



Commemorative Ceremony for the Presentation Sisters Speech

**By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
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Iona Presentation College, Mosman Park
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One of the many often quoted comments of Pope Francis that we commonly hear referred to is his insistence that we do not live in an era of change so much as in a change of era. It is one of those catchy phrases which many people repeat but whose implications are not always realised. I think Pope Francis is right – both in terms of our Church and in terms of the wider world in which we live. Change is not just an element of our lives: it is the backdrop to our lives.

To cope with change is hard enough at any time and to cope with the pace of change we experience today is even harder and can be quite disorienting. But to live in and through a change of era is a much more momentous thing, and potentially a much more disorienting and destabilizing thing. One of the most challenging dimensions of such a change is to find the wisdom and discernment to identify those bedrock values which can keep us grounded as we find ourselves called to rethink everything, to do the hard work of recommitting ourselves to the values that matter most in terms of human flourishing, and to work out, in the midst of change, just what we cannot afford to let go of, no matter how much pressure we find ourselves under to adapt and change.

In thinking about these things, especially in terms of today's celebration and the decisions which have had to be made and which have been the catalyst for today's event, I find myself being led back to a phrase from one of Saint Paul's letters, the Letter to the Romans. Writing to the early Christian community in Rome St Paul says this: *Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Thus you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect* (Rom 12:2).

For a long time the sisters have been engaged in a process of discernment about the future of Iona College and the vital part the Lord is calling the sisters to play in that future. I am sure that this discernment has at times been very difficult. Iona College has I would imagine, always been seen as the jewel in the crown of the sisters' presence and ministry within the archdiocese of Perth and indeed in Western Australia generally. Through long years of faithful and at times heroic commitment the sisters have built a College, or perhaps it is better to say a community, of educational excellence, of apostolic initiative and courage, and of fidelity to the charism of Nano Nagle. Today we gather to acknowledge and express our deep gratitude to the sisters for this commitment, but also to assure them that what they have planted here in this corner of Perth will remain as a living, vibrant and faithful expression of the spirit and spirituality of their foundress, Nano Nagle. As a Catholic school community Iona College will always have at its heart the vocation to witness, in every aspect of its life, to Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life. But Iona College will always approach this rich mystery of Christ through the eyes of, and in the



footsteps of, Nano Nagle and the sisters, so many of whom are here today, who have enabled her vision to be realized in our own Australian context.

Of course the sisters are not leaving Iona College. Their presence here in their residence, very much in the midst of the College community, will be a rich source of witness and of blessing. I know the College will always see itself as a school in the tradition and spirit of the sisters. Both the school community and the sisters will know that Iona is the sisters' home. They will not be welcome here as honored guests; they will simply be here as members of the family.

But the sisters know that their presence will be in one sense at least of a different kind – and this I believe reflects very much the wisdom of Pope Francis's intuition that we are living through a change of era, not just through an era of change. It is my conviction that the present situation of religious life in the Church, especially in countries like our own, invites religious, like the Presentation Sisters, and indeed like myself, to rediscover an ancient truth about religious life: it is not so much about what we, as religious, do in the Church that matters. Rather it is about what we are in the Church.

After all, as the present story of Iona College shows, people do not need to join a religious order in order to run and teach in excellent, faith-filled, mission-centred schools. The men and women who work here at Iona prove that beyond any doubt. To say this is not in any way to diminish the importance of all that the sisters have done here at Iona for so many years. But it is to remind them, and all of us, that the real value of religious life lies not in the work but in the motivation for the work, not in what we do but in the "why" of what we do. And the "why" persists and endures long after the "what", for whatever reasons, is no longer possible. Religious life exists in order to be a living and powerful and visible reminder to the whole Church of the priority of the things of God in the midst of our day-to-day lives. To put it simply, religious are called to be, in what they do, yes, but much more in who they are and how they live, the God people in our lives – the people who remind us, simply because of their presence among us, that God matters and indeed that nothing else matters more. Your presence, sisters, here at Iona now and in the years to come, is your fulfilling of your vocation to be "God people" for the rest of us – and we need you now as much if not more than ever before.

What in some ways therefore looks like an ending is in fact a recapturing and a renewing of your vocation as Presentation Sisters. Like Nano Nagle with her lantern, your new presence to Iona College will, in the words of one of the psalms, be *a lamp for our steps and a light for our path*. Thank you for being that so clearly and faithfully for so many years – thank you for continuing to be that now and into the future. May God bless you all.