

Lavalla History

Mr Mike Hansen's Address

Hands up those of you had a mum or dad who attended St Paul's, Kildare or Presentation College! (if appropriate)

Have you ever imagined what our school looked like when they were here? What about those who attended sixty years ago and in the years between?

And what about schools more than a hundred years ago?

We have such a rich palette of resources now: libraries, the internet, retrieval and storage systems, spacious classrooms, grounds and facilities. It has not always been like this. Lavalla didn't just drop out of the sky ready made. It has had a long and glorious history of struggle, sacrifice and vision to get where it is today. It is our story. And it is the early days of our story that I would like to share with you today.

To understand **who we are** and how we come to be **where we are** today we must glance back along the path from whence we have come. Indeed, we must travel back to a time in Australian history when our identity as a nation was still being formed.

In the latter part of the 1800's, the various state governments passed what were called the Education Acts. The States would take responsibility for the education of children that was compulsory, free and secular. Secular meant that the new government schools would not have any religious instruction. Every child would get an education no matter how poor their parents. But the Irish priests and bishops of the colonies were horrified remembering the dreadful Penal Laws in Ireland designed to stamp out the Catholic Faith and where any Catholic keeping a school could be heavily fined and imprisoned. Not wanting ever to be so restricted again they lead the charge for a separate Catholic Education system. Education, they argued, was not just something for the mind and the body with subjects like Mathematics, Geography, History and Gymnastics. It needed to be more holistic to be robust and complete. There was the soul and the spirit to consider. As bishop Lyons said at the official opening of Kildare College in 1962, "Religion is not just another subject. It is something to permeate the whole school and saturate its atmosphere." And when St Paul's College was opened eight years earlier, Father Daly reminded the gathered community, "There is much more to education than the three R's. A student under capable instruction should become a thorough Christian gentleman. This will be a good college to produce good boys." A century and a half before this in the early 1800's our own Marcellin Champagnat began his schools to cultivate not only good "good citizens" but "good Christians" as well.

So the Catholic Church decided to go it alone and run its own schools. But how were they to do that? The government would build schools and pay teachers' salaries in the new government schools... But it wasn't going to pay teachers and build classrooms in church run schools. The Catholic population were mainly the working class poor... they could not pay much for schooling. What was the church to do? Where could they get teachers and how could they pay them?

Enter the European religious orders.... Nuns and Brothers from Ireland and Europe.

Father James Corbett was the parish priest of Saint Kilda in the 1870's. He was Irish and he wrote to the Reverend Mother of the Presentation Sisters in Limerick, Ireland, pleading with her to send some sisters to staff his little school. Even today, reading his letter, you can almost hear the drums roll with his opening line...

"Dear Reverend Mother, from the ends of the earth I write to you for help".

His request was duly answered and six sisters arrived in Melbourne on Sunday, December 21st, 1873 after a two month sea voyage. A huge crowd of well wishers, both Protestant and Catholic had waved them goodbye from the dock in Ireland, these daughters of Erin, for they knew they would never see them again. Melbourne was truly the end of the earth.

They were women of listening hearts.

To them the Spirit spoke: 'Come'

So they rose up to follow.

It led them out of their quiet valley,

Over the rim of the world,

Where summer came in wintertime

And the very stars hung strange...

Raphael Consedine pbvm

They, and scores of others over these same years, were the answer to the dilemma of how to staff the parish schools. These women were steeped in Catholic piety and practice, they were dedicated and tireless teachers and they were cheap.

These early sisters attracted local young women and their numbers swelled. They were able to open and staff more schools to provide a Catholic Education to children and young people. Not just nuns but priests and brothers arrived to open schools in cities and towns. They came in their religious habits and gave heart to the mainly poor Irish Catholic population who felt themselves the underdogs bumping along the bottom of society. When the Marist brothers were first seen in Sydney it is said that grown men wept in the streets.

And children flocked to the schools the nuns and brothers operated. Parents paid what they could.... Fees were kept low. It was seen as a 'miracle of religion' how these pioneering men and women religious survived. Lacking any support from government for nearly a hundred years, the parishes held raffles, conducted fetes and provided manual labour to keep the schools going and the brothers and sisters comfortable. In more recent years the Marist Brothers here were famous for the Saint Paul's car raffle and the profit they made basically kept the brothers clothed and fed for the year.

And the schools were hugely successful... parents sent their children to 'be taught by the nuns' or sent them to the Brothers who 'would sort them out'.

It is into this culture of sacrifice, struggle, conviction and vision that our own school has its genesis. It was not until 1956 that a Catholic secondary school for boys was opened here in Traralgon. There was a rapid growth in the population in the early post war years and concern was raised as to the availability of Catholic education for the newcomers.

Monsignor O'Mara, the parish priest of Traralgon worked tirelessly to provide for future needs by adding classrooms to St Michael's Primary school. He foresaw that Primary Education was not, in itself, sufficient. There was a need for secondary education in a Catholic environment. The idea grew in him, becoming almost an obsession it is said, to start something, first of all for boys. Mr Simon Stoddart made ten acres of land available to Monsignor O'Mara... land upon which to build his dream. It is that land upon which we stand today.

The building cost £ 24,000 (This doesn't seem a lot of money but consider that the average weekly wage was about £50 and a family car cost around £1,000 at the time). The Marist Fathers said they could staff the school and Monsignor O'Mara and the parishioners of St Michael's took responsibility for, and worked tirelessly to raise, the first £ 22,500 (taking inflation into account in today's money \$451,000). For Monsignor O'Mara it was the consummation of his hopes, dreams, aspirations and endeavours. Such was his passion to see our school a reality he gave his life's savings of £3,000 for St Pauls to become a reality.

On April 7th, 1956, St Paul's College was officially blessed and opened by bishop Ryan. As the Journal newspaper reported at the time.... "This area now bears the picturesque ... place-name of **Glenlilac**. (It) symbolises the Highland cottage in which Mr. Simon Stoddart was born and at the same time conjures in imagination a future setting where advanced education will be given ... in quiet and dignified surroundings." Fr Davis was the first principal... the enrolment was 92 boys.

The Brigidine Sisters, who were conducting St Michael's Primary School set aside three rooms at the Primary School and began secondary classes for girls in 1958. The sisters borrowed the extraordinary sum of half a million dollars and built the double storey classroom block on the Kosciusko Street site which was formally opened as Kildare College in 1962. Inaugural enrolment was 60 girls.

Since those early, euphoric days sixty years ago much has happened to the identity of the original colleges. The Marist Brothers came in 1962 after the Marist fathers withdrew. Under the leadership of Br John McMahon, in 1979 a mini system of three schools was created: Kildare and St. Paul's for Years 7-10... and a new senior campus, Lourdes College, for Years 11 & 12. By 1981 with Br Doug Walsh as principal at St Pauls enrolment was 595 boys. More changes occurred in 1989 after the Brigidine Sisters withdrew and the three colleges became one co-educational school called Catholic Regional College with Br Fons Van Rooij as principal. The amalgamation with Presentation College Newbough in 2001 created Lavalla Catholic College with Br Julian Casey. The first lay principal Ms Erica Pegorer was appointed in 2005, to be succeeded by our current principal, Mr. John Freeman. In October 2010 we bid farewell to the Marist Brothers after 48 years of service to the community.

It was quite prophetic that the St. Paul's campus was named 'Glenlilac' and a small lilac tree near the St Pauls chapel marked this... and at Kildare, a great oak now stands as a link to the oak planted in 1807 by Bishop Delany in the grounds of the first Brigidine convent in Tullow, Ireland. They are powerful symbols of how our two schools have grown over the years and spread their branches.... from small and humble beginnings.

Our past continues to inform who we are and what we are becoming as an educational community in the Marist and Catholic tradition. From the Brigidines of Kildare we take their spirited motto **Fortiter et Suaviter** "Strength and Gentleness", From the Presentation Sisters we take confidence in purposeful action **Non vox sed votum** (Not a voice, but a wish) more freely translated as "Not words but deeds".

From Fr Champagnat and his early brothers... from Bishop Delany and the flash of the new fire he lit with the Sisters of Saint Brigid From the bright light of Nano Nagle and the six nuns from Limerick... From Fr Corbett and his vision of Catholic Education... From Monsignor O'Mara and his absolute faith in his dream of a secondary college for boys.... flowing through the people of our past, from the deep wells of their passion and faith we have become the inheritors of their dream for us.... people destined to become what they were...to take our place in the world determined to renew it with Strong Minds and Compassionate Hearts.

And what are we to learn from our story that will be useful to us?

Simply this...

Where there is no vision the people perish
Where there is no dreaming, the people die
Trust your heart vision
Trust your dreams
Keep the light in your eye ...