



ST JOHN'S COLLEGE

within the University of Sydney

Speech at the Installation of the 21st Rector by Dr Mark Schembri

- Your Excellencies General the Honourable David Hurley, Governor-General of Australia, and Mrs Hurley:
- Prof Mark Scott Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Sydney
- Prof Joanne Wright, Deputy Vice-Chancellor
- Mr John McCarthy, Fellow of the Senate of the University of Sydney and former Ambassador to the Holy Sea
- The Hon Michael Daley, Attorney General of New South Wales
- The Hon Susan Carter, Shadow Assistant Attorney General of New South Wales,
- His Grace, Bishop Richard Umbers, Auxillary Bishop of Sydney
- Mr Chris Meney, Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Sydney,
- Mr Lawrence Buhagiar, Consul General of the Republic of Malta
- Council Chairman Mr John Coorey, Other Members of Council, Justices of NSW, other Heads of Colleges, other distinguished guests,
- Vice-Rector, College Staff and dear Students.

Welcome here today!

I am humbled and very grateful.

Most importantly, welcome to my children Abi, William, Georgia and Sophia and my wife Sarah, my sister Jeanine, and to Mum and Dad, Anne and Alfred, and Sue and Paul.

Abi and William like to joke that they are the true Rectors of this College – well today that joke finally comes to an end!

Many Colleges talk about being like a family. At St John's College we are a family.

It is a special occasion to reflect on my children, who were baptised in this chapel, and today I am humbled and honoured to be in a sense baptised into this College as Rector....even if my installation is one year late!

I was tempted to convince the students that I was starting up another tradition where one is actually installed a year after their commencement. In reality however, I was doing exactly what every university student does - I was seeking an extension.

So what is the real role of a college in the 21st Century? Indeed, what is the point of the university at all? Why are we in a chapel today? Pope John Paul II wrote and I quote:

“Born from the heart of the Church, a Catholic college is located in that course of tradition which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution. It has always been recognised as an incomparable centre of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity.

With every other University it shares that gaudium de veritate, so precious to Saint Augustine,

which is that joy of the searching for, discovering and communicating truth in every field of knowledge. A University's privileged task is to unite... the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth".

"Gaudium de veritate" - joy from truth - I love that phrase because when you see it you never forget it. We often call it the 'lightbulb' moment – the Eureka moment. I felt that joy when my mother, born in Malta, proudly talked in the five languages in which she is fluent.

I felt that *sense of truth* teaching in secondary schools in rural NSW.

I felt that *joy from truth* teaching students how to collect urine samples from horses and cattle at the Sydney Royal Easter Show.

And I felt that *joy* as a researcher here in the department of Theriogenology at the Sydney University. As you all of course know, theriogenologists work out how to make animals pregnant.

I felt that *indescribable joy* in learning how to deliver human babies, and in teaching my medical students how to do the same.

St John's College is full of these moments - though hopefully not the experience of delivering babies. We have a fantastic College life that brings the best current minds in professions and specialties to teach the best minds of the future. Students meet the global leaders of today here every week, knowing

that these students might be called to serve as the leaders of tomorrow.

I am also struck by the profound task ahead me – that is to ‘search always for the truth’ but having the certainty of – already knowing the fount of truth.

The task of a university is not to demolish the foundations of knowledge and excellence. It is not to deny the reality of what we know, but to always continue to dig deeper, to better understand and penetrate the mysteries of science, of humanity and of “why?”.

The relentless pursuit of what is good and true cannot capitulate to cynicism, scepticism and despair. A University College has not succeeded if its students leave confused, lost and purposeless. It must give certainty about what has been handed on and the inspiration to tomorrow’s leaders to go further. More than ever, people need meaning and purpose to make sense of the chaos, noise and darkness.

These College halls have seen the divisions caused by religious sectarianism and war. We were founded by an English Benedictine archbishop steeped in ancient academic traditions to provide access to university for the poorest students of early NSW.

There were times when some Irish Catholics, many who resided in this building, were told that they “need not apply” for jobs when they went searching. There were times when totalitarianism and intolerance bled the young students of this College. Generations destroyed in the flower of their youth. These times may yet come again. What is our response? What does the university and truth have to offer here? The answer is

immortalised in the story of Dr Kevin Fagan in our quadrangle. A student of St John's trained in these halls to run towards need and run towards death and danger - who gave his life for those prisoners on the Burma railway. Because greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friend.

Indeed, so much was at the very heart of this College's founding. One of the leading citizens of New South Wales at that time was John Hubert Plunkett, one of the true civic pioneers in New South Wales, and the first Catholic to hold high office in the British Empire. His words on the night of Monday, August 3 1857, fundraising for the opening of this College, were of the most profound anti-sectarianism and enlightenment. Plunkett said that while in England, the laws "set class against class, and religion against religion", but in New South Wales (quote) "instead of having any hostility against each other, we all run in the same race, and wish success one to another."

Plunkett continued: "We all have the same object in view – the general elevation of the country, and to prove to the world that the best way to make all classes satisfied is to have laws based on civil and religious liberty." What an ideal on which to build a University College.

Every age brings with it new challenges. Part of improving on what has come before includes an unapologetic and truthful critique of those things that are false and inauthentic. Great traditions at St John's College and the University of Sydney allow everyone to flourish. Such traditions are fundamentally opposed to fake and toxic so-called "traditions" of hazing, and false values of exclusion or division. False traditions denigrate and diminish rather than elevate and ennoble. We need to hold fast to what is good and strive to achieve that hope and

belief that we need to serve humanity. In this vision, there is absolutely no place for disrespect, violence, discrimination or assault.

The Colleges have always been part of the University. St John's has only ever had students of this university as its members. Women and men from all over the country, and many from New Zealand and internationally. Nearly half of our students come from regional and remote NSW, many on scholarships and bursaries to ensure excellence can be supported in students of every background. When the University semester ends, these halls fill again with school children in music camps utilising our performance spaces and, more importantly, the dreams that one day they too will come to the University of Sydney.

I am indeed humbled to stand here before you all and be installed into this office today. This office of the Rector of St John's College is always greater than the person. The symbols of duty carry with them reminders of great responsibility that we owe to each other.

In the words of my other alma mater, Harvard University, "Veritas" – truth, and the duty we owe to her. Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Today's music and the musical work of the choir here at St John's every Sunday reminds us that some truths cannot be expressed in mere words. Music and architecture are the very embodiments of what is good and true. The feeling of being a Johnnie is inextricably tied to our place here and our music. Richard Perrignon and his talented ensemble, thanks for your great work today.

Finally, two big thank yous: A profound thank you to the Honourable David Hurley, Governor-General of Australia, and Mrs Hurley. Two extraordinary Australians who have

embodied the best qualities of public service. It is a great honour for the College to have you here today.

Secondly another huge thank you to the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Prof Mark Scott. A world leader in the field of education who is bringing Sydney University on a remarkable process of development in reaching extraordinary heights.

Thank you to the wisdom and guidance of College Council, especially the Chairman Mr John Coorey, my hardworking staff, and above all the students who infuse this College with the “*gaudium de veritate*,” the joy from truth.

Thank you all for coming today to share this wonderful occasion with my family and me and I look forward to the food and drinks which will be served in the Philosophical room after the conclusion of the event.

Nisi Dominus frustra

M Schembri

Rector

22 October 2023

