy and theology studies. After the Second Vatican Council these were generally separated from the houses of formation and lay people were admitted alongside the seminarians; these included the

Sydney Faculty of Theology (1954) which became the Catholic Institute of Sydney (1976), the Yarra Theological Union Melbourne (1971) and Catholic Theological College (1972), also in Melbourne. Other Catholic tertiary institutions have included Campion College (2006), a liberal arts college in Western Sydney, and some trades institutions.

In more recent years parishes and dioceses have also established many preschools, conscious of the needs of parents for this support, of the opportunity this provides for connecting with young families, for catechesis, and for providing educational advantages to children. Out-of-School-Hours services are also increasingly common on parish or school premises.

Thus the Church in Australia today can be said to engage in education from womb to tomb - or at least 'P to T' (from preschool to tertiary).

### ...to high hopes for Catholic education today

At this time of bicentennial celebrations for Catholic education, the Catholic Bishops of Australia wish to record our pride in all that has been achieved during those two centuries, and our gratitude to those who have funded, built and otherwise supported, led or staffed, entrusted their children to or studied in our schools. It has been one of the Catholic Church's principal contributions to Australia's social and cultural infrastructure. Catholic schools have educated a significant proportion of the nation's young people, offering a distinctive vision and values, complementing the state systems, and enabling choice and diversity in education.

Rather than resting on our laurels, however, the Bishops recognise that every generation must examine critically the current performance of its institutions, their relationship to families, parishes and the wider

mission of the Church, the sense of identity among leaders and staff, and whether we are doing our best by our young people. Each generation must also make again the public case for faith schools, for choice in education, and for funding of Catholic schools on just terms.

On this anniversary we also want to acknowledge the quality and commitment of our education leaders and school staff today. We look forward to the Church in Australia recommitting herself to the great adventure of Catholic education at the Plenary Council of Australia 2021-22 and look to you all to give a lead in the years that follow.

Of course, the education scene in Australia has changed dramatically since Fr Therry's day. Catholic schools continue to grow but not necessarily in enrolments of Catholic children. Financial stress and other factors have led some Catholic families to look elsewhere for schooling; meanwhile many other-than-Catholic families entrust their children to our schools. Even our Catholic students now often have little connection with the Church outside of school. Secularisation continues apace in our culture and there was considerable disillusionment with Church institutions resulting from the sexual abuse crisis. Thus, while our schools continue to embrace their traditional responsibility for religious and other education, they now have a different mix of students and less support for their specifically religious mission from outside the school than they had in the past. The surrounding culture and its powerful agents such as the media are also commonly unsupportive.

Some schools originally established to educate the poor now find themselves increasingly educating the children of the middle class. Partly this reflects socio-economic and demographic change across much of Australia. Partly it reflects the success of the Catholic school system in raising up working class and migrant families.

But our schools remain committed to enrolling even greater numbers of students who are Indigenous, refugees, disabled or in any way disadvantaged. Meanwhile in some parts of the country many better-off Catholic students have been lost to other-than-Catholic independent schools. Government schools and other Christian schools have become rivals for our students in the education ecosystem.

Other challenges for school leaders and teachers include the burdens of reporting and other bureaucratic accountability, particular difficulties experienced by rural and remote schools, over-crowding or shortage of schools in the new (or renewing) suburbs, the impact of new technologies, and dissatisfaction with education results in Australia vis-à-vis other countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has also presented many difficulties for staff and students, even as they showed great resilience, flexibility and generosity in responding.

At the end of this pastoral letter we note a series of Church documents that have challenged all those involved in Catholic education to dedicate themselves to ensuring that our primary and secondary schools – and to some extent our tertiary institutions – are truly Catholic in their identity and life, are centres of the new evangelisation, enable our students to achieve high levels of Catholic religious literacy and practice, and are led and staffed by people who will contribute to these goals. This will require that, as far as possible, we retain a ‘critical mass’ of Catholic students and staff in our schools, even as we welcome those from other religious backgrounds. This requires system and school leaders to re-examine how they might maximise enrolment of Catholic students and employment of committed Catholic staff, while recognising the gifts that

others also bring. Much more is required, however, for a genuinely Catholic school than a preponderance of students from Catholic families or of staff who are devout. It is essential that:

- leaders and staff understand, and are solidly committed to, the Catholic identity of the school
- activities of pre-evangelisation, primary proclamation, catechesis and spiritual formation seek to ensure our young people have a personal encounter with Christ, develop an enduring relationship with God and the Church, and have a genuine apprenticeship in the Christian life
- the Religious Education curriculum is sound, attractive and professionally delivered, helping students to integrate faith, culture and life
- other disciplines also consider the Catholic/Christian dimension of their subject areas
- schools are Eucharistic communities within the parish context where students regularly take part in Mass and Reconciliation and are engaged in various forms of prayer and meditation
- schools are places that cultivate a Catholic imagination, supported by a Catholic visual culture
- schools are connected to their local parish(es) and diocese, through inviting the pastors and parents into the school, and through active collaboration with the wider Catholic community
- families and parishes support their schools in these important endeavours.

The Church texts offer many other suggestions that we would echo in Australia today regarding passing on Catholic faith, life and culture, leading and staffing preschools, schools and universities in this new era, and critical indicators of progress.

## Conclusion

In his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, Pope Francis commented that schooling is a right for all children and that a good education can make an enormous difference in the lives of young people, setting them up for life (§§109 & 130). Among other things, Catholic schools and universities should offer an education in human solidarity and Christian fraternity (§§103, 114, 151 & 167) and make it possible “for each human being to shape his or her own future” (§187). Teachers must therefore “be conscious that their responsibility extends also to the moral, spiritual and social aspects of life. The values of freedom, mutual respect and solidarity can be handed on from a tender age” (§114).

“Let the little children come to me,” said Jesus, “for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matt 19:14). As the Catholic education world in Australia celebrates its bicentenary, the Bishops of Australia share the Holy Father’s confidence *in the power of a good Catholic education from P to T*. We also have great confidence *in our young people*: that inspired by their encounter with Jesus Christ and nurtured by a Catholic education, they will be young women and men of character and ideals, and will contribute as leaders and disciples in our world. And we have great confidence *in our education leaders and staff*: that in charting the course for Catholic education in Australia in its third century, you will help us imagine how our educational institutions can be schools in a deeper faith and humanity, and ensure that this dream is realised.

## Resources on Catholic education

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Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (2013)

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

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Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (2020)

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)

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