



## **Catholic Education Commissioning Mass Homily**

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Thursday 11 February 2016 & Tuesday 16 February 2016  
St Simon Peter Church, Ocean Reef and St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

Information technology has changed our world forever. Today, you can find out almost anything you need to know with a simple push of a key on a keyboard or the click of a mouse. While browsing on the Internet the other day, for example, I discovered that 2016 is the Year of the Monkey in the Lunar Calendar. It is also the International Year of Pulses, the Year of Print, and the National Year of Digital Inclusion. No doubt each of these is very important, at least for those who have an interest in the growing of pulses like chick peas, or the spread of digital technology, or the printing of fine art works.

For us in the Catholic world, of course, 2016 is also the Year of Mercy, called for by Pope Francis and offered to us as a way to rediscover what our Christian faith, and the role of our Church, is really all about. And because our Catholic schools are indeed a work of the Church and an expression and practical outcome of our Christian faith, the Year of Mercy offers us an opportunity to once again reflect on the role our schools, and you as the backbone of our schools, are called to play, in our Church and in our society.

Schools, of course, are all about children and young people. This in itself is enough for us as Christians to want to be involved in schools. Jesus spoke of children as having a special place in the Kingdom of God and indeed as those who, more than anyone else, had a special God-given insight into the mystery of God's kingdom. "*Unless you become like a little child,*" Jesus once said, "*you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.*" This precious gift of insight into the ways of God needs to be protected and given a chance to grow. As we know, this is both the task and the joy of parents – to share the gift of faith with their children – and our schools, and you as teachers and staff members, have the responsibility and privilege of helping families in this important task.

If schools are about children and young people, then they are more particularly about the education of the young. The very fact that the big majority of young people in Australia will spend at least twelve years in formal, institutional education settings indicates just how important education is and just how highly our society values it. It is vital, then, that as a society we get it right. And, while we know that education is about intellectual formation, we instinctively know that it is about so much more than that: it is about human, personal formation. As an oft-repeated cliché puts it, we are about educating the whole person. A glance at the website of most schools, be they government, independent or Catholic, will testify to this. In many different ways, using



many different concepts and expressions, these websites nearly all talk about the values the school stands for.

It is precisely here that the call of Pope Francis for a Year of Mercy for the Catholic world comes into play. Mercy is not a value or, as Shakespeare would call it, a "quality" which is unique to Catholicism or to Christianity more generally. It is a teaching of all the great world religions and is a profoundly human impulse, aspired to by both religious and non-religious people alike. But, in Christianity, it takes on a unique aspect. As Pope Francis put it when he announced the Year of Mercy, we Christians believe that "*Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy*". This means that mercy, especially as Jesus practises it, is a godly thing, a divine thing. It also means that anyone who inserts him or herself into the life and mission of the Church, as you all will be doing this year, takes on the awesome responsibility of reflecting in your own lives and work this divine face of mercy which shines on the face of Jesus and becomes, at least as an ideal, the face of the Church in relation to the world in which we live. After all, we speak of the Church as the Body of Christ – but the Church is us – and, for the children and young people in your classroom and in your school, the Church is you – not exclusively you, but certainly you. You have accepted a solemn responsibility to be the face of Jesus, and the voice of Jesus, and the compassionate glance of Jesus, and the forgiving heart of Jesus, for the children and young people entrusted to you – by their parents, by the Church and by the society in which we live.

If this is to happen, then you must know this Jesus who is the face of the Father's mercy. You must know about Him certainly but, more than this, you must know Him. How else will you be able to reflect Him to others? How else will the children and young people you work with and for recognise Him in you, and come to admire and love Him in you, and be ready to commit themselves to Him in imitation of you? How else will you be able to look the parents of those children in the eye and assure them that you have joined them, to the very best of your ability, in the great adventure of forming their children in the knowledge and love of God who is the source and heart of all the other knowledge they will assimilate at school?

When it all comes down to it, this is why our Catholic schools exist. This is what it means to commit ourselves to making our schools the very best schools they can possibly be. In addition to providing the most comprehensive curriculum, and the best learning situation, and the most up-to-date facilities, and most dedicated staff we possibly can, a Catholic school must provide an atmosphere totally enlivened by belief in the God who reveals Himself in Jesus and who, in Jesus, continues to be present and active in our world in and through the Church. This is the essence of the Catholic World View, the understanding of life's meaning which we wish to share with our children, the faith which every child who comes to a Catholic school has the right to encounter in all its beauty. Certainly, for the children of Catholic families, but also for the children of other families who choose our schools, this is what makes our schools unique. It is the indispensable foundation of that difference which makes our schools such an attractive option for so many parents.



We should, I think, be rightly a little frightened by this responsibility. To some extent, we hold the well-being of these young people in our hands. We may at times feel unequal to the task. But our willingness to be part of a Catholic school community means that we cannot evade this responsibility, or foist it on to others, or ignore it in the hope it will go away. This afternoon, I want to ask you, with all the passion I can muster, to accept this responsibility with courage, with determination and with trust. The One whose face you are called to reflect to the young people in your care can lift you to safety when you feel like you are sinking, can lead you back to the right path when you recognise that you are lost, and can be a light for you when you feel like you are groping in the darkness. He is waiting to reach out His hand in friendship: you only have to ask.