



**Feast of Mary, Help of Christians
200 Years of Catholic Education**

Homily

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**Monday 24 May 2021
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

It is very appropriate, I think, that we gather here in the Cathedral this morning, along with our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith who are doing something similar right across the nation, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Catholic education in Australia on this annual feast day of Our Lady Help of Christians, the national patroness of our country.

Today's celebration has three particular resonances for me. First and foremost, of course, it is the celebration of an extraordinary 200 years of Catholic education in our nation. Now is not the appropriate time to retell this remarkable, and in many ways heroic, story. This story has been told already many times, and in many ways, this year and no doubt will continue to be told in the months and years to come. But we have gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, a word which, as many of you would know, means 'thanksgiving'. Today is a day for acknowledging with profound gratitude all that has been done and all that has been sacrificed across the last 200 years to provide education to countless thousands of young people. And even more, of course, today is a day for profound gratitude to God whose Spirit led the first generations of Catholics in this country to establish a Catholic education system and whose Spirit has guided, and continues to guide us, as we move into the future.

The second resonance for me is, of course, the fact that in 1844 the bishops of Australia chose Mary, the mother of the Lord, under the title Help of Christians, as the patroness of Australia. This is very important for Catholic education. Mary is consistently presented in the gospel tradition as a model of faith and as a model of discipleship, and it is these two qualities, faith and discipleship, which have marked, and must continue to mark, the work of Catholic education now and into the future. The fact that the Church invites us to reflect on this woman so often throughout the course of each year, and for us in Australia to do so in a special way on May 24 each year, testifies to a tradition which reaches back to the very beginnings of Christianity and has endured, especially in the Catholic tradition and in the Orthodox traditions of Christianity, to this very day. Because of this Mary emerges in this morning's Gospel as a prophetic figure. *'All generations will call me blessed,'* she says, *'for the almighty has done great things for me and Holy is his name'.* How often still today do we find the words of the gospel on our lips as we pray the classic Catholic prayer, the Hail Mary: *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.*



I want to reflect a little more on this central role which Mary plays in our Catholic faith but before I do so I would just like to mention the third resonance of this feast day for me. As many of you know, I belong to the Salesians of Don Bosco, and this religious order, founded by St John Bosco, has Mary Help of Christians as our inspiration and guide. Indeed, the traditional image of Mary Help of Christians which we can see, for example, in the stained-glass window of the church dedicated to her in East Victoria Park, is the image designed by Don Bosco himself. the original of which can be found in the basilica Saint John Bosco built in Turin in northern Italy in honour of Mary the Help of Christians.

As I have mentioned our Catholic tradition invites us, really every day but certainly on many formal occasions throughout each year, to remember Mary, to honour her, and to turn to her for her prayerful guidance and help in our journey of life and faith. We honour Mary in many different ways and with many different titles: this cathedral is dedicated to her as the Immaculate Conception; just recently we celebrated the feast of our Lady of Fatima. We have schools and parishes in this Archdiocese dedicated to our Lady of Lourdes, to Mary Star of the Sea, or simply just to Mary or to Our Lady. Some pray the Rosary, some pray the Angelus, some pray the Memorare, and there are many other different forms of prayer which we address to Mary asking her to pray for us.

While the ways in which Mary is remembered, honoured and celebrated in our Catholic tradition are many and varied, that she is remembered, celebrated and honoured is part of what I would call the instinct of faith of our Catholic tradition. It is, in a sense, part of the Catholic worldview – the Catholic understanding of what it means to live as a person of faith within the Catholic community.

Many of you have heard me speak often of the Catholic worldview. It is, I am convinced, a particularly important concept for Catholic education. As you know it is my strong conviction that a Catholic school cannot be a good Catholic school if it is not a good school. When families choose Catholic education for their children they do so because they want the best education for their children that they can possibly give them. Everything that goes into making a school a good school, an excellent school, a school of choice, must be a part of our Catholic schools. But equally, a Catholic school won't be a good Catholic school unless it is Catholic. And so everything that goes into making a school Catholic must be a part of our Catholic schools. And at the very heart of what it is that makes a school Catholic is the unshakeable conviction that everything about the school is informed by the Catholic world view. And what do I mean by this? I mean that coherent, cohesive and all-embracing understanding of what it is to be a human person created in the image and likeness of God and called into a relationship with God, with others, with self, and with the world in which we live. All the elements we might think of as being part of a Catholic school: its pastoral care programs, its liturgical life, its religious education curriculum, its engagement with the local parish and with the wider life and mission of the Church, its involvement of its students, especially the older ones, in compassionate and practical outreach to those in need - all of these things, and others besides, are simply concrete and particular expressions of the Catholic worldview, the fundamental philosophy which underpins the life and the mission of the school. What a tragedy, and even a betrayal, it would be if this coherent and cohesive vision of what it means to be a human person in all its rich dimensions, were to be merely tolerated or grudgingly accepted, rather than



warmly embraced, by those who choose to send their children to our schools, and even more by those who choose to work in our schools.

The Church is involved in education because the Church, like the families who send their children to our schools, wants to provide the very best education possible to our young people. But how could we claim to be doing that if God, who has called each one of us into life, and whose desire for us that we live our lives to the full, is somehow sidelined, or barely tolerated, or regarded as a kind of optional extra, in the work of Catholic education in the life, the daily life, of our schools.

The founding impulse of Catholic education 200 years ago was the desire to ensure that our children should not be deprived of the most important foundational principle for their lives: that they are created by God, loved by God, called by God and cherished by God. Notwithstanding all the changes which have taken place in the last 200 years, both in the Church and in the society of which we are a part, this must still be the grounding impulse of our commitment to Catholic education today and into the future. May the prayers of the woman we have learnt to call our Help accompany us and support us as we continue to try and respond to the words of Jesus: *let the little children come to me, do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.*