

# AUDACITY TO THE POINT OF FOLLY

## *Celebrating the Centenary of the Australian Province of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*

*The year 2005 was the Centenary Year of the Australian Province of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. On December 10th we celebrated along with many friends and distinguished guests. Here follows the homily preached on the occasion by Tim Brennan MSC, the current Provincial Superior.*

TIM BRENNAN MSC

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST Aboriginal senator was Senator Neville Bonner. I met him on Bathurst Island in the late 1970s. He had come to Bathurst Island with the Prime Minister. In the midst of the pomp and ceremony, that accompanies a prime minister on his travel to remote Australia, Senator Bonner called me aside. He asked did I know a Brother Ron Lilwall and was he still living on Bathurst Island. When I explained Ron lived with me in the presbytery he asked could I take him immediately to see him. So, despite the protocol and formality, the two of us abandoned the Prime Minister and the upcoming speeches and we went in search of Ron.

I learned on that day that Ron Lilwall had been appointed from Kensington Monastery to Palm Island in 1947. This 25-year-old aboriginal man and the 30-year-old MSC must have won each other's trust. Neville Bonner spoke of Ron helping him when he was in strife—and pointing him in the right direction. Ron did not see any need to detail to me the other man's troubles—from those long ago years. They had not remained in contact over time. In fact Ron Lilwall only served two years of ministry on

Palm Island. He left there in 1950—appointed to the Leprosarium staffed by the OLSH Sisters in Darwin Harbour. He served there for the next six years.

Why thirty years later was Australia's first aboriginal senator so determined to catch up with this MSC?

I tell the story of Br Ron Lilwall as we celebrate one hundred years of the Australian Province. I tell it because he is an MSC dear to me personally.

But I tell it also because Ron represents all those MSC who will not feature in any definitive history of our province's first hundred years. Yet their memory is dear to some of those among whom they lived and ministered.

Maybe Senator Bonner, like me, glimpsed a little of the compassionate heart of Jesus in my confrere. An individual MSC was there in some moment of grace—and by word or deed made the compassion of God present. And so the treasured memory of a person.

We MSC talk about being called to be on earth the heart of God. We are earthen vessels yet the call is to be the heart of God

for our world.

But, our hundred years as a province is not just about those of us in vows.

Each one of us MSC knows family, friends, parishioners, and colleagues whose faith has supported us on the journey of life. Today we thank the Lord for the blessing *you* have been in our lives. Perhaps you do not realise how your faith has sustained us and carried us when the burdens seemed to overwhelm us.

And similarly we do not forget those of our MSC companions who found their life led them in different directions from us. Today, let us honour what they have given to the Australian Province and rejoice in the new ways they manifest the compassion of God to a needy world.

As we in the Australian Province look back over these hundred years with gratitude and humility we know it is the Lord who grants success.

But it also comes through those who have been part of us and our ministry.

The OLSH Sisters work alongside us: from here in Kensington, to Japan, to PNG, and in the countries of the Pacific Union. And in our ministries around the province there have been numerous other religious congregations who have enriched our ministry in parishes, schools, retreat houses and much else.

Our Eucharistic celebration today is a prayer of heartfelt thanks for what so many have been for us through all those years.

Over the last quarter-century we have, as vowed MSC religious, begun to take up the dream of Fr Chevalier that others should be part of his family as well. Inspiring lay people have lived in community with us—most notably at Douglas Park.

The MSC Associates around the country are another expression of our province's efforts to be as openhearted as Fr Chevalier was able to be. He had a vision that what he began would not be limited to just those in vows but would include all inspired by his charism. May this new century of Australian MSC life be marked by a more collaborative approach with all who, like us, treasure the spirituality

---

*Tim Brennan is the Australian Provincial Superior of the MSC. Previously he spent all his priestly life in the Northern Territory where he ministrered in Aboriginal communities for a number of years. From 1990 he was Vicar General of the Diocese of Darwin.*

of the heart—and seek to make it available to God's people.

Early in the Year 2000, the Holy Year, Pope John Paul II took the quite unexpected step of saying sorry on behalf of the world's Catholics for the sins committed in the Lord's name over two millennia. Such a move was unprecedented since the days of St Peter.

As we Australian MSC mark our centenary, are we as willing to let the challenging light of the gospel shine on our story: to move beyond our myth-making, and face our limited response to the Gospel?

In terms of repenting, sexual abuse issues immediately come to mind. But our schools, parishes, seminaries, and novitiate have missed many opportunities to bring the joy and the freedom of Jesus' message into the life of the young and the not so young.

Our missions in Australia and overseas have seen generosity, heroism, self-sacrifice, even martyrdom. But it is hard to leave the baggage and the prejudices of one's own world behind. How do we grow in awareness of the richness, values, and dignity of other peoples and their cultures? We can talk of God being there before we came, but to have the insight and respect to live that belief day by day is the stuff of true sanctity.

Our penitential rite today began such a confession. It needs to continue in the life and heart of each of us in this new century.

Today we celebrate the Mass of the Immaculate Conception. It was the proclamation of this dogma by Pius IX in 1854 that marks

the foundation day of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. And on the same Feast in 1905 the Australian Province was erected.

Our readings, from the Book of Genesis and from the Letter to the Ephesians, present to us the tension at work in the life of each one of us—and the same tension is evident in our life as a province.

In the book of Genesis we are reminded of how easily we can fail to attend to the voice of God in our daily living. In the Letter to the Ephesians there is the assurance of God's presence; a presence wishing to be active in our daily living. Held up to us in the Gospel is the way to the fullness of Christian life. Mary told the Angel that she was ready to let God's will unfold in her life.

We as individuals and as a religious congregation are not as free as Mary nor are we as wholehearted in our commitment to the things of God. Our lives bring many challenges, many invitations from God. Unfortunately we often do not hear them or our hearts lack the freedom and the trust in God to say our Yes.

We MSC in the novena we prayed leading up to this centenary will have noted Fr Chevalier is described as having *audacity to the point of folly* and we asked of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart *may we always do what your Son tells us*.

Our next one hundred years will continue to echo with the words we heard in today's readings. New opportunities and pitfalls will

come. As individual MSC, and as a province, may we not hide in fear like Adam and Eve but rather, filled with a sense of the graciousness of God, be able to say yes to God's invitation as Mary did.

With us today is Fr Narciso Abellana MSC a member of our General Council in Rome. We in Australia are part of an international religious institute with other provinces scattered around the world. Even our Australian province has members working in India, China, Vietnam, Japan, Fiji, Kiribati.

Such connections challenge us in the Australian Province to look beyond what is good for Australia and to see ourselves as part of God's people scattered around the globe. As a recent lecturer here in Sydney remarked, there are some good sides to globalisation. And one of those is the opportunity to seek what is good for the whole human family rather than hemmed in by narrow self-interest.

On behalf of all MSC I thank our other distinguished guests for honouring us with their presence. I know many of them have their own story to tell of how they came to know the MSC.

Thank you one and all for making the time to join us in giving thanks for the blessings of God over one hundred years.

---

*By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. Jn 19:37), we can understand the starting point of this Encyclical Letter: 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move.*

—Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas*