

## Prize Giving 2020

Tena Koutou        Bula Venaka

Talofo Lava,        Kia Orana

Malo O'le            Mauri

Kamusta

Welcome parents, guardians, whanau, staff and most of all, you the students

Congratulations to the well deserving prize-winners tonight.

Recently the Hamilton Diocese conducted a strategic review and are looking to put together a plan going forward for the next 10 years. One of the issues raised was the future of Catholic schools in New Zealand. We are all aware that without the Catholic schools the Church in New Zealand would struggle to maintain its numbers as many of the traditional Christian churches, who have few if any schools, have been unable to do. State integrated schools make up around 11% of the schools in New Zealand and, of that, Catholic schools make up 10% (this figure was 14% however successive governments have not allowed us to build new schools and as the population has grown we have remained stagnant by comparison). However what is also true is that attendance at Mass has fallen away over the past 20 years and thus the question is posed 'If the students do not go on to attend church after school what is the point of having the schools?' A fair question.

Most certainly it is our job as leaders and teachers in Catholic schools to evangelize our boys, in my mind, my role is to open the hearts and minds of the boys to at least the potential of a belief in Christ and the joyful life that that brings. What we know for certain is that the last census tells us that for the first time less than half of New Zealand's population believe in God and that there are challenging times ahead for the churches. For many of our boys the school is the only connection with the Catholic Church and we feel the pressure of responsibility to reach our boys as they journey with us, after all surely faith is 'caught and not taught'.

The highlight of this year was in the 29 boys who voluntarily completed what is called the RCIC course with us which enables them to become confirmed Catholics and receive the sacrament of first Holy Communion. Not only does this mean that 29 more boys are fully Catholic but they are also fully committed members of Saint John's College and during our school Masses

both here at the Cathedral and up at school can receive the host and gift of Christ, rather than a simple blessing. More than a third of our boys are rural and as the parish based RCIC courses are only run in Hamilton, for many this is the only opportunity these boys have to fully embrace the teachings of the Catholic faith. We fully intend to continue to offer our boys the opportunity to become confirmed Catholics through this school-based programme.

After lockdown there was a lot of talk about the 'new normal' and how after only six weeks the online learning environment would completely revolutionise how schools are taught. I heard one Principal state that they were going to a model that was not the new normal but the 'future normal' - I have no idea what that means. What was actually needed for our boys was a return to normal routines as quickly as possible. Boys need structure and predictable routines to have clarity of purpose to perform to their best. Without these, boys are 'all at sea' and will simply float wherever the tide (or rip!) takes them. The data we gathered through surveys of the boys over this time made it clear that, on the whole, they found online learning difficult, and would rather be taught face to face by their teacher. And, we also know through feedback and surveys of our community that as a school Saint John's did a very good job during this period and for that I thank you, our staff. Having said all of the above there have certainly been some worthwhile ideas come out of the online experience of how to use technology as a teaching and learning tool, so watch this space.

The world continues to change at an ever-increasing pace, so what is important is that we equip our boys with the skills and knowledge that enable them to adapt and succeed, not just in a career but in aspects of being a man of integrity, faith, love and hope. The temptation for many working within Education in New Zealand is to guess what's coming, and dramatically change what we are doing, and how we are doing it. New Zealand education is famous for it. Knee jerk changes that ultimately don't work, and then spending the next two decades trying to fix them.

In fact there is another one of these coming up next year where NZQA are meddling with the NCEA standards that are working just fine as they are, these changes where multiple standards are being concertinaed together will have a detrimental effect on boys' achievement. For example, currently in English at level 1 we have nine standards available to create a course that catered for a class and their ability, now we will have four standards and no choice.

The simple fact is that no one really knows what the employment and industrial landscape will look like in the future – just look at this year, who would have thought that international pilots would be out of a job!

In times of uncertainty the answer, more than ever, is to stay true to our traditions and Marist culture of preparing young men for life which has always worked. Now is the time to have our feet planted confidently on the ground, it is what our community, students and staff want and it works. Our NCEA results consistently outstrip the new 'ILE/MLE' schools, (that is innovative or modern learning environment schools) even though they are mostly decile 10 schools. While the world might be busy changing around us, boys and their needs, wants and desires have not!

We at Saint John's will continue to educate and grow fine young Catholic men, men of love and compassion who take responsibility for themselves, their actions and for those that rely on them. Boys who are resilient, up for a challenge and enjoy teamwork. If we do that well, then they will successfully make their way in life, and have the strength of character to move with the times and roll with the punches, just as they always have. This is best summed up by a Maori whakataukī.

"Inā kei te mōhio koe ko wai koe, I anga mai koe i hea, kei te mōhio koe,  
Kei te anga atu ki hea."

"If you know who you are and where you are from, then you will know where you are going"

Tonight I make special mention of our three wise men who are retiring at the end of 2020. Brian Sparrow, Kevin Frewan and John Bull. Together they represent well over 100 years of loving service to Saint John's College. We are incredibly grateful to these outstanding individuals for the selfless dedication they have shown in their work for us. The Gospels tell us that the three wise men brought with them gifts, well you have certainly done that. We are the richer for it and today we stand on your shoulders!

However, just as we wish you well in your well-earned retirement, I am acutely aware that these men (two of whom are the last remaining staff members who taught me at this school) take with them not only institutional knowledge but they have been the flag bearers of the Marist tradition and they are the last of the staff who worked alongside the Marist Brothers at Saint John's College. It

is now our job to ensure that we remain faithful to our Marist roots. Saint John's is a special place to be part of and that is because we are a Marist school where everybody, particularly the lost, the last and the least, has a place.

A wise man once said to me, in regard to schools, that 'a river that denies its source goes out of existence'. Our source is Marcelin Champagnat and the Marist brothers. If we deny or ignore our origins then we lose our purpose and if we lose purpose then there is no reason for us to be. John, Brian and Kevin, thank you for being our source and giving us purpose. It is now up to us to continue that work and become, as I call it, 'the keepers of the faith'.

The most important gift we can give our students, our sons, is an unshakable view that life is a precious gift and that they have a bright future ahead of them. Young men need to be able to see that they have a place, a place where they matter, where they belong and where they can make a contribution. This gives pride, purpose and meaning in their lives.

Corinthians 13:13 states that: Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love. Undoubtedly this is true, but I wish to talk of hope. It is so important that, as adults, we provide balance to the incredibly negatively biased view of the 2020 world which our young men are presented with on many fronts, the media (social or otherwise) being just one of these.

We must give them hope, we must never have them believe that the world is a place full of misery and despair; we must never tell them their future will be full of misery and hardship. Young men need to know that there is a pathway forward for them, they must know that they can lead a fulfilled life full of hope, happiness, faith and love – because they can! No, we cannot and should not protect them from all of life's challenges, for it is in staring these down that they grow and learn about themselves. But, we must give them hope that there is a place in this, and the next world, for them and their loved ones. Because there is.

So, although 2020 has been a challenge, we look forward to a future for ourselves and these young men, filled with faith, love and hope.

May God bless and Keep you all

