

Homily by Archbishop Francis P. Carroll, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference
It was delivered during the Mass of Devotion to Our Lady, Mary Help of Christians on Thursday, 3 May at 7:30pm.

We meet tonight in this, the Mother Church of Australia, dedicated to Mary the Immaculate Help of Christians and in the year of our Nation's Centenary of Federation.

The centenary recalls with pride, the birth of one united nation and a hundred years of unbroken democracy under the rule of law. In a spirit of thanksgiving, we celebrate the strong national life we enjoy today. With humble confidence, we renew commitment to act in the future with the responsibility of a nation mature in our relationships with the land, our fellow citizens and the rest of the world.

With the words of the Constitution "humbly relying on the blessing of almighty God", the founders of federation made a bold proclamation that the new Nation was born under the sovereignty of God and would grow and prosper within God's providence. On the day the delegates finalised the work of writing the constitution, Alfred Deakin wrote the words in his prayer book "A Christlike citizenship".

Well before Federation, Christian faith came to Australia and the Churches were an important part of its history and development. Following humble beginnings in the less than auspicious environment of penal servitude and convict culture, the Catholic Church played a major and distinctive role in the several colonies.

After the difficult pioneering years, the Holy See, in 1842, approved the setting up of Dioceses in Hobart and Adelaide to form an ecclesiastical province under the metropolitan Archbishop of Sydney. The British Government acquiesced in this foundation of the Australian Catholic Hierarchy, the first to be erected in a British possession since the Reformation.

Archbishop Polding moved quickly to call the first Provincial Council and Synod of Australasia. There was need to promote Catholic unity and solidarity in the face of severe sectarian attacks and to deal with many matters of organization and regulation internal to the Church. The Council consisted of Archbishop Polding, Bishops Robert Wilson and Francis Murphy, together with fifteen of the thirty five clergy then present in the Colony.

It was then, in September 1844 that Australia was placed under the patronage of the Virgin Mary under the title of Help of Christians. This decision was confirmed by Rome in 1852.

While the Marian title Help of Christians had a long history in Catholic tradition and devotion, its observance as a feast in the Roman calendar, was only introduced on 24 May 1814. This marked the release from prison of Pope Pius VII after five years of exile, and the restoration of Rome following Napoleon's annexation of the Papal States.

When the redoubtable Father Therry blessed the foundation stone of the first Catholic Chapel in the land, he invoked the patronage of Mary. He had been ordained in Ireland as the Irish Church was quickly adopting devotion to Mary Help of Christians as a further enrichment of its long tradition of love for the Mother of God.

Father Therry knew well how many in the oppressive environment of the new colony kept their Catholic faith alive by praying the Rosary.

In 1844, Archbishop Polding and his little band of provincial councillors, sought to lay solid foundations for the Church in Australia and to meet the challenges of their time. They confidently placed themselves under the patronage of Mary Help of Christians.

In 1988, Australia recalled the achievements and the ambiguities of two hundred years of white settlement. In that bicentennial year, the Catholic Bishops gathered here in St Mary's and renewed the dedication of the Church and the Nation to Mary Help of Christians.

This year of 2001, marks the centenary of Australian Federation. Australia again celebrates, but is very conscious of the formidable challenges to be met in another century and new millennium.

The Church too faces enormous challenges. Purified and renewed by the Jubilee Year, we are called afresh to live and witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The task of evangelising within contemporary Australian culture, is a daunting one but that is our privileged mission. Conscious of the magnitude of the task, we turn to our patron Mary Help of Christians and once again entrust Australia to her prayerful protection.

We have total confidence that Mary the Mother of Jesus will be with us to pray for us and to lead us to her Son. Overshadowed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived and gave birth to Jesus, nurtured him as a child, sought him when lost, elicited his first miracle and stood to the end by his Cross of shame and suffering. She was with the Apostles and Disciples when the Holy Spirit came with Pentecostal power to give birth to the Church.

As she accompanied her Son in all of the significant events of his life, who could doubt that she accompanies the Church as it continues to live and grow as the Body of Christ. Not only does Mary accompany and support the Church as the first disciple of her Son, but she is also its Mother.

What kind of Church are we called to be in Australia today so as to help bring about God's reign of truth, justice, freedom and love and to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. In a country still needing reconciliation of many kinds, how is God's purpose for the Church to be fulfilled so as to unite all things in Christ.

We must be a holy people united in love. Pope John Paul reminds us that the Church's structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members and holiness is measured according to the great mystery in which the bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the bridegroom. Mary goes before us all in the holiness that is the Church's mystery. She goes before, as "a model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ. The Holy Father writes: "She (Mary of Nazareth) precedes everyone on the path of holiness; in her person the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists "without spot or wrinkle". In this sense one can say that the Church is both Marian and Apostolic-Petrine".

As Catholics we have a clear understanding of the Church of Peter and the Apostles. That dimension is clearly demonstrated tonight in the presence and leadership of the Bishops gathered in Conference, together with the personal representative of the Holy Father as a visible sign of our unity with the successor of Peter. But are we as conscious of the Marian dimension of being Church? Pope John Paul not only tells us that the Church is both Marian and Apostolic Petrine but goes on "this Marian

profile is also, even perhaps more so, fundamental and characteristic for the Church, as is the apostolic and Petrine profile to which it is profoundly united". Thus the Marian dimension of the Church precedes the Petrine, although the two are always complementary.

To realize the fullness of our calling and be effective in our mission for Christ in the Australia of the new millennium, we need to know and live our identity in both its Marian and Petrine dimensions. As the Apostolic Petrine Church, we know our identity in the Holy Spirit as an hierarchical communion, founded on Peter and the Apostles and faithfully handing on the apostolic traditions. The people of God with all its members called equally to holiness in the communion of faith and love, finds the institutional form that reflects the visible reality of the Incarnation. The continuity of tradition is guaranteed in the apostolic succession clearly recognizable in the College of Bishops united under the leadership of the successor of St Peter.

We rejoice in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The living authority of teaching and governance ensures the visible unity of the Church, the orthodoxy of truth and the good order of community life.

There are great opportunities for the Church to present the Gospel message to an Australian society showing many signs of a thirst for spirituality and a hunger for meaning. Today's culture also poses immense challenges with its exaggerated individualism, subjective truth, moral relativism and materialistic consumerism.

The Christian message must be presented by a Church confident in its self-identity, strong in its sense of belonging, clear in its teaching of truth and firm in its moral guidance. A Church strong in its Apostolic-Petrine dimension is well equipped for this task.

The strengths of the Petrine dimension however, require the balance of the Marian. Without it an almost monarchic, clericalist and even legalistic spirit can enter in. The Holy Father has consistently appealed to those accorded priestly authority to temper the drive towards power by contemplating the Marian dimension of the Church and its service. Hans Urs von Balthasar, claimed that if "if the mystery of the Marian character is obscured or abandoned ... there Christianity must become unisexual, that is all male". He also wrote that if the Marian dimension is denied or abandoned, "the Church becomes functionalistic, soulless, a hectic enterprise without any point of rest, estranged from its true nature by the planners. And because, in this manly masculine world, all that we have is one ideology replacing another, everything becomes polemical, critical, bitter, humourless and ultimately boring, and people in their masses run away from such a Church". Strong words, but also disquieting if one looks honestly at many aspects of the Church today and its experience of diminishment.

The Marian characteristics of the Church provide the remedy and balance required. If Peter is united visibly with Christ through his divine commissioning, Mary is united invisibly through her divine maternity. The Marian dimension is associated with motherhood, which looks to the inner life of the people of God. Learning from Mary, the emphasis is on giving birth, and nurturing the Christ life of the baptized so as to lead to a maturity of faith.

Mary pondered all these things in her heart. The Church must first be contemplative, prayerful and discerning before speaking or acting.

A Marian Church glorifies the Lord and is filled with wonder at God's overpowering love poured out upon humankind. It marvels at the faithfulness of God's love and its totally free gift of forgiveness. It seeks to live that love and be a channel of that forgiveness.

Maternal love brings an ethic of care and is shaped by compassion. Mary never speaks of her own needs but looks to those of others. Just as the mother of Jesus nursed, cleansed, fed and cared for her son, and just as Jesus nursed, fed and cared for his own, humble service is the sign of love in the reign of God. Mary's only advice is to do whatever Jesus tells us. And Jesus washed the feet of his disciples.

A mother knows her children and includes all in her love. The Marian Church also knows her children and continues to love, respect and acknowledge them even when they do not acknowledge her. She will display the maternal tenderness of God, even towards her rebellious sons and daughters.

The loving mother always has time to listen to her children. The Church must be ready to listen to her own, to other Christians and to the voice of humanity. She must especially listen to the cry of the poor and the pain of the world.

To witness to Christ and serve in his name, to bring about the reign of God in Australia, we as Church need both Marian and Apostolic-Petrine qualities and strengths. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, we need the visible leadership of Peter and the Twelve, together with the loving heart of Mary.

As Australia celebrates the Centenary of Federation and a new millennium begins to unfold, we're challenged to put out into the deep once again with the enthusiasm of the very first Christians. The same Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost, empowers us to start again on our mission of evangelization. Mary is the radiant dawn and sure guide for our steps. With confident and loving hearts, let us invoke her prayer and patronage for our Church and our Nation as Help of Christians.