

## ADDRESS

### MARIST COLLEGE CANBERRA ASSEMBLY

*Friday March 17*

As delivered

Good morning Mr Sidorko, students, parents and staff of Marist College Canberra

Let me assure you that it is a pleasure and a delight for me to be with you today; it is a reminder of a very happy period in my own life.

I had but one single, short year here. It was a memorable one – my first year of teaching immediately after my Novitiate, a time when I met and worked with many fine people – students, families, staff and brothers. I won't mention the year because it was well before any of you students were born and probably well before many of your teachers were!

Since that time, this school has remained for me not only a reminder of a hopeful and idealistic period, but also a continuing example of a community that is characterised by many fine qualities: abundant vitality, creative energy, genuine faithfulness and wholehearted endeavour. In short, it represents what we hope for all Marist schools and ministries. I have always enjoyed my all too infrequent and short visits here. The Brothers generally, particularly those who have served here, have the same fond regard for this school and community.

However, today I am akin to a gate-crasher, for I asked Mr Sidorko if I could come and speak with you. I did that deliberately because I believe that there are some things that need to be said directly to this community by me as Leader of the Marists. I had such an opportunity last year, when I spoke at the Liturgy of Lament, but this

context is different because it is the College community as it is today. The topic though is much the same.

So let me explain the three things I have come here to say:

Firstly, I acknowledge the tragedy of sexual abuse that has afflicted this community in the past. Every organisation can have dark chapters, shadow sides and underbellies, but that this good school with its proud tradition has this particular aspect in its history is indeed shameful and a great sorrow. I had the opportunity recently to publicly reflect on how the Marist vision and way, noble and self-sacrificing in its origins, could be so grotesquely distorted by this crime. It is something that cannot easily be explained. Human failure accounts for it in large part, but there is a multiplicity of issues that requires close analysis, some societal, some cultural, some organisational. In many places and in many forums I have expressed sorrow and asked for forgiveness. This apology from all Marists, is genuine and enduring. I give it gladly in the spirit of healing, for there are too many lives that have been left broken by abuse.

Secondly, I recognise that the pain and suffering has been borne primarily by the victims and survivors of abuse, including those who were tragically abused here, and their loved ones. As we now know too well, there are also secondary victims who have been affected in a multitude of different ways by what has happened, including this very community, ex-students and their families, current students and your families, staff members past and present. Having to face the undeniable fact that terrible crimes were committed here at this School has caused dismay, hurt and pain to you and to the broader School Community. The recounting of these tragic events in inquiries and courts, criticisms from some quarters, negative comments made to people involved here, and the suspicions cast over this fine school – all these have an impact which I acknowledge. In many ways, you

have been innocent victims of this insidious wrong doing. Such a reality is instructive for us all – our actions always have consequences, some planned, others unintended. By what we decide and what we do we can create ripples of hope, or ripples of grief. I regret that for you and this community there has been far too much of the latter. I hope you know that you have not been alone, and that many others have stood with you, mostly in silence because there is so little that can be said, in your discomfort and pain.

Thirdly, I want to applaud you for the resilience you have shown in the face of these tragic realities; recognising that you, without having had anything to do with the original crimes that were committed, have paid a price in bearing the stain of this terrible legacy. This has been the unfortunate lot of this community over the last decade. Time and time again when there have been difficult moments, when anger and disgust have been expressed, you have remained strong. When the Marist name has been publicly disparaged and ridiculed, when evidence has pointed unequivocally to criminal behaviour, when people have questioned the relevance of schools such as this, you have borne the pain and persevered in hope. This College community has remained faithful to what is best in our Marist tradition. Over and above that, it has not tried to avoid the undeniable realities, or silence the critics, or reject survivors. There has been no pointing the finger and saying “it’s their problem, not ours”. This community has been receptive and gracious, loyal and above all compassionate in your recognition of the genuine hurt suffered by victims of these crimes.

Marist College Canberra has blended well the twin virtues of strength and gentleness. The Hebrew people of the Old Testament described the essential characteristics of God as faithful and

merciful. This is what we as Christians are called to be; this is what you have exemplified.

I know that he neither expects nor wants this, but I need to acknowledge the outstanding leadership of Mr Sidorko. As the leader of the College from 2006 he has had to manage this crisis as it has unfolded through public revelation and private despair, through court cases and the Royal Commission. He has reached out to victims with humanity and compassion. He has been an articulate spokesman. He has given thoughtful and compassionate responses as issues have arisen. He has instilled confidence and hope within this community and beyond. Marists everywhere are indebted to and proud of him, as we are of the staff and students of this College.

As much as we would like to, we cannot undo past actions or retract past decisions, we cannot re-write history, deleting the moments of failure and loss. All that is impossible. We live with our imperfect story and fractured experiences.

However, I want to assure you that the culture of the Marists is different today. Recently I read about the ways in which the culture of organisations can change; there were many listed, but one struck a chord: it was that cultural change can be brought about by scandal and public embarrassment. This has been our experience; and as a result we have changed; we have needed to change.

I hope and believe that your experience as students at this College is proof of that. I know from what I have observed and what I have heard that this school is a strong and vibrant community, where extraordinary efforts are made to educate and care for you. I sense it in the spirit here today, in the rapport between students and staff, and in the relationships you have with each other. I see it in the

programmes offered and the priorities emphasised. I am confident that here you are safe and secure, protected and supported.

So students, families and staff of Marist College Canberra:

I apologise that ex-students of this College have suffered grievously through the crimes and failures of the past.

I acknowledge the hurt you have experienced yourselves as a result of these tragic events.

I regret the damage to this fine school.

I recognise your strength, resilience, loyalty and faithfulness.

On behalf of all Marists I offer you our respect, admiration and gratitude.

This school community has lived its motto, *Servo Fidem*. You have kept the faith – and for this I thank you!

*Br Peter Carroll*

*Provincial*