

200 years ago, Fr John Therry founded a school in Parramatta, west of Sydney. It was the first official Catholic school in Australia. Fr Therry had arrived in the colony in May 1820 and establishing a school was one of his very first projects. The school was already running in January 1821. There were 31 students, including 24 Catholics and 7 students of other faiths. Mr George Marley was employed as the teacher.

From those small beginnings, Catholic education grew to provide for young people all around the country. The first Catholic schools in our diocese of Ballarat were founded in 1849 – All Saints School in Portland and St Patrick’s School in Port Fairy. As more and more people settled throughout Victoria, new parishes were established and schools provided a focal point for the local Catholic community. In our diocese today, we rejoice in 53 primary schools and 11 secondary schools. We also rejoice in having a campus of Australian Catholic University.

Some of our schools are quite small, like that first Catholic school in Parramatta. Others are much larger, some with over a thousand students. Some of the students are just beginning their educational journey. Some have moved into the university stage. But whether the students are younger or older, whether the schools are large or small, the schools and university have a common mission. They seek to nurture the gifts of each student and build a community inspired by the teaching and example of Christ. Jesus came that we might have life and have it to the full. Our Catholic schools seek to lead each student to the fullness of life. Jesus came to serve. Our Catholic schools encourage students to use their gifts in service.

All around Australia today, school communities are gathering to celebrate 200 years of Catholic education. We’re doing so on the feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians. Back in 1844, the Catholic community of Australia and New Zealand chose Mary as Patroness of Australasia under the title of Our Lady, Help of Christians. As the Catholic faithful turned to Mary for help in those days, so we can turn to Mary for help in our days.

In this Mass, we’re asking Mary’s help particularly for our school communities. We pray that we might continue to build on the foundations laid over these past 200 years.

Of course, that history has not always been rosy. In the course of those years there have been some tragic failures, when children have been harmed rather than being cared for. We need to acknowledge those failures and learn from them so that we’ll be vigilant in caring for all the members of our communities. It’s important to recognise harm done. It’s also important to give thanks for all the good.

We give thanks for all those who have served our schools through these two centuries. We give thanks for the priests who have been like Fr Therry, promoting opportunities for education in each parish community. We give thanks for all those who have staffed schools, the laity like Mr Marley and the thousands of religious who have staffed our schools for so long. We give thanks for the families and all the parishioners who have made such sacrifices that their children might have a good education. We give thanks for these 200 years. We rejoice in our schools today. We look forward to continuing blessings on our education communities in the years ahead. When we look at the history of Catholic education in this country and when we look at the vibrant school communities we have around our diocese today, we have good reason to have firm faith in the future.