



2016 National Catholic Education Commission Mass

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St Mary's Cathedral
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"Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us."

As we gather in this beautiful Cathedral this afternoon to rejoice in and give thanks for the wonderful, complex and exciting reality of Catholic education in our country, the words of the letter of Paul to Timothy from our first reading remind us both of the treasure we possess in Catholic education and of our need to guard and protect this treasure. We have rejoiced in these days, and will continue to rejoice in the days ahead: in the strength, professionalism, and remarkable outreach of our education efforts. It is right that we should do so. I have no doubt that one of the impressions many of us will take away from our conference is of the extraordinary potential and the almost unlimited opportunities of Catholic education. Together, we offer a precious gift, a true treasure, not only to our young people and their families, but to the society of which we are a part. We are all familiar with the statistics: 1,731 schools; 91,000 staff; 765,000 young people. But, behind the statistics are real flesh and blood people with hearts and minds to be opened to the wonders of God's creation and the greater wonders of God's love for us made visible in Jesus Christ.

Today, as we acknowledge with gratitude this extraordinary treasure, we might, therefore, recall a thought from another letter of Paul: his second letter to the Corinthians. There, he reminds us, in speaking of the treasure of our faith, that "we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, not made of gold". Like the gift of faith itself, the gift, the treasure of our Catholic education system which is grounded in our faith and sustained by our faith, is also held in earthen vessels, precisely because we hold it in our own fragile hands.

If we were ever to become complacent because of our undoubted success, or self-congratulatory because of the seeming solidity and security of our structures, to the point where we allowed God, and the things of God, to drift to the margins or even begin to disappear, the system we love so much and to which we have all dedicated ourselves, would begin to unravel around us. This sobering truth explains why Paul, in that letter to the community at Corinth, reminds them that the overpowering strength of their faith comes from God and not from themselves. We must say the same about Catholic education. It is a gift, and an extraordinary one, given to the Church in Australia by God. It is true that, across the generations, extraordinary numbers of people have cooperated with the Lord in receiving and developing this gift, but we must always remember that the gift has not been created by, and will not be sustained by, our efforts alone. It will only be by the power of God to which we must remain always radically open. God is at the heart of Catholic education in this country, not us. And so, as our first reading today reminds us, we must actively



seek, and always be receptive, to the gift of the Holy Spirit, promised to us by Jesus, who is always faithful to His promises.

The treasure of Catholic Education, therefore, is always a gift. But, like all gifts, it needs to be received with gratitude and treated with care. It is, of course, a gift given to us not only or primarily for ourselves to rejoice in and celebrate but, rather, so that it can be offered, in all its integrity, to those for whom it is ultimately intended: the children and young people who have been entrusted to us by their families. To say, then, that Catholic Education is a treasure which we hold in the earthen vessels of our own hands and hearts is really to say that the young people in our schools are themselves the real treasure of Catholic education. We hold the precious gift of the lives, the hopes, the dreams and the futures of young people in our own fragile hands. It is an enormous privilege and, of course, a frightening responsibility.

In today's Gospel, Jesus singles out children as those who hold a privileged place in His kingdom and as those who have a unique understanding of the mystery of God at work in their lives. If parents entrust their beloved children to us, so, too, does the Lord Himself entrust these same precious children, His children, to us. We must take Him at his word when He says, in another Gospel passage, that it would have been better for a person to have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea than for that person to have been the cause of scandal or suffering for one of God's children. What a cause of shame and disgrace it is for us that, at times, some of us have failed God's precious children so badly!

Even as we celebrate in these days this wonderful reality of Catholic education, we must still ask, as the early disciples did when the Word was proclaimed to them, "What must we do now?" Another way of addressing the same thing is to ask how we can be faithful to all that the task of Catholic education asks of us.

When I became Archbishop of Perth four years ago, I asked this question of all in our Archdiocese. What must we do? The answer I proposed then is one I want to offer again, this time to all of you and through you to all who work with you. The greatest challenge facing the Church today and, therefore, the greatest challenge facing Catholic Education, is to start afresh from Christ. We must return Jesus Christ to His rightful place at the heart of every aspect of Catholic education, and we must return Catholic Education to Him, offering it to Him as a gift of which we can be proud, confident that it is, to the very best of our ability, exactly what He wants it to be.

Today, then, let us once again commit ourselves to guarding the treasure entrusted to us, relying on the help of the Holy Spirit living in us. Let us love and respect and nurture our children, offering to them the very best we have. And, above all, let us create for them the spaces, the opportunities, the environment, in which they can encounter the One who is, for them and for all of us, the Way, the Truth and the Life.