

CENTENARY KEYNOTE DRESS

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HON. SIR GERARD BRENNAN, AC

YOUR EXCELLENCY, Your Eminence Cardinal Clancy, Father Provincial, Brother Superior, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Representatives of other Congregations and other Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

We gather here today to celebrate a centenary—to celebrate one hundred years of worship and committed service by the members of the Australian Province of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. For centuries past, however, this site has been—as it remains—in the traditional ownership of the Eora People and we acknowledge that ownership today.

Today's celebration recalls the decree of Pope Pius X in 1905 pursuant to which the Australian Province was erected. It recognized the growth of the Society in Australia since the first MSCs arrived in Sydney twenty years earlier.[...] Today we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Christ's Mother, the 8th December being the birthday of the Society as well as the birthday of its Australian Province. The General Council appointed Fr Tréand, a priest much loved and respected by his colleagues, as the first Provincial though he was in indifferent health. [...]

The Australian nation had been summoned into existence five years earlier on the first day of 1901. In many respects, parallels can be seen in the histories of the Commonwealth and the Province. Both owe their structure to their parent authority. In Australia, we inherited the Westminster system of Government and the British tradition of an independent Judiciary; the Province inherited the traditional hierarchy of Provincial, Council and consultors, Chapters, Superiors and the respective ministers of particular communities, following the template

of the Society elsewhere. Although the Commonwealth of Australia was created with all the powers needed for an independent nation, and although the Province was erected to be largely self-governing, both were closely tied to the parent authority. At first our Governors General were appointed by the British Government and our foreign affairs were, until the 1940's, in the hands of the British Foreign Service. Some of our legislative powers and the final appellate jurisdiction in some of our court cases were not free of Imperial control until 1986. Similarly, the government of the Australian Province remained in many respects under the control of the General Council in Rome.

Thus, while Fr Tréand was an excellent appointment, he was not assisted by the General Council's appointment of at least one member of his Provincial Council and, regrettably, that caused some troubles for the early days of the Province. In time, the situation changed until the stage was reached when Australians—at first Fr McCabe and then Fr Cuskelly—each became the Superior General of the Society. Now both the nation and the province are effectively self-governing, but while the Society in practice has independent authority in its internal government, it rightly values and adheres to the international charism of the Society and cherishes its relationship with both the General Council and other Provinces throughout the world.

Of course, there were bound to be some tensions in the early days. The Superior General and the General Council had some concerns about the development of the Province and the observance of the rules. Indeed, from 1914 to 1920 the Province was virtually under the authority of a Visitor General, Fr Linckens,

in whom many of the powers of the Superior General had been vested. Some difficulties had arisen from personality differences but, as I understand it, the source of most of the tensions is to be found in the diverse demography, history and culture of Europe on the one hand and Australia on the other. And whenever an issue productive of tension arose—for example, about the undertaking of financial burdens—distance and the problems of communication compounded the risk of divergent views.

I note, in passing, that when in 1931 the Bishop of Toowoomba persuaded Fr Fleming to establish my Alma Mater, Downlands College, the view of the then Superior General was expressed in the word ‘impossible’. I thank God for the courage of the Australian Province. Perhaps Rome should have known better than to question the establishment of a major institution in the midst of a depression. After all, this land [at Kensington, NSW] was bought and this Monastery was built in the 1880s when the Colony was in dire financial straits and Australian Banks were failing. The Province has always placed its trust in Divine Providence and the generosity of the Australian people and has never been averse to taking risks in the expansion of its mission.

Such tensions as there were between the General Council and the fledgling Australian Province were, in retrospect, creative tensions: they were resolved to form and strengthen the charism of the Australian MSCs. Europe, with its long tradition of Christian spirituality, whether Catholic or Protestant, and with its familiarity with authoritarian regimes, probably found it difficult to appreciate a distant, sparsely populated continent, whose indigenous inhabitants embraced a spirituality not then recognized and whose Anglo-Celtic population saw themselves as an independent, frontier people taking whatever initiatives were appropriate to meet the challenges of a developing nation. Europe could contribute both the tradition of deep Christian spirituality and the framework within which the spiritual life might be fostered. Australia could contribute respect for the vigorous independence of individuals, a

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sense of solidarity that we call ‘mateship’ and a willingness to ‘give it a go’. Tensions there were between the two. The Australian Province was not always punctilious in the observance of the rules and protocols which were then needed in the formation of the novices and scholastics and in the preservation of the members of the Society in their work of spreading devotion to the Sacred Heart. What emerged, however, was a structured Society which lost none of the robust character of the Australian but which was a disciplined force to carry out the arduous duties which had been undertaken. [...]

The Province has served the Church and the people in the countries to which missionaries went out. To Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Fiji, Japan, Viet Nam and India. So successful have the missionary efforts been that a separate Papua New Guinea Province of the MSCs was erected in 1989. Many of those missionaries are here today and we acknowledge their lives of love and service. [...]

I must ask you to bear with me while I recall some events from my school days. I do so not to indulge myself in nostalgia but to pay my tribute to the MSCs and to spell out something of the charism which has made them so significant an influence on the faith and the lives of generations of Australians. I take you back to 1941, in the dark days of the Second World War, when our class entered Downlands College for the first year of our secondary schooling. Long before Vatican II, we were introduced to the reasons why we believed what we had learnt by rote in the catechisms of primary school. We were invited to question and to think so that faith could find a root

in personal conviction. The emphasis was on our spiritual lives and the formation of our consciences, not on obedience to an externally imposed rule. The changes of Vatican II, the opening up of the Church to the world around us, the rejection of a ghetto mentality—these confirmed, they did not deny the ethos which we imbibed as schoolboys.

Downlands was then a boarding school for Catholic boys and it would have been easy to teach dogma to be believed and to re-enforce it by the regular timetable of daily Mass and prayers. But pietism was not the way of the MSCs. Not for the MSCs was the bowed head, the joined hands and the superficially pious demeanour. Faith was not only a rational belief; its practice was a robust, perhaps masculine, virtue. One of the stories told was of a farmer from south-western Queensland who delivered his son into the hands of the Rector, saying: ‘Teach him his Catechism and how to fight, Father, so that he can defend his faith!’ On Saturday evenings, Fr Doyle, the Rector returned again and again to his invaluable injunction: ‘Be different!’ We were to think for ourselves, not be swayed by the say-so of others. Then we saw that the hands which raised the host and chalice were the hands that wielded the cricket bat or held the football; we knew that the lips which summoned the Divine Presence were the lips of men whom we assessed to be both intelligent and inspirational in their beliefs. And for living proof of the spiritual life and quiet edification, we saw the sheer, shining, humble sanctity of the Brothers. [...]

If there had been misgivings in earlier days about the observance by Australians of monastic rules and protocols, the schoolboys of the 1940’s saw no evidence of laxity. From the regular rounds of morning Masses, through the ordered day, the MSCs were busy with their appointed tasks. Even consultations were conducted by a formal, brisk perambulation of the consultors back and forth on the pathways of the College. The prayer life of the community permeated and informed the life of the school.

I presume to speak for all the thousands

of students of Australian MSC schools when I say: Thank you for your instruction and your example and for your confirmation and strengthening of our faith. May Our Lord keep you close to His Heart now and in the life to come.

Of course, education was but one of the activities of the Society in the last century. There were many other activities which have commended the Society to the community and which have earned the gratitude of those whom they served. [...]

Of course, the changes brought about by Vatican II in the Church and its relationship with the world had its impact on the MSCs. Some found the changes disturbing and left the Society; most found them affirming of their faith and spiritual life, emphasizing the need for an outgoing love and compassion and the deepening of a sacramental devotion to the Sacred Heart. Fr Cuskelly sought to re-order the traditional approach to the devotion to the Sacred Heart, saying that the first need was to ‘unite our adoration with His, to worship God with Him, to unite our offering of love and praise and thanksgiving with His in the sacrifice of the Mass.’ Within the MSC communities, the paramount importance of observing the rule became secondary to the living of a more caring life. And that was another way of maintaining one of the old pillars of the Society, namely, the sense of community which gave strength and support to all members of the MSC family.

Many of you here today will have experienced the caring concern of the MSCs and I imagine that all will have memories of the benefits that have been conferred by an MSC during the last 100 years. Your presence evidences the appreciation that each of us has for the contribution that the Society has made to this nation, to New Zealand and to the communities of the mission countries and our gratitude for the inspiration that has touched the hearts and minds of so many of us. But what of the future?

A future of an ageing membership of the Society; a future of falling vocations, yet larger

demands; a future of Churches with half-filled pews; a future of a community obsessed by materialism and self-interest. This is a future that may not be very different from the France of 1854 when Jules Chevalier founded the Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. And the needed response may not be very different from the vision which he had. What can topple a self-interested materialism? Ultimately, a realization that the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is a bowl of ashes and that self-interest produces a lonely isolation from the rest of humanity. But what will stimulate that realization? Only a demonstration of love and compassion that removes the isolation and displays the richness of human relationships. And what is the surest way to evoke a demonstration of love and compassion? A belief in the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, that each of us has a Divinely created dignity that commands love for, and compassion for the trials of, our neighbour. Love and compassion are the virtues of the heart—they come from the core of our being. They may require an intellectual conversion from our ordinary way of thought and they may call for an understanding of the circumstances in which our neighbour is placed, but the power to show love and compassion comes from a movement of the heart. And when we seek for divine inspiration, we look to the heart of our Saviour. There is to be found the spirit of love and compassion, as David proclaimed when he praised the Lord Who ‘crowns you with love and compassion’ (Ps 103:4). It is there that we can find the power to sustain a conversion of our own hearts. So the charism of the Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart is as necessary in Australia today as it was in mid-19th Century France.

Of course, any voice identified as a voice of the Church today may be treated with a certain reserve, if not summarily dismissed. In the minds of many, the Church has become rule-ridden and dictatorial, even diminishing the role and function of conscience. If mere conformity with rules and an unreflective acceptance of dogma were the badge of ortho-

doxy and fidelity, however, the institutions of the Church would have become like the scribes and Pharisees whom Christ condemned because they ‘tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but [do not] lift a finger to move them’ (Mt 23:4). No, true orthodoxy focusses on the central teaching to ‘love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and all your soul and with all your mind’ and to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mt 22:37-39). Jesus instructed His disciples to ‘love one another as I have loved you’ and promised them that if they kept His commandments ‘you will remain in my love’ (John 15:10, 12). Love and compassion are the most reliable indicia of orthodoxy and fidelity to the Divine Master. Conscience, formed and informed, dictates what we do or avoid doing in order to live, and to show, that love and compassion. And the teaching of the Church is, to the faithful, the primary means of informing our consciences. Then we are confident in our vulnerability as we expose ourselves to the risk of love and compassion.

So what do we pray for the future of the Society of the Australian Province of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart? I would pray that they may discern the signs of the times and thus discover the places and people in greatest need of love and compassion. I would pray that they invite those not of their Society to join them in serving those people in those places and that they maintain the discipline and intellectual rigour which can make that service effective. I would pray that they will find joy in that service and in the knowledge that their hands are doing the work of the Divine Heart and bringing those whom they serve closer to His encompassing embrace. And then, with them, I would pray:

May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved.

Forever.