

Schools can be centres

Speaking to Religious Education co-ordinators from Sydney's Catholic schools, Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP has set out the challenge

EARLIER this year I was in Rome for a meeting of the Pontifical Academy for Life. Just prior to my visit, a homeless man was buried in the Vatican graveyard. It would have been unremarkable in the early days of the Church – the reason St Peter's bones are where they are is that the Vatican Hill was a cemetery in the less desirable, marshy part of town, with a circus in which Christians were martyred as public entertainment. But in recent centuries it has been reserved for North European nobility, as well as a sprinkling of cardinals, artists and benefactors. What made the headlines was that the Pope had directed that a street-person, whose corpse had been in the morgue awaiting identification since he died in December, should be buried there.

Willy Herteleer was well known around St Peter's. The 80-year-old Belgian lived in the "small town" of the Borgo adjacent to the Vatican. Swiss Guards, shop-keepers and clergy would feed him and



Pope Francis greets the crowd as he arrives to lead his general audience in St Peter's Square on 29 April.

PHOTO: PAUL HARING

pay for his morning cappuccino. He attended the 7am Mass daily at Sant' Anna for

25 years, saying Holy Communion was his only "medicine". He was "rich in faith" if

not in money.

A canon of St Peter's, Mons Americo Ciani, knew him well, presided at his funeral and has painted his portrait. He describes how Willy engaged people in conversation as they passed to and from St Peter's. He'd ask "Do you remember to go to Confession every now and then? You should, you know, because you won't get to heaven without it!" or "Are you going regularly to Mass? You should, because otherwise you're missing out on Holy Communion!" Whatever was behind his destitution, it had not shaken his piety or missionary drive. Though Willy preached from a position of social "inferiority", he was a new evangelist.

1. Vision of a New Evangelisation

I've been asked repeatedly what my vision is for the archdiocese, including education. When I say I haven't come

with marching orders from the Vatican or some grand strategy of my own, people suspect I have a hidden agenda. So at my installation I laid it out in these terms: my hope is for "a Church in which the Gospel is preached with joy, the wisdom of our tradition mined with fidelity, the

If we get it right, schools will evangelise - and form the laity too

sacraments celebrated with dignity and welcome, and the seminaries, convents and youth groups teeming with new life; a Church in which our parishes, chaplaincies and educational institutions are true centres of the new evangelisation, our laity the-

ologically literate and spiritually well-formed, our outreach to the needy effective and growing – and God glorified above all". St John XXIII was pope when I started my Christian journey and if you were searching for a theme that unites the six popes I've lived under, it would surely be "the new evangelisation" that began with him and his Second Vatican Council.

So it's not just a personal idiosyncrasy! Clearly, the 165 Catholic schools in our archdiocese, educating over 85,000 students, are an enormous opportunity. If we get it right, the schools will not only be centres of the new evangelisation but platforms for other parts of my dream, such as a well-educated, well-formed laity, a Church for the poor, and the greater glory of God.

Before saying more about the what and why of this, a little bit about my own relationship to education. As a boy I attended four different Catholic schools in this archdiocese – and not because I was a serial offender! (Here I am in the jersey of the first Rugby League team of St Michael's, Lane Cove.) For some years I also taught Catholic school teachers, again in five different tertiary institutions. I've chaired the SACS (Sydney Archdiocesan Catholic Schools) Board and its Parramatta equivalent and chaired the CECNSW (Catholic Education Commission NSW) for the past decade. So schools are not foreign territory for me! A large part of my pastoral energy has been committed to reaching out to young people, most obviously with World Youth Day 2008 and as the Bishops' Delegate for Youth since. Evangelisation, education and formation loom large on my horizon, as I know they do on yours.

2. Context of MTD Catholics

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Catholic educators chat during a break in proceedings at last week's gathering.

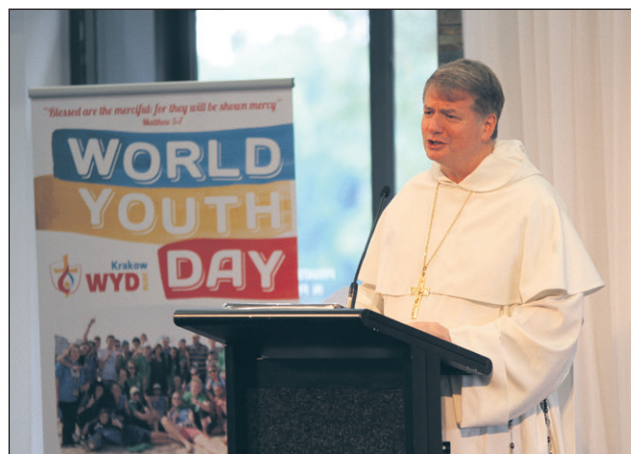
PHOTO: ROBERT HIINI

of a new evangelisation

for schools to become powerhouses of the vision of the Second Vatican Council: where all members of the Church missionary - starting now



Archbishop Fisher, at left and below, addresses Sydney archdiocesan Catholic schools staff, many of them Religious Education Coordinators, on his hope for the future of schools as key agents of the new evangelisation. Anyone can be involved, such as homeless Roman man Willy Herteleer, pictured above in a 2010 photo. Although homeless, Willy clearly carried out his role - and by all accounts in a remarkable way. Willy's gravestone in the Vatican gardens is pictured above. PHOTOS: LEFT AND BELOW: R HIINI; ABOVE: CNS



the public square and private life. Traditional Christian approaches to matters such as sexuality seem to them oppressive. This rings true for our culture too. 72 per cent of Australian youth who attend church as youngsters drop out as they grow older. One social scientist describes the 18-29 age bracket in Australia as the "black hole of church attendance".

Later today Anthony Cleary will discuss some findings of a survey of the faith of 14,000 of our students from Years 5, 7, 9 and 11. There are positives and negatives there; were it all positives I'd be suspicious the research was rigged. Nonetheless, I'm always open to being surprised. I was happily surprised to learn that one in five of our young people reports attending Sunday Mass - a higher figure than I had guessed - but sadly unsurprised to learn one in four only ever attends Mass at school. Again, I was pleased to learn that half our students attend Reconciliation at least annually, but sorry to hear a third never go. A quarter or more of our students are agnostic or disbelieve in God. Though I suspect our pastors, principals and parents would be none too pleased to have a street-person on our school grounds, we need some Aussie Willy Herteleers challenging us on the way to St Peter's!

Underpinning or confirming belief and practice is, of course, the experience of God. More than a third of those surveyed don't think or aren't sure whether they've ever experienced being close to God or Christ. Almost half are unconvinced religion helps at the big moments in life or influences the way they live. Most thought there are no moral absolutes and that morality is a personal choice. None of this will shock those

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Study of Youth and Religion, headed up by sociologist Christian Smith, published *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. It identified what it called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" as

the fastest growing religion amongst the young. Its key doctrines are that:

There is a god, who created and orders the world and watches over human beings

This god wants people to be nice to each other, as

taught by the Bible and most world religions

Being nice makes you happy (i.e. feel good about yourself) and makes the world a happier place (the purpose of life)

You don't have to involve

god in this too much, except when you've got problems, and

Whatever particular things people do or not in their lives, good people (which is most people) go to heaven when they die.

Another American researcher suggests that teenagers and young adults are commonly alienated from family, community and institutions, sceptical of Church authority, and think Christianity largely irrelevant to

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New missionaries can change everything



Young women attend a diocesan youth rally. Youth need don't just need maintenance, but missionary displeship as well, says Archbishop Fisher. PHOTO: CNS

FROM P7
working in the field with our young people... The question is: should we just resign ourselves to the inevitable slide of the culture religiously or

is there still something(s) we can do about all this?

3. Called to missionary discipleship

Put simply, evangelisa-

tion means "proclaiming the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ" so as to "bring people to faith through a personal encounter with Him." Catholics are not always

comfortable with the word evangelisation: it conjures up images of televangelists and door-knockers trying to liberate people from Babylonian captivity to Rome or preaching the prosperity Gospel. A UK survey ranked evangelists "better than tax inspectors but worse than prostitutes". Yet as the last six popes have never tired of reminding us, evangelisation is not optional for Catholics, not something we can leave to the official 'missionaries'.

We have now had more than two years of Pope Francis. His decision to bury Willy in the Vatican speaks volumes about his commitment not just to the poor but to evangelisation.

His first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, says "Missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church" and that the mission field is not deepest darkest Africa but "on the peripheries" of our own homes, workplaces, parishes and classrooms. "I dream," says the Pope, "of a missionary option, that is, a

missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures, can [all] be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than her self-preservation." "I prefer a Church that is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, to a Church which is [pallid and] unhealthy from being confined [indoors] and from clinging to its own security."

To be a missionary, on-the-streets Church requires that our proclamation always be faithful to the tradition we have received but in a contemporary and accessible idiom; that our catechesis begin with the basics of our faith and lead to a "solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled" formation; and that it be fed in the interior space of prayer that gives Christian meaning and direction to all our busy activity.

We are called not merely to be maintenance-men in our schools but "missionary disciples".

Consistent with Vatican II's reminder of the priestly, royal and prophetic dignity of the faithful, the Pope argues that "every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be

4. Still at a crossroads

Will we respond to this call of the contemporary Church? In 2007 the NSW bishops recognised that Catholic schools were at something of a crossroads, not just with respect to enrolments, funding, curriculum and pedagogies, but with respect to their very identity and mission.

They challenged us to ensure that our schools are truly Catholic in their identity and life, are centres of the new evangelisation, enable our students to achieve high levels of Catholic religious literacy and practice, and are led and staffed by people who will contribute to these goals. In considering the Catholic 'soul' of our schools, the Bishops emphasised:

- a school-wide goal of forming Christian disciples, with appropriate world view, character and behaviour

- an attractive RE curriculum, texts and resources, taught by teachers with appropriate RE qualifications and pedagogies

- priority for RE in staffing, time, space and resource allocation

- schools as places of Catholic imagination and spirituality, centres of prayer and sacrament

- schools that involve families, parish and diocese in the evangelising and catechising process.

The bishops asked that at the very least by the end of their schooling, students know core Catholic teachings, Scriptures, history and tradition, and how these are to be lived in the world; that there have been many attempts to ensure an affective experience of God beyond the cognitive understandings; and that at least some will have been fired up to believe and live these things beyond their school days.

Is this an unreal expectation?

NEXT WEEK: RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP IN OUR SCHOOLS

This is the edited text of Archbishop Fisher's talk to Sydney archdiocesan religious education co-ordinators and school staff at PLACE last Monday. The full text can be found at:

www.catholicweekly.com.au

We are not just 'maintenance men' but missionary disciples as well

actively engaged in evangelisation". That includes those in our Catholic schools:

Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelisation of culture, even in those countries where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods.

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Pope Francis says every Christian is challenged – here and now – to become a missionary wherever they are. That includes, says Archbishop Fisher, Catholic schools as well. PHOTO: CNS

Schools 'must be oases

Speaking to Religious Education co-ordinators from Sydney's Catholic schools, Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP has set out the challenge

I remember a conversation with a prominent, non-believing academic whose wife is Jewish and whose daughters attended a Jewish school. At the time we were both teaching future Catholic school teachers, including RE teachers, at ACU. He told me he was mystified that children at Jewish schools emerged well-versed in the theology and traditions, customs and heroes of the Jewish religion – whether or not they believed or practised Judaism – but that so many of the Catholic school graduates we were then preparing to be teachers knew so little about their tradition, and Catholic leaders and systems seemed resigned to that. We must aspire to better.

5. Response: achievements and aspirations

Anyone who thought that eight years on we've ticked all the boxes in *Crossroads* would be delusional. It would be like saying we've done the Gospel. But we can certainly point to important initiatives in response to the charge in that document and other Church rhetoric. In large part due to your efforts:

- Our schools are committed to providing a diverse range of individual and communal prayer experiences including Adoration, the Rosary and Christian meditation.

- Our schools have a robust RE curriculum, texts, religious literacy testing and focus on religious experience and moral reasoning.

- As I know more intimately and appreciate more gratefully than anyone, Catholic schools played a huge part in the success of World Youth Day in 2008 and have been generously involved in local, national and international festivals of faith ever since. Sydney leads the Church in Australia in this and dedicated youth ministry modelled on and complementing these experiences is increasingly commonplace in school and parish.

- The Family and Faith Program in many of our schools is strengthening the faith of parents and connecting families to the religious life of school and parish.

- The faith formation of staff is approached comprehensively through academic degrees, PD programs, pilgrimages and immersion experiences, prayer and retreats. Each school has a three-year faith formation plan to support continuing faith development of staff and students. Over 400 of our teachers are undertaking further theological study.

- The Archbishop's Charter lists aspirations and expectations for our schools. It recognises the complex goal of educating children in the



'We must identify idealistic young people as future priests, spouses and teachers and create environments in which that idealism is fostered and those vocations flourish.'

Scriptures and Tradition, and forming them intellectually, morally, imaginatively, liturgically and socially.

- Last year's external review affirmed the many good things happening in Catholic education in Sydney, especially in Catholic identity and mission on the one hand, and quality teaching and learning on the other.

But the more we learn in life the more we realise we don't know. So, too, the better we fulfil the identity and mission of the Catholic school the more keenly we feel the need to do better. Here are some of the pressing challenges and goals for Catholic education in Sydney:

- Of particular relevance to RECs and Youth Ministers is strengthening religious leadership in our schools. I am especially mindful of the myriad demands on you and how time poor you may feel as you work with the leadership team in overseeing Catholic identity and mission in your school; as you evangelise, catechise and form our young people yourselves and with others; as you program, teach and assess formal Religious Education; as you plan and conduct quality liturgical and prayer experiences, youth ministry initiatives, school retreats and social service activities; as you collaborate with, support and strengthen relationships with parishes, Church agencies and the wider archdiocese – all on point-something

SMALL GESTURE, BIG MEANING

Jean-Francois Millet's *The Angelus* is a famous depiction of a moment of faith in the lives of ordinary people. Two peasants are bowed in prayer at the end of their day's work at Barbizon in northern France. The church of Chailly-en-Bierre is visible on the horizon; presumably its bell has just rung. Following Archbishop Fisher's call, approximately 100,000 students and staff of schools and Church agencies now pray the prayer daily.



of a work-week! At times it's probably exhausting or demoralising. But please know that your work is highly valued by the Church and by your archbishop; indeed it is absolutely crucial to the mission of the Church. Much as I would love to be teaching

Before young people can pray or act, they must encounter Christ

the RE classes and conducting youth ministry activities, I must rely on you to be my mouth and hands in these matters. I will endeavour to

ensure that your work is given the recognition, priority and support it deserves. You need to be encouraged and nourished in ways that will sustain you in your work and help it to be fruitful.

- Another challenge is recovering Catholic cultural identity and confidence among our young Catholic school teachers. If Catholic students are sometimes mocked by their peers for going to Mass or Confession, so too young Catholic teachers may feel odd for being passionate about the faith or even wishing they were. Some powers in the industrial scene at the moment, and other influences in the wider culture, discourage staff from bringing a well-formed Catholic conscience with

them to work and the rest of life. So we must identify idealistic young people to be our future priests and religious, spouses and parents, school principals, RECs, youth ministers and teachers, and create environments in which that idealism is fostered and those vocations flourish.

- We must not only work at 'growing' our system and individual schools, but at growing our Catholic enrolments in those schools, especially in schools where this is already below three-quarters, and growing the proportion of them who are more than non-Catholics (= nominal Catholics) but have some passion for faith and practice.

- Before we can get young people praying or acting for

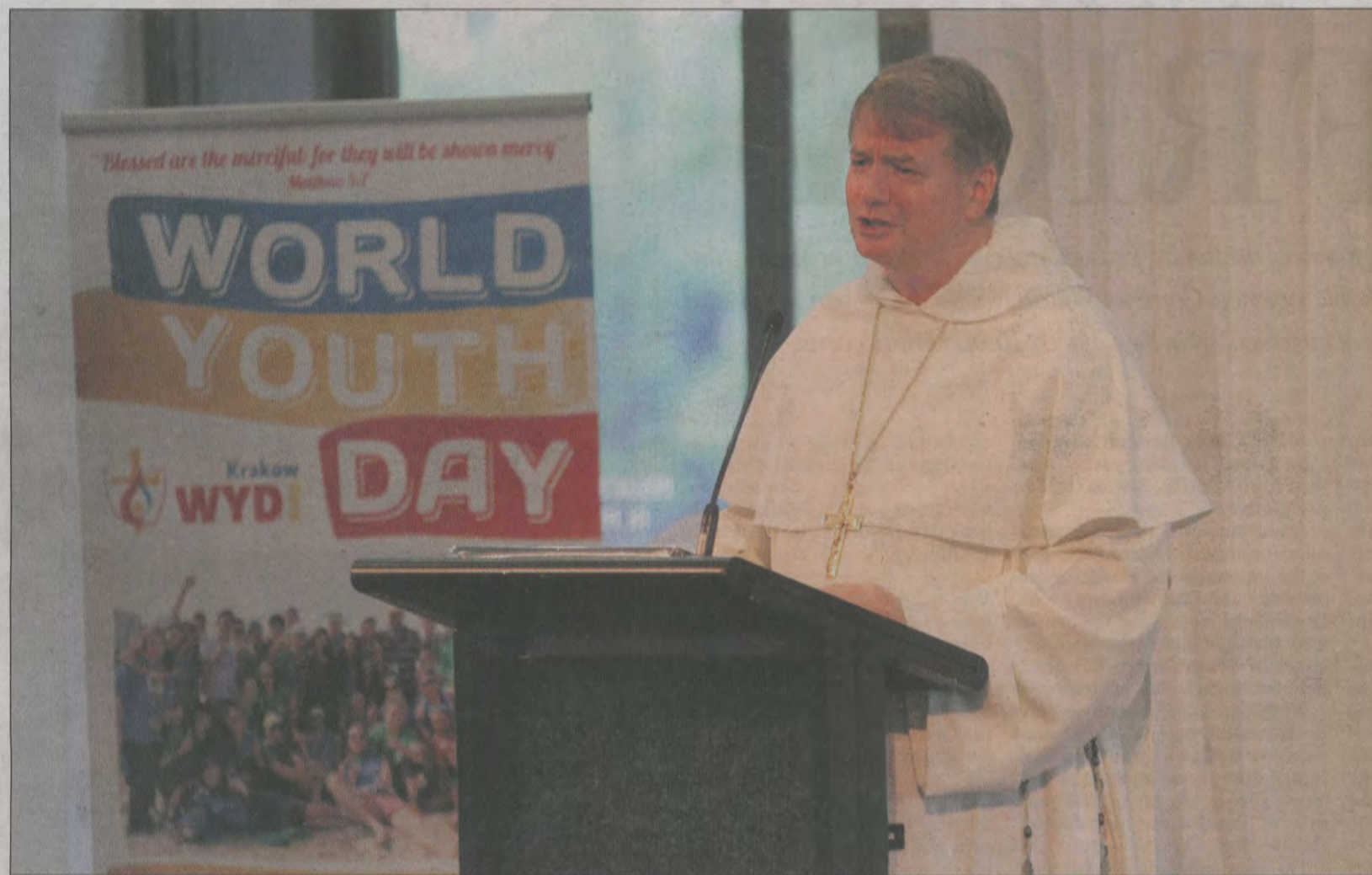
social justice or being peer evangelists, they must themselves encounter Christ, his Gospel and his Church, in contexts that have the potential to fire them up for faith. Faith festivals and youth ministry in schools are relatively recent initiatives and no doubt more can be done, especially in linking these with parish, but they are important responses to the reality of so many young people being disconnected from the Faith and from its expression in the home and parish. Last year, I published a document on the effects of such festivals on young Australians and how we might maximise these. I would like to see attendance at such 'intensives in Catholic faith life' as an ordinary part of the formation of beginning teachers.

- Our schools must be oases of Catholic prayer and life in which each person is welcomed, formed and sent. We are doing a lot in this area but it is still uneven: we are, for instance, often more comfortable talking and doing social justice than other areas of Catholic morality, in talking morality than the rest of faith, in talking Catholicism-lite in a study of comparative religion than talking full-cream Catholicism.

- Strangely, around age 16-18 when many young people are most intensely asking the big questions about God, the universe and themselves, about vocation and moral-

of Catholic prayer, life'

for schools to become powerhouses of the vision of the Second Vatican Council: where all members of the Church missionary - starting now



The Archbishop of Sydney, Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP, addresses Sydney archdiocesan religious education co-ordinators and other school workers. PHOTO: ROBERT HIINI

ity, and are about to enter the world of universities and workplaces where they will face many challenges to their faith and morality, we tend to reduce our religious education input. I am not against the study of other faiths, but I do think our children should know their own tradition best. So I have asked the CEO to see if we can achieve a Board-approved Catholic Studies unit among the options for the HSC.

● In addition to evangelising and catechising, R.E. (and indeed the rest of the curriculum and life of the school) helps in forming consciences, including the 'social conscience', of students. In the life of the new NSW Parliament we are likely to see moves to further widen the licence for abortion, to legalise euthanasia, to take away rights of conscience in these matters from health-workers, to remove religious liberty protections for schools from Anti-Discrimination laws, to redefine the fundamental institution of marriage and family, and to reduce various forms of assistance to the needy. Are our students offered the wisdom of our tradition for navigating such complex intersections of private morality and public policy? Or do many teachers avoid such 'neuralgic' topics because they lack sympathy with Catholic positions on these matters, fear offending someone, or lack confidence in how to approach such contentious

areas themselves?

● Deepening collaboration between school and parish is a perennial challenge. They must not be separate silos into which we put students, parishioners and energies: they are different faces of the one evangelising mission and so must complement and support each other better than they presently do.

6. Missionary disciples making an Angelus of their lives

In a week's time we will celebrate the Solemnity of Our Lady Help of Christians, patron of our country and our archdiocese. Throughout history, the Church has honoured Mary through such devotions, art and feasts. The Annunciation in one such feast.

We recall a late school-aged girl, who sits deep in prayer and contemplation as the angel of the Lord appears and declares unto her the Hail Mary. The ancient fathers imagined all humanity past, present and future, all the angels and animals, the whole material and spiritual universe, hushed, anxiously listening: the first Eve said NO to what God asked of her, what will this new Eve say? After some consternation and explanation she says "I am the handmaid of the Lord: be it done unto me according to thy word". By her consent God comes to dwell among us, as one of us. All of history turns on this fiat. Everything is either BC,

before that moment, or AD, after it: the moment of the Angelus.

From ancient times the Angelus was said at noon, when the sun is highest in the sky, and sometimes at dawn and dusk when the light is coming and going. Bells are customarily rung to encourage people to stop work, if only for a few moments, and reflect upon God's gifts to us; to ask themselves what all the busyness is for and how it serves the enfleshment of God; and to say 'Yes', 'Please' and 'Thank you'!

When I was a young auxiliary bishop in Sydney, awaiting a permanent secretary, we hired an excellent temp

Sign of unity with archdiocese a 'powerhouse of prayer' at noon

who knew almost nothing about religion beyond Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. I explained that one of her jobs would be to ring the Angelus at noon each day. "No problem," she said.

But later in the day she came back to ask: "What's the phone number of that evangelist you want me to ring each day?"

After I introduced the ringing of the Angelus in my parish I got mostly favourable comments. But a non-

Catholic lady complained that the bell was tormenting her dog and wondered if that was why I did it. I explained the value of stopping each day to ponder what life's all for, to give thanks and to consecrate our day at its mid-point to the service of God and people. She responded that she thought that was a lovely idea! I don't know what she prayed each day thereafter: probably that her dog would stop barking! But she saw the sense in stopping, thinking and thanking. I've already heard of a school that rings the Angelus observing workmen onsite stopping and praying at the sound of the bell with the school community. The bell itself is an evangelist!

Now we'll be doing it together, as an archdiocese, perhaps 100,000 of us staff and students in our systemic and congregational schools, in parishes and agencies too.

I pray the Angelus each day with my chancery staff. What a sign of unity as the archdiocese of Sydney becomes a veritable powerhouse of prayer around mid-day each day!

Whether or not it will answer our state government's energy needs, it will certainly help power the Church!

I am grateful to our principals, RECs and teachers that our schools have responded so generously to my direction that the Angelus be prayed in all our schools at noon each day. Some are doing it over the PA; some may

have students or teachers lead it in class. Some already have or are arranging to get a bell and there is much competition as to who gets to

ring it. By cultivating such habits, we are helping ensure that breaking and praying are part of the ordinary rhythm of life for our young people, like tooth brushing. And then, when the hard times come, when the puzzle is deep or the need is great, they will know where to go.

Conclusion

Willy Herteleer is dead and buried but his story goes on. Mass and Confession, loving God and neighbour, talking to both about both, a relationship with Christ lived in poverty and at the peripheries yet flowing from the very heart of the Church - this was his simple formula and it touched the lowest to the highest. He shows that we are all in this together. Great things have been achieved in Catholic education in this archdiocese; yet we confidently look to those in our schools to achieve even greater. By the gift of yourselves we can hope to see more young men and women of faith and character whose gifts are nurtured and who will contribute to building up God's kingdom. Thank you for your part in that sacred adventure.

Part 2 of the edited text of the recent talk by the Archbishop of Sydney, Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP, to Sydney archdiocesan religious education co-ordinators. Full text can be found at: www.catholicweekly.com.au



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