**\*Passion, Politics and Purpose**

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I am pleased to be with you today to deliver an address to the graduating students of the Faculty of Arts, Sciences, Law & Business and the Faculty of Education and Philosophy & Theology and I take this opportunity to congratulate you on this significant achievement.

I’m also deeply honoured to receive an Honorary Doctorate for my contribution to public life and for my work in advocating for Catholic education and, more broadly, Catholic social teaching.

Thank you to family and friends joining me here today.

By way of a brief background, I was born in Altona, a western suburb of Melbourne which interestingly became home to our first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, who I served with as a Labor Senator for Victoria.

Like many Australian women, I am the beneficiary of a good Catholic education, a legacy of Archbishop Mannix’s ‘lift’ from the working class.

I hold a Bachelor of Arts (majoring in Philosophy and Sociology) and a Bachelor of Social Work (Distinction) from Monash and La Trobe Universities and completed during my early career working for the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees’ Association as a social welfare and research officer, and then as national industrial officer. I also served as a member of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) for a period.

In 1995, I was appointed as an Australian Senator representing Victoria and over the next two decades served in a number of portfolios including Deputy Leader in the Senate, Parliamentary Secretary for School Education and Workplace Relations, and Minister for Mental Health and Aging.

I was also the first Senator to give birth in office (a bit hard for the men) and the first woman to be appointed Manager of Government Business in the Senate. I was active on a number of Senate committees including as Chair of the Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References, Economics References and Privileges Committees.

In 2019, I took up the role of Executive Director of the National Catholic Education Commission. This is the peak body for Catholic education in Australia and has responsibility for advocacy and liaison with the Australian Government and key education authorities, to better support the needs of almost 800,000 students and 1,760 schools through funding, policy and strategic direction.

While that covers the headlines of my work, I wanted to drill beneath to the reasons why I chose to work in the labor movement and enter public life.

I’ve titled today’s address – Passion, Politics and Purpose – I might have used ‘vocation’ rather than ‘purpose’ but I liked the illiteration!

**Passion**

My sense of justice and early working life exposed me to Catholic social teaching and the dignity of meaningful work.

Back in 1891, Pope Leo the 8th published a revolutionary encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* – which still today stands as a call to arms for the Church to, not only comment on the morality of modern life and work, but to contribute to the formation of a just and fair society through the active and meaningful involvement of her members in the public arena.

While condeming socialism, *Rerum Novarum* called on governments and industries to treat the working classes with greater dignity through fair pay and conditions, and to create a social environment where citizens could be self-determining through property ownership and the like. In determining worker’s rights, Pope Leo the 8th saw the need to establish unions to ensure fairness and the inherent dignity of all citizens – to contribute to the common good of humankind and society.

200 years of Catholic education have produced a disproportionately high number of Australian leaders in many sectors.

The Church remains a passionate advocate for the rights of workers and the most marginalised in our society. We see this in the Church’s outreach through social services, charities, agencies, hospitals and schools.

This *passion -* to contribute to a just society - springs from the gospel stories, many of you would remember from your earliest days.

In parables, like the Good Samaritan, Jesus taught his followers to care for the most vulnerable in society. For example from Matthew’s gospel:

*For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*

As I visit schools as part of my role in Catholic education, this passion is so clearly evident through the faith formation and pastoral outreach programs of Catholic schools, and the participation of students and staff in their communities, as well as to the environment.

As a politician, I’ve reflected on the contribution of my colleagues on different sides of parliament, who shared a commitment to social justice. In my case, it was ignited by Christian social principles; for others it came from a secular base. What I noted, was a common passion to promote social justice within a framework of consensus, co-operation and tolerance.

Elle Woods in the movie Legally Blonde quoted Aristotle during her Harvard graduation speech saying, "The law is reason free from passion”. She goes on to say (no offense to Aristotle), but she found passion is a key ingredient to the study and practice of law - and of life. I agree!

As you make your next steps into the world, go out and find your gift/s and what activates you to make a meaningful contribution and discover what ignites your passion. The next step, then, is to hone and master your passions/gifts, and put them to good use in the world. This commitment to mastery will become the wood that continues to burn when your motivation wanes or your persistence is challenged.

Passion is a key ingredient for success in life and work, but it’s not the only ingredient. As I found with my parliamentary colleagues and in my work before and since, co-operation and working towards the meeting of ideas and practice, is a critical component of making a meaningful contribution.

**Politics**

If I had to summarise the nature of effective politics to one word, it would be ‘co-operation’ or ‘compromise’ – although to avoid negative connotations, ‘perhaps the art of a good compromise’.

In my current work advocating for the interests of Catholic schools, I spend a great deal of my time building relationships with various groups, presenting our perspective and listening to their views.

A very pointy issue at this time is the debate on religious freedom and whether faith-based schools should have the ability to continue to employ, enrol and teach from their faith perspective.

Without going into the complexities of the issue, when we look at any discussion on protecting rights, there is always a need to strike a balance so that all rights are respected and treated as equitably as possible.

In a pluralist society, where we have a great diversity of views – both religious and secular – this work becomes ever more important. Whenever different views intersect, particularly when these views are inherent to the individual or groups’ identity, deeply held beliefs and sense of belonging, it can lead to division and emotionally charged interactions.

The art of politics is to create an environment for co-operation, understanding and tolerance to be supported. It’s something that I’ve had to work hard at during the course of my career – and in my family life – so I thought I might share a little of what I have learned to support you as you face different perspectives in your working and personal lives.

1. Come from a starting point of respecting the dignity of each person
2. Listen more than you speak
3. Be confident and clear in articulating your views
4. Speak up and don’t be afraid to hold an alternate view
5. Seek a win:win approach to benefit the common good
6. Be authentic and have agency or authority in your position, and empower the agency or authority of others

After a recent meeting of faith leaders, one of the leaders wrote a very encouraging email to me noting how they had come to the meeting feeling like they weren’t in the ‘league’ of others in the room in regard to their experience of the issues. I thought I might share it as an example of the ability of each of us to create a co-operative environment:

The email read:

*‘…when you spoke, it was with so much confidence and dignity. You clearly presented the facts with respect and in such a manner it was clear for everyone to understand. The articulate way in which you spoke had an air of authenticity and authority about it, I think it gave the room confidence to speak up. I know that what you said and how you said it inspired me to overcome some of my insecurities and fears and speak up.’*

As someone in the later stages of their working life, this was particularly encouraging. It reminded me that these attributes and principles, that I had honed over many years in the union movement, parliament and through some very difficult and challenging debates, are a creed to live by in each of my interactions and encounters.

You will find ‘politics’ in every organisation and group from your family to your office to your friendship and community groups. As you move into new environments, may you hone the art of co-operation in your working and personal lives so that you contribute to the respect and dignity of each person you encounter.

**Purpose (Vocation)**

Finally, I wanted to talk about purpose or as the Church often refers to it – vocation.

As a Christian, the expression of my faith in the world extends beyond a belief in God or just fronting up to Mass on Sundays. (As a politician, it was at times difficult to get to Mass, but I found it was vitally important in sustaining my faith and to be part of a community where I belonged and was strengthened.)

The expression of faith is not something that is experienced as an add-on – it is imbued through your whole humanity and spirit. As such, your purpose is not just one job, or choosing a religious path, or your individual contribution in the world. While these are important, it goes far beyond that.

Last year on the 59th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, Pope Francis said, ‘As Christians, we do not only receive a vocation individually; we are also *called together*.’

He wrote: ‘…the Church must become increasingly synodal: capable of walking together, united in harmonious diversity, where everyone can actively participate and where everyone has something to contribute as we Christian’s have done in the past.

‘When we speak of “vocation”, then, it is not just about choosing this or that way of life, devoting one’s life to a certain ministry or being attracted by the charism of a religious family, movement or ecclesial community. It is about making God’s dream come true, the great vision of fraternity that Jesus cherished when he prayed to the Father “that they may all be one”.

Pop Francis went on to say …

*‘… let us journey and work together in bearing witness to the truth that one great human family united in love is no utopian vision, but the very purpose for which God created us.’*

This is a rich and powerful way of describing humankind’s purpose, and what others have described as the search for meaning. Whether you come from a faith background or not, you can apply this sense of purpose to your own lives.

Each of us is called in our capacity of being both flesh and spirit to walk this life in connection and love, using our passions and gifts and the values and beliefs we hold most dearly, for the betterment of all humankind.

No small feat, but the beauty is you don’t have to do it alone or complete it in your lifetime.

Let me conclude with a few lines from the prayer, ‘Prophets of a future not our own’ by Cardinal Dearden:

*We plant the seeds that one day will grow.*

*We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.*

*We lay foundations that will need further development.*

*We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that.*

*This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.*

*We are prophets of a future not our own.*

Thank you and congratulations to all of today’s graduates from the University of Notre Dame Australia.