

Catholic Education
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NATIONAL
CATHOLIC
EDUCATION
COMMISSION

17 February 2021

Media Release

PASTORAL LETTER EMBARGOED UNTIL 10AM (AEDT) THURSDAY 18 FEBRUARY 2021

Bishops' pastoral letter celebrates 200 years of Australian Catholic education

The Catholic Bishops have written a pastoral letter to school leaders, staff, students and families to mark the 200th anniversary of Catholic education in Australia which will be launched on Thursday 18th February 2021 at 10am (AEDT) followed by a:

**Media conference/Photo opportunity
Thursday 18 February 2021 at 10.30am
Level 5 Polding Centre
133 Liverpool Street Sydney**

The letter, *200 Years Young*, recognises the contribution of religious, clergy and lay people to the foundation of Catholic education, and the distinctive role Catholic schools play in educating and forming young people of faith and service in their communities.

Today, there are 1,751 Catholic schools educating 768,000 students and employing 98,000 staff. Nearly 40 per cent of Catholic schools are located outside of metropolitan cities in regional, rural and remote communities.

Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP, Chair of the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education, has called on all those involved in Catholic education to acknowledge this significant milestone in the life of the Church.

“From very humble beginnings with the opening of the first official Catholic school educating just 31 students located on Hunter Street in Parramatta, Catholic schools have grown to educate more than one in five Australian students, with many others attending Catholic pre-schools, colleges and universities,” Archbishop Fisher said.

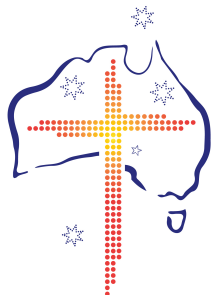
“We are fortunate to have Catholic schools in most towns and suburbs, and university campuses in most capital cities, serving students from diverse backgrounds and beliefs. While they are no longer all from poorer families, as so many were in the first century-and-a-half of Catholic education, we continue to welcome and ensure our schools are accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, refugees, those with disabilities and students who are financially disadvantaged.

“Alongside families and parishes, Catholic schools are the Church’s principal meeting point with young people, and are integral to the Church’s mission of transmitting the faith to the next generation and forming young people as future contributors to Australian society.”

Archbishop Fisher said while there is much to celebrate over two centuries, the Bishops acknowledge in their pastoral letter the irrevocable harm caused by child sexual abuse in Catholic schools and other institutions over the years.

“This damaged many children and families, as well as the credibility of Church institutions, including schools, in the eyes of many. As these failings have been steadily corrected at a systemic level, the trust of families is being gradually rebuilt,” he said.

National Catholic Education Commission executive director Jacinta Collins welcomed the pastoral letter and the ongoing commitment of the Bishops to provide a faith-based education for Australian families.



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“We are in a unique position in Australia that we have the support of successive governments to the funding of Catholic and non-government schools. This support has enabled our schools to be accessible to families that seek a faith-based education for their children and ensures diversity in school choice,” Ms Collins said.

“But it also relies on the commitment of Church leadership to actively support and foster the mission of Catholic schools and the work of many other Church agencies such as Catholic hospitals, social services and charities that contribute enormously to the social fabric of Australian society.”

The pastoral letter will be distributed electronically to Catholic school communities and staff and is available to download from the National Catholic Education Commission website.

“I commend this pastoral letter to you and congratulate all those involved in Catholic education on this historic milestone in the life of the Church in Australia,” Archbishop Fisher said.

The bicentenary of Catholic education in Australia will be celebrated throughout 2021 with a range of events commencing with a national virtual launch on 18 February 2021 at 10am and 2pm (AEDT).

For more information visit www.200years.catholic.edu.au

Background

The bicentenary commemorates the anniversary of the first official Catholic school in Australia, founded in October 1820 by Irish Catholic priest Fr John Therry. The school, which Catholic historians believe was located on Hunter Street in Parramatta, taught 31 students. An Irish Catholic convict George Marley (also identified as George Morley), who was sent to the colony, opened the school for Fr Therry and ran it for three years.

This school was transferred to the site of the present St Patrick’s Cathedral in 1837 and was entrusted to the care of the Marist Brothers in 1875. Parramatta Marist High School, now located in Westmead and St Patrick’s Primary, Parramatta trace their origins back to this first school. There were said to be at least two other Catholic schools operating in New South Wales before the school opened by George Marley, however both schools were closed by 1818.

Available for interview:

Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP and Jacinta Collins

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