

PRINCIPAL'S SPEECH PRIZE GIVING 2021

In AD 325, the Council of Nicaea adopted the Nicene Creed, which is often recited at Sunday Mass. This is a key moment when Catholics, and other Christian churches, profess their faith in a public community setting. The creed begins with, 'We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible...'

Lately I have reflected on one line in the creed which, over time, I believe I have started to understand: 'We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church'. This phrase is known as the 'four marks of the church' and pre-dates the creed itself. You might wonder what this means and, in particular, are we saying that the Catholic Church is number one amongst churches.

This I have learned: 'apostolic' means that we, like the apostles, follow Jesus and continue their work. To be 'Holy' is to be dedicated to the service of God. 'Catholic' means universal, all embracing, full and complete. 'One' in this context does not mean that we Catholics see ourselves as the number one church, rather it means that we are one body, one church and one community, that although we are many, we are one. The church is one in the same way that God is one. It is this word 'one' that I wish to focus on.

A test of a 'good' Catholic school is how connected it is with each student and with its wider faith community, both past and present. At Saint John's College, we see ourselves as one, we are brothers, Jonnies boys and Marist men, one in faith and one in community. There is something special about being part of this place and I have the privileged perspective of having been a student, a parent and principal here. The heart of what it means to be a Saint John's Marist man has not changed in the 60 years that we have existed, and it is amazing how cyclical things can be in places where traditions and community matter. For example, we have the pleasure of having Monsignor Frank Eggleton as our Chaplain, and this is not the first time he has fulfilled that role. Monsignor was a first day pupil of Saint John's in 1961, his mother Joan was the first secretary at Saint John's and, as far as I can tell, did just about all of the administration duties. Her photo hangs at the end of our administration corridor next to the Pope!

Later, Monsignor studied at Tuakau to become a Marist Brother, Brother Francis, and taught at Saint John's, even having the dubious pleasure of teaching me and coaching me at cricket. During this time, Frank felt the calling to become a priest and now as our Chaplain, things have come full circle. It is a remarkable honour to have someone who has been a day one student of Saint John's, a Marist Brother of Saint John's and now Priest/Chaplain to our College. The story of Monsignor Frank underscores the strength and connectedness of our College, and when I say we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us, Monsignor is a case in point. Our boys might pass through our College but they will always belong, and it is awesome when old boys, from different eras, come back to visit and look around. They are always welcome.

2021 has again been a disrupted year for all of us, and it is the senior boys who are leaving who have, in particular, missed out on numerous experiences in their last year of school, not the least of which is the opportunity to 'hang' with their friends and have face-to-face teaching. I am truly sorry, lads, that this has been your experience for the past two years. Every boy has had a different experience and reaction to the lockdowns; while some have enjoyed the solitude and ability to study at their own pace, many have struggled both with the work and their own mental wellbeing. However, tough times give us all opportunities to build resilience and learn how to cope and reach out in times of need.

At the beginning of the year, I addressed staff on the importance of not losing track of our Marist tradition, and the term 'Marist Man' is one that we must continue to foster at Saint John's. There are many Catholic schools (some of which are Marist) that have, over the years, turned their backs on their Charism. That is not to say that they are less Catholic; however, for us, our Marist Charism gives us a lens into our faith, and our five pillars are a way of making our Faith and traditions accessible to young men. A Charism is an extraordinary power gifted a Christian by the Holy Spirit and the pillars are an interpretation of Saint Marcellin's gift. These Pillars are straightforward, easily understood and are a touchstone by which we can measure ourselves and our actions. If we are acting 'In the way of Mary', then we are compassionate, loving and we say yes when we are asked to help others. With 'Simplicity' we are straightforward, open and honest. When we have a 'love of work', then we do not shirk our responsibilities, and make no mistake a student's 'job' is their schoolwork. When we live 'In a family spirit', we look after each other as brothers, particularly the 'lost, the last and the least'. When we have 'Presence', then we are there for one another, we are present at school and in the moment.

As an aside, interestingly these pillars are not the product of Marcellin Champagnat 200 years ago but the work of the universal Marist community in the 1990s. The Marist order were aware that there was a need to keep the Charism of Marcellin accessible to the current youth in their schools. While young men have not changed over the decades, the world around them is in a constant state of flux, so it is vital that we remain true to the traditions that stand the test of time. Boys need constants in their lives to flourish, and as men, we struggle when we no longer know where we stand, where we belong, what we can meaningfully contribute to and if we matter to anyone.

A Marist man understands this. We are currently in the process of creating a Marist man profile which will be linked to service, and our More Marist profile that encourages and rewards positive behaviour.

Next year, for the first time we are making 'BYOD' (bring your own device) compulsory for Year 9s. For many years, we have had an excellent wireless network that students can connect to and have encouraged boys to bring their devices. In hindsight, I naïvely thought that boys would immediately begin bringing laptops to school. However, this did not eventuate. A major driver for this BYOD decision is that we are told by the Ministry of Education that by the time these students reach Year 11 and Level One NCEA, the bulk of exams will be online and digital. Our boys know how to play games on a computer but one cannot assume they know how to use one to type an essay!

In the last few years, I have noticed that in talking to students, they are less averse to becoming a teacher. Once upon a time when asked if anyone is contemplating becoming a teacher, I would seldom have a single student putting their hand up. I asked this same question earlier this year and multiple boys indicated they were contemplating becoming a teacher. This is a really encouraging sign, as we need our best and brightest in our classrooms. In many countries, teaching is held in high regard. However, here we are often the butt of jokes or sarcasm. Teaching is a calling, a vocation, and we are given the privileged opportunity to help mould the lives of young people, and to make a real difference in the world. Not all jobs can claim that. The most important trait of a good teacher is that they love working with kids, in our case adolescent young men. I am often told by members of the public that teaching teenagers must be a dreadful part of the job. On the contrary, it is the best part of the job! We need to be encouraging more young men to become teachers. Just 12% of teachers at primary level are male. This rises to 40% at secondary but this figure is also dropping.

I wish to acknowledge Mr Steve Andrew who is retiring this year. Mr Andrew started at Saint John's in 2001, so will have completed 20 years' service as a hard materials technology teacher, and latterly has been head of faculty. Mr Andrew has been acknowledged nationally for his 'cutting edge' technology curriculum work, and we wish him all the best in his well-earned retirement.

In closing, despite these challenging times it is more important than ever that we remain true to our traditions and identity as a Catholic Marist College. Sixty years on from our inception, Saint John's College continues to remain a college that prepares young faithful men for life, young men who take responsibility for themselves, their actions and for those that rely on them. Marist men, Jonnies boys!

God Bless you and your Whānau.

Shane Tong
Principal