



**Mass in celebration of the Silver Jubilee  
of the University of Notre Dame, Australia – Homily**

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There is something particularly appropriate, I believe, about celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the University of Notre Dame on this major feast day of Mary, the Feast of the Assumption. After all, the university bears Mary's name, Notre Dame - Our Lady - and was placed under the protection of her prayers when it was launched 25 years ago.

As we consider the growth of the university, and the vital role it has played in the Perth Archdiocese over these 25 years, and now more recently across Australia, we can be confident that in Mary, the mother of the Lord, we have someone who carries us in her heart and supports us with her presence and her prayers.

Catholicism, along with Orthodoxy, has always been marked by a vibrant appreciation, both at the theological level and at the level of popular religiosity, of the important role which Mary plays in the Christian faith. This was certainly the case in the founding of Notre Dame University in Indiana.

Fr Edward Sorin, the inspiration behind the university's establishment in 1844, commented on the night 35 years later when the original building was burnt to the ground: *"I came here as a young man and dreamed of building a great university in honour of Our Lady. But I built it too small, and she had to burn it to the ground to make the point. So, tomorrow, as soon as the bricks cool, we will rebuild it, bigger and better than ever"*.

Our own university has never suffered such a disaster, and let us hope and pray that it never does, but it has been, in a sense, through its own trial by fire, especially in the early years as it faced a financial crisis which almost destroyed the university before it could properly establish itself.

Tonight's liturgical celebration is not the time to retell the story of how the university weathered this storm, but many of you here this evening will have vivid and perhaps distressing memories of those anxious and uncertain early years. Perhaps, though, tonight is the right time for recalling that ultimately, while the Lord works through the generosity, initiative and persistence of His people, it is really on Him we must rely and to Him we owe our praise and gratitude.



In thanking God, we also remember the mother of Jesus. As Catholics, we have always known that, in the mysterious plan of God, we are given the mother of Jesus as our mother, our helper and our supporter. We may not know why or really understand how it all works but our experience certainly assures us that Mary's prayer is an unfailing source of grace and divine help for us.

As the famous prayer, the *Memorare*, recalls for us, it has never been known that anyone who fled to her protection, implored her help or sought her intercession was left unaided. We may never know how much our university owes to Mary's prayers. We do know we owe her our gratitude.

The role of Mary in our life of faith, and in a particular way tonight's Feast of the Assumption, invites us to reflect on something we profess every time we recite the *Creed*, and that is our belief in the Communion of Saints. Like many things in our Catholic tradition, the Communion of Saints, and Mary's preeminent role in this Communion, can to some seem rather quaint, overly pious and even peripheral to our faith. In reality, it highlights for us something which is absolutely essential and which should be a pillar of every institution which wants to claim the name "Catholic".

As Catholics, as Christians, and indeed as human beings, we belong to each other, are dependent on each other, and are mutually responsible for each other. Our belief in the Communion of Saints, and in the reality and efficacy of Mary's prayer on our behalf, is simply an affirmation of this mutuality and of our absolute conviction that death does not destroy this communion in which we all share.

Tonight, I would like to suggest that this is a dimension of our Catholic tradition which this university might well see as one of the precious gifts which it seeks to offer to our society. It is, I believe, a gift and a value which we are in danger of losing. At a time when a philosophy of individual rights has escaped the world of academia and permeated our society to an extraordinary degree, the idea that individual rights must be situated within the context of our mutual responsibility for the common good is both widely denied in theory and ignored in reality.

So many of the contentious issues of our day have a foundation in this denial of our responsibility for the welfare of our community. How often do we hear the comment that each person should be free to do whatever he or she wants as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else? Behind this is the presumption that each person is, to a large extent, independent from others and that much of what we may choose, or do, affects only ourselves and not others. If, on the other hand, we are deeply connected to each other, then everything we choose, and do, or indeed fail to do, does impact on others, if only because in our choices and in our actions we are shaping ourselves and thus shaping the ways in which we are able to interact and influence others for good or ill. It is, in fact, this conviction of our deep inter-relatedness which is at the heart of our Christian belief in the Communion of Saints and in our belief in the active and positive presence of Mary in our lives as believers. It is a belief as old as our faith.



When, in the Book of Genesis, God asks Abel, who has just murdered his brother Cain, “Where is your brother?”, Cain replies almost with disdain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” He is implying that the answer to the question is “no, of course you are not”. The Scriptures instead are insisting on the opposite – yes, you are your brother’s keeper. You are as responsible for him as you are for yourself. It is the same lesson which Jesus seeks to teach, and to live. The Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the fact that Jesus is the living embodiment of that parable, make this very clear. I would even go so far as to suggest that what I am speaking of tonight is a key foundation for our theology, our medical and professional ethics, our sociology, our educational endeavours, our Catholic approach to the law and, indeed, most areas, which form part of the curricula of this university.

As we celebrate the Feast of the Assumption and reflect on Mary’s presence at the heart of the Communion of Saints in the kingdom of heaven, I would ask that the university commit itself to being a place where this truth of our deep interrelatedness as human beings and our consequent mutual responsibility for each other is acknowledged in your teaching, in your research, in your institutional structures and in your pastoral care for staff and students. Then, you will deserve the name you carry, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Our Lady.