

MERICI COLLEGE 60th ANNIVERSARY MASS
7 SEPTEMBER 2019
HOMILY – BISHOP PAT POWER

When we consider that it was only six years ago in 2013 that Canberra commemorated its centenary, our celebrations today for Merici College's sixty years mark a large part of Canberra's civic history. Up until the opening of St Edmund's College in 1954, all Canberra's Catholic secondary education was provided by the Good Samaritan Sisters at St Christopher's School in Manuka.

Five years after the opening of St Edmund's College for boys, Canberra Catholic Girls High School began its illustrious history in 1959. Later to be renamed Merici College, this college can rightly claim a significant part in the history of the Catholic Church in the national capital.

It was an imaginative decision by Archbishop Eris O'Brien and his advisors to open a Catholic High School staffed by Sisters from a number of different Religious Congregations. The diverse histories and spiritualities of the Sisters provided for the students a splendid kaleidoscope of contemporary Catholicism. Bear in mind that just as this college was beginning its life in 1959, Pope John XXIII was calling the Second Vatican Council which was aiming to renew the life of the Catholic Church. The Council's deliberations would have an impact on the Church's self-understanding, on Religious life, the ordained priesthood and on the role of the laity in the life of the Church and the world. The Catholic Church was challenged to move from being a rather closed society to being the People of God open to other Christian Churches, non-Christian religions and to the world around us. One of the final messages of Vatican 2 was to young people*. How pleased would Archbishop O'Brien and Pope John XXIII have been to see how wonderfully their visions have come to fruition in the first sixty years of the life of Merici College.

The College has seen Canberra grow from being a comparatively small city to being today Australia's "Bush Capital" of which we are all immensely proud. We have become a more cosmopolitan community and one which is more appreciative and respectful of our indigenous heritage. All of that has been actively promoted at Merici by the staff, students and parent body in a whole variety of ways.

I witnessed the history of the College with admiration mainly from afar. My two youngest sisters, Loretta and Pauline living in Queanbeyan were among the early pupils for a short period. 1959 was the year I entered the seminary and after I was ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop O'Brien in 1965, I became the following year the chaplain of Catholic Girls High School, Griffith, now St Clare's College. By then the formidable Sister Clare, who was this college's first principal, was pioneering Canberra's second girls' secondary college. Even though this diminutive nun was held in fear and trepidation by her students, as a young priest I learnt a great deal from her wisdom and goodness. Over the years, outside school hours, Merici College has been generously made available for a number of important diocesan gatherings in which I participated, in addition to the times I was invited here to say Masses or give the occasional talk.

In preparing this homily, I sought the help and guidance of Ursuline Sister Genny Ryan well known here at Merici. The College, of course, took its name from St Angela Merici, the founder of the Ursulines who were one of the College's six founding religious orders in 1959.

I am never quite sure how to translate the College's Latin motto FIDELITAS: "faithfulness" or "steadfast love" which we sang of in our opening hymn?

Sister Genny reflected on that theme in the light of today's scripture readings. "From the beginning, the faithful presence of the Holy Spirit was obvious to Archbishop Eris O'Brien as he was guided to embark on a new model of education for young girls and women. With the different Religious orders and later lay teachers it was to be a model of collaborative women's leadership. The Religious Sisters responding to Archbishop O'Brien's invitation discerned their possible place in the new venture. Relying on the presence of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide them, they generously accepted the Archbishop's invitation. And so began in 1959, an amazing story of faithful service, not only embraced by the Religious Sisters but also by the committed college staff of men and women, surrounded by the College's families and friends. All have contributed over sixty years to the education of young wisdom women making a difference to our world.

"The unfolding history of Merici College is reflected in today's first reading. 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; it is new every morning. Great is God's faithfulness.' God is not in competition with anyone or any part of his creation. He is simply in cooperation with all who love. Whenever we place one foot forward, God uses it, sustains, supports and blesses it. Every moment of every day we reveal God's truth and faithful presence. This has been a hallmark of the community life of Merici College over the past 60 years. As a community all are collaborating in fulfilling God's loving plan for us. God's concerns become our concerns. All happenings, great and small, are part of God's loving plan for us; we respond by our readiness to take risks in our love for God and one another.

"In today's Gospel, Jesus shows how God works underground and how essential it is for all of us to stay connected to God's divine energy within. So Jesus tells us 'Remain in my love', that is, stay connected to our ultimate source, God's enduring love and great faithfulness. In hearing the image of the vine and the branches, his listeners knew how important it was for the vine to be deeply rooted in the underground source and for all the branches to be connected to this source so as to produce good fruit. Jesus uses this familiar image to challenge his followers always to live in awareness of God's faithful and compassionate love for us all. This connection is the source of our fruitful service of others.

"The story of the last 60 years of this College affirms Jesus' words from today's Gospel: 'It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit.' Angela Merici's words echo Jesus' statement when she says 'Have faith and firm hope. You will see wonders.' Today, we know that we have seen wonders as our loving God has poured countless graces into so many receptive hearts here in Merici College over 60 years."

I know that this College has been responsible for countless outstanding graduates. May I single out just one. Jane Keogh was a foundation student of the college in 1959. She went on to become Sister Jane Keogh, a Brigidine Sister. You will remember that the Brigidines were one of the six founding Religious Congregations who pioneered this great school. I wish to focus on the latest phase of Sister Jane's life. After many years as a teacher, Jane returned to Canberra where she has been a very credible public voice speaking out for refugees and asylum seekers and actively advocating on their behalf. Jane, now in seventies, has practically exhausted herself as she continues to visit, encourage and advocate for people who would otherwise be without a voice. Yesterday, she was speaking passionately at a lunch-time rally in Civic in support of the Tamil family currently being threatened with deportation. She cannot be here today precisely because of pressing demands relating to those desperate people. I am very conscious that not everyone can be another Sister Jane, but I am sure that on her visits to Merici she has shared with you some of the things that are possible for all of us to undertake towards making our society a fairer one.

I know these are the values that Sister Jane learnt as a student here at Merici and that for over sixty years countless young people have been led in that same direction. Let me tell one little story in that regard. Ever since I became a bishop in 1986, I have taken part in lots of rallies, mainly here in Canberra, in support of a variety of causes involving matters of social justice. Quite a few years ago and I forget what the actual issue was, the planners of one such rally decided to call on school students to register their protest by absenting themselves from school to take part. While I very much supported the cause, I was not happy about students taking the law into their own hands in a kind of strike action. So I approached the principals of a number of Catholic Colleges asking if they would give permission for some of their students to take part. I was very proud that Merici College enabled a sizeable number of their students to attend. Attired in their school uniforms, these girls provided a powerful witness that day. I might add that when I walk around the city these days and see Merici students in their uniforms, even though I do not know them personally, I always feel proud of their demeanour.

It has been a privilege for me to be with you today. I would like to conclude this homily with some encouraging words from Pope Francis who has been such a blessing in so many ways since becoming Pope in 2013. I haven't met this Pope, but Archbishop Christopher is not long back from Rome where he met him. A few months ago, Pope Francis issued to the young people of the world an Apostolic Exhortation *Christ is Alive*. His message in regard to young people is most applicable to the students of Merici.

Christ's Church can always yield to the temptation to lose enthusiasm because she no longer hears the Lord calling her to take the risk of faith, to give her all without counting the dangers; she can be tempted to seeking a false, worldly form of security. Young people can help keep her young. They can stop her from becoming corrupt; they can keep her moving forward, prevent her being proud and sectarian, help her to be poorer and to bear witness, to take the side of the poor and the outcast, to fight for justice and humbly let herself be challenged. Young people can offer the Church the beauty of youth by renewing her ability to "rejoice with new beginnings, to give unreservedly of herself, to be renewed and to set out for ever greater accomplishments".*

I am sure that Pope Francis would be heartened to know how Merici College has promoted such values for the past 60 years and will continue to do so into the future. May God be with you all as your companion on the journey.

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** Words from Vatican II's 1965 Message to Young People quoted by Pope Francis in his 2019 Apostolic Exhortation on the same subject.*