



Mass celebration marks bicentenary of Catholic education in Australia

Archbishop of Melbourne Peter A Comensoli will lead a celebration of Mass with more than 600 Catholic school students and teachers in St Patrick's Cathedral on Monday 24 May to mark 200 years of Catholic education in Australia.

Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS) Executive Director Jim Miles says the Mass will be part of simultaneous celebrations across Australia and holds significant meaning for the Catholic and wider communities, particularly on the Feast of Our Lady Help of Christians – the Patroness of Australia.

'Over the past two centuries, Catholic schools have educated millions of young Australians and grown to now include 777,000 students and employ over 100,000 staff in 1,750 schools across the country.

'Locally, the first Catholic school in the Archdiocese of Melbourne commenced in 1839, growing to 333 Catholic schools educating more than 155,000 (or 20%) of all students in the region today.'

Mr Miles said that over the past two centuries, the Catholic community – priests, parishioners, religious orders, families and staff – has worked tirelessly to offer a high-quality, faith-based education option for young Australians.

'In more recent times we are also blessed to have the support of government, ensuring we can make a Catholic education accessible to families in every major town and city, and in many regional, rural and remote parts of Victoria and Australia.

'As always, our Catholic schools continue to evolve and respond to community expectations and the changing landscape of contemporary learning to engage students and prepare them as global citizens, equipped to face the world with confidence and a commitment to faith and the common good.'

Mr Miles said students and staff representing the oldest continuing school in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, St Mary's School, Williamstown (established 1842), and the newest, St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Werribee (established 2021), would participate in the Mass.

The Mass will also feature a performance of the national bicentennial song '[Faith in the future](#)' by the Loyola College, Watsonia, choir.

'This Mass will be a highlight of the bicentenary year and an opportunity to give thanks to all who have contributed to the story of Catholic education in Australia, and to look forward with faith and optimism to the future', Mr Miles said.

Background

First Catholic school in Australia (Parramatta)

The bicentenary commemorates the anniversary of the first official Catholic school in Australia, founded in October 1820 by Irish Catholic priest Fr John Therry. This school, which Catholic historians believe was located on Hunter Street in Parramatta, taught 31 students.

The school was transferred to the site of the present St Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta, in 1837 and was entrusted to the care of the Marist Brothers in 1875. Parramatta Marist High School, now located in Westmead, and St Patrick's Primary, Parramatta, trace their origins back to this first school.

First Catholic school in Melbourne/Victoria

The first Catholic school in the Port Phillip District (later known as Victoria) likely commenced in 1839 after the arrival of the first Catholic priest in the colony, Fr Patrick Geoghegan, a Franciscan friar.

It was a catechism school, conducted by Catherine Coffey who had migrated from Tasmania with her husband. The first Mass was celebrated in a small, roofless building on the corner of what are now Elizabeth and Little Collins streets in the Melbourne central business district. Thomas Lynch and his wife, Mary, were the teachers at the first official Catholic school, which was probably near the present St Francis' Church.

When Bishop James Goold, an Augustinian priest working in the Archdiocese of Sydney, arrived in the Port Phillip District in 1848, he founded two Catholic churches (St Mary of the Angels in Geelong and St Francis' in Melbourne), six schools and a number of school chapels in Geelong, Williamstown, Brighton and Portland.

The longest continuing primary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne are St Mary's School, Williamstown, and St Mary's School, Geelong, having been established in 1842. Academy of Mary Immaculate, Fitzroy, is Melbourne's longest continuing secondary school after being founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1857.

Reference: Rogan, F 2000, *A Short history of Catholic education: Archdiocese of Melbourne 1839–1980*, Catholic Education Office, Melbourne.

Notes:

- Acting Premier and Education Minister James Merlino will attend the Mass.
- A message from Prime Minister Scott Morrison will be made available on 24 May.
- The Mass from St Patrick's Cathedral will be live streamed on Monday 24 May commencing at 10.30 am. A link will be available on the [MACS website](#).

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