

What is a greater work?

Occasional Address
for the Education Faculty Graduation Ceremony
Australian Catholic University

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by Mark Raper SJ ¹

What is a greater work than to direct the minds and form the character of the young? I hold with certainty, that no painter, no sculptor, nor any other artist does such excellent work as the one who moulds the mind of youth.

St John Chrysostom

Teaching has an extraordinary moral depth and is one of the most effective and creative activities, for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings. The personal relationships between teachers and students, therefore, assume an enormous importance and are not limited simply to giving and taking.

Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1998, Section 19

Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, members of University Senate and Chapter, teachers and staff, graduands, parents and families, ladies and gentlemen: thank you for your invitation to join this important celebration.

Congratulations to the Australian Catholic University for the hope that you give our country and our world through a new cohort of graduate educators. Tonight we thank all our own teachers, who've helped each of us be here today. Acknowledging the academic faculty of ACU, I recall John Paul II's words, speaking to Australian educators on his 1986 visit '...you who devote yourselves to the work of the mind, to reflection and to teaching ...By dedicating yourselves

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to human learning, you declare your willingness to stand face to face with truth – the truth about the human person in relation to the whole world, to all creation.²

I acknowledge too the staff of the university, librarians, secretaries, security workers. You make it all possible. The university goes forward on your shoulders.

May I pay tribute also to parents, family members, partners and all who have supported our new graduates, enabling them to be here tonight. You should be very proud.

Finally, congratulations to you graduates for the vocation you have chosen and for your diligence in pursuing it. 'I hold with certainty,' said St John Chrysostom 1600 years ago, 'that no painter, no sculptor, nor any other artist does such excellent work as the one who moulds the mind of youth.' The Congregation for Catholic Education wrote: 'teaching...is one of the most effective and creative activities, for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings.'³

Before going further, let us acknowledge the indigenous people for whom this land was always home. Next week is National Reconciliation Week. Next Tuesday 27th will mark the anniversary of the 1967 referendum in which 90% of Australians voted to remove from the Australian Constitution the clauses that discriminated against aboriginal people. And June 3 is Mabo Day, recalling the 1992 High Court judgement that recognised native title rights and overturned the myth of *terra nullius*, that the land was unoccupied before 1788. It is hard to imagine that our nation was founded on such an obvious untruth. These are important anniversaries for a university dedicated to the search for truth, and committed to uphold human life and dignity.

Let us recognize and own our shared history with Australia's indigenous people, and our common aspiration for a future world where all people will be respected. Indigenous Australian culture is the oldest living human culture in the world today, even more ancient than that of the Iraqi people whose now-scarred homeland, once called Mesopotamia, is one of the cradles of civilisation.

Mentioning Iraq, I invite you to acknowledge the men and women of Australia's armed forces who were placed in harm's way in recent months in the Middle East. And let us call to mind those Iraqi children, women and men who now wait anxiously in their homes in Baghdad, Basra or Nasiriyah for their country to recover from the neglect, the sanctions, the bombing and the looting. Nasiriyah lies 20 kilometres from the city of Ur, believed to be the birthplace of Abraham. Through Ishmael and Isaac, his two sons by different mothers, Abraham became the ancestor of two peoples, the Arabs and the Hebrews. Since Christianity has historic origins in Judaism, Abraham is the father in faith to all three monotheistic religions. We have the one father in faith, we worship the one God, we hold the same belief that the treatment of the orphan, the widow and the stranger is the criterion of authenticity of our faith.

² John Paul II, Address to the Representatives of Australian Institutions of Higher Learning, Sydney, November 26, 1986

³ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* Vatican, April 22, 1998 #19 www.petersnet.net/browse/343.htm

Many of you will seek employment in Catholic schools. Let us acknowledge those religious women and men who built that Catholic education system, as well as the lay people who now follow in their footsteps. Brother Marcellin's studies of Catholic schools reveal that in the 1950s, 95% of teachers in Catholic schools were religious, and only 5% were lay teachers. In 1993 the statistics were already reversed, that is there were 4% religious teachers in Catholic schools and 96% of teachers were lay; whereas today 1.5% of teachers are religious.⁴ The Catholic schools, a major component of Australian education for over 175 years, today educate 20% of our country's youth. The Australian Catholic University is not simply filling a void left by the decline in religious as educators, its role is to form the lay people who today have a proper role of leadership in our Church and society. Your Vice-Chancellor has described ACU National's ideal graduates as 'highly competent in their chosen fields, ethical in their behaviour, with a developed critical habit of mind, an appreciation of the sacred in life and a commitment to serving the common good.'⁵

The changes of the past 50 years, of course, are minor compared with the transformation already being wrought in our globalised world. Paradoxically our world is more interconnected and at the same time more painfully divided than ever before. Globalisation provides both immense new challenges and stunning new opportunities for those committed to human solidarity and justice. The Bali bombing, the September 11 suicidal attacks on the United States, and the subsequent 'coalition of the willing' for a global war on terrorism indicate how fragile is our post-modern world, how elusive is the solidarity we seek, and how radically transformed is the context in which you will serve to educate the human spirit.

The students whom you will teach, and perhaps you too, can expect to change career, change city, even change country of residence several times in their working lives. You can face such a future of change with a sense of hope, thanks to the support of your families, your peers, and because of the open and critical education you have received. As Pope John Paul II said to an Italian Catholic university recently: Being 'Catholic', he said, commits your university not only to being an important institution in the Church, but it must combine this with 'sincere openness to any serious cultural expression, with critical reflection on the present and future of a society that is becoming multiethnic and multireligious.'⁶ First and foremost, in order to achieve any of its goals, a Catholic university must be a good university.⁷

My fellow Jesuit, Ignacio Ellacuria, Rector of the University of Central America, who was assassinated in 1989, described the vocation of a Christian university:⁸

⁴ Dr Marcellin Flynn & Dr Magdalena Mok *Catholic Schools 2000, A Longitudinal Study of Year 12 Students in Catholic Schools 1972 – 1982 – 1990 – 1998*, Catholic Education Commission, NSW, 2002, p. 294.

⁵ Australian Catholic University Mission Statement, August 13, 1998
www.acu.edu.au/acu_national/about_acu_national/mission_statement.cfm

⁶ John Paul II, speaking to Italy's Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Rome, April 13, 2000.

⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, St Paul Books and Media, Boston, 1990, # 7.

⁸ Ignacio Ellacuria SJ, Commencement Address, Santa Clara University, June 1982
www.scu.edu/Jesuits/ellacuria.html

(It) ... must take into account the Gospel preference for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor study at the university; it does not mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence – excellence needed in order to solve complex social problems. It does mean that the university should be present intellectually where it is needed: to provide science for those who have no science; to provide skills for the unskilled; to be a voice for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to promote and legitimate rights.

For the last 20 years I have had the privilege to serve refugees in many parts of the world. These twenty years have been marked by cruel conflicts, by massive disrespect of human rights, and by the forced displacement of millions of people. This violence stems from disrespect for the dignity and rights of the human person. Yet the corollary should also be true. From the respect of people will come peace. Or, where people are respected, there will be peace. Your task as teachers in today's world is to build a culture of respect, the basis for a culture of peace.

During the 1980s we encountered large stagnant refugee camps, of Vietnamese boat people, Cambodians, Afghans, Mozambicans, with populations awaiting solutions in Cold War terms. Then in the 1990s we witnessed displacements of tremendous scale, speed and size, such as the Rwandans, Bosnians, Liberians, and Kosovars. I have lived and worked in situations of massive internal forced displacements too, in Colombia, Burundi and Angola. Our first temptation, on seeing such immense suffering, is to come with the immediate needs of food, shelter, water. We did and still do some of that, of course. But we soon learned that these people have not abandoned everything, their families, their security, the land where the spirits of their ancestors lie, just for a shirt or a house. We learned to come with less means, fewer people, and to stay longer. Accompanying the people, we searched out and encouraged their own sources of hope, which lay in their own culture, their elderly, and in education. There is a proverb: "If it were not for hope, our hearts would break." It was essential to search with people for the sources of their hope, lest they die of sadness.

For people in exile, for whom the future is uncertain, education is a source of hope. Education gives refugees a focus. Education gives a window through which to imagine a possible future. Once, after beating through thick scrub in northern Uganda to find a group of Sudanese refugees who had spent weeks trekking to the border seeking safety, all the people asked of me was for a blackboard and chalk. In the Cambodian camps, which were highly politicised hothouses, I remember the relief of the students of mathematics, who could stretch their minds on a topic that it is very difficult to politicise. It is a joy to me, and I thank you Professor Sheehan, that ACU has entered a partnership with my old organisation, Jesuit Refugee Service, to educate Karen refugees on the Burma border in Thailand.

After these years abroad with refugees, I returned to Australia to discover with shock our treatment of those who arrive in our country seeking safety. If it is true that Iraq is now liberated, and that Iraqi people are now able to speak freely, what will they be thinking when they call their relatives and friends overseas to share their joy, only to discover that those in Australia, even the children, are

held captive in prisons or treated as non persons on temporary visas in the very country that went to Iraq as their liberators?

Tonight we sang our National Anthem, which has the lines: "For those who've come across the seas/ We've boundless plains to share." Whatever meaning those lines had for our forebears, they are apparently not to be taken literally today. 50 years ago, Australia helped to draft the Refugee Convention, and the government of Bob Menzies signed it in 1954. The new refugee crisis of today is that this international set of agreements is now, at the time it is most needed, being dismantled piece by piece by the very States that signed it into force. Moreover it is both impractical and expensive to approach this global problem in anything other than a global, collaborative way.

"The city of the merely human", wrote St. Augustine, "is built on love of self at the expense of the other. Whereas the city of God is built on the love of the other at the expense of the self." And in another place he said: "If the times are bad, then let us be better; then the times will be better, for we are the times."

Refugees demonstrate the worst in human society, and the best: the willingness to oppress others and the willingness to assist. Refugees are drenched in human value. In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, our treatment of refugees, widows and unaccompanied children is the criterion of authenticity of faith. Only a society without values will ignore its weakest members. We rely on you, our future educators, to live by these values of respect and of peace. It is in our national interest.