

**Talk to the Secondary Religious Education Teacher's Symposium,
St Francis Xavier College, Florey
Wednesday 14 December 2016
Address by Archbishop Christopher Prowse
Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn**

I am delighted to be with you all today. Firstly, I want to thank all of you for taking on the huge responsibility of being Religious Education teachers in our Secondary Schools throughout the Archdiocese. From a Bishop's point of view, there could be no higher priority in our schools than to be assured that the living Gospel of Jesus Christ alive in the Catholic Church is permeated like a fragrance throughout all our schools, especially through the Religious Education teachers and their classes and interaction with the students.

I wish to give a brief type of meditation or really adult education talk on an important aspect of our Catholic theology that underpins so much of what happens in Religious Education. It comes from our Catholic theological studies called Ecclesiology. This is our understanding of what it means to be Church.

I would like to present to you two particular dimensions of Catholic Ecclesiology.

The first one is called the Petrine Dimension.

It comes from our understanding of the role of St Peter in the Church.

When we visit Rome, and I'm sure many of you have, there are four major Basilicas. But the two principal Basilicas in antiquity in the centre of Rome are the Basilica of St Peter's and the Basilica of Mary Major. I will talk about the Basilica to Mary in a moment. But let us reflect on the Basilica of St Peter.

It is quite clear from even the latest archaeological studies that soon after he was crucified upside down in the Roman Circus in the Roman Empire, St Peter was buried nearby on a hill called the Vatican Hill. Immediately afterwards we have evidence that the primitive Christians decided to visit the grave and found inspiration from doing so. The Church was the Church of Martyrdom and the early Church gained a great deal of strength from the example of St Peter.

We must recall that St Peter was chosen to be what we would now call the first Pope by Jesus himself. The word Peter means 'rock'. When Jesus nominated him as the leader he was basically saying, "You are rock and upon this rock I will build my Church". These words and the words that followed are now seen inside the Basilica of St Peter. It is the biggest Church in Christendom. Even today people would make it a major priority to visit the Tomb of St Peter and to feel at one with the early Church. This early Church founded on St Peter and the Apostles we call the Apostolic Dimension of the Church.

Peter and the Apostles formed the, if you like, initial Apostolic leadership of the Church under St Peter. Even today, we consider the Bishops of the Church as successors of the Apostles. They have a pastoral Ministry of service and unity in the

Church in a local area and also universally with Peter and under Peter's successor, who is now Pope Francis.

Entry into the Church of course is always via Baptism. It is so essential for us to stress the initiation sacraments of the Church (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) but it is Baptism that is the gateway into membership with the Church. This is not something we have made up but goes back to the earliest moments of the Church. Here the Petrine Ministry of the Church with its ordered nature and its hierarchical structure is manifest for all to see.

This hierarchical dimension of the Church is a bit like a pyramid. We are all here to serve the Lord in an ordered fashion.

But this is only one of two vital dimensions of the Church.

The second dimension of the Church is its Marian Dimension.

There is a feminine dimension of the Church. It is based on Mary, the Mother of God.

The Basilica in Rome built in her honour is also a very ancient Church. From very early years of the Church people gathered on another hill of Rome near the present-day railway station. Particularly for the people of Rome, there is a great devotion to this Church and millions have flocked to it over the centuries. Particularly during the Middle Ages where one in three Romans died because of the plagues (esp. "Black Death") that spread throughout the city, people would flock to the Basilica of Mary Major to call on Mary's intercession and help. Mary is being given to us by Jesus himself on the Cross. Jesus has done that by the way he offered Mary to St John as his parting gift to the nascent Church gathered at the foot of the Cross.

So the Catholic Church describes herself in a feminine way. The Church is a woman. We talk about Holy 'Mother' Church. We don't talk about Holy 'Father' Church. The Church is a 'she' not an 'it' or a 'he'.

Later on, particularly in the writings of St Paul, the Church is described as the Bride of Christ. The nuptial mystery of the Church is found in this image of marriage.

In the deeper sense, the Church's impulse for Evangelisation and Mission comes from the Motherhood of the Church. Even the word 'mercy' comes from the word 'nurturing womb'. The Church gives birth to new members through its Missionary dimension. She is a mother and she cares for the many children she gives birth to. So there is a feminine dimension to the Church.

This could be symbolically seen as a circle. It is indicative of the many gifts and Charisms of service and love that the Church offers in a Marian way through the various and faithful gifts that God gives us.

So we have both a pyramid and a circle as defining the Church. They are to be seen together and never separated.

If the Petrine Ministry is disassociated from the Marian Ministry we can easily have an understanding of the Church which is overly bureaucratic and simply corporate in

nature. But the Church is never to be seen as a machine or purely an organisation! On the other hand, the Church can't be seen just in a circular manner. For example, many of my friends who are leaders in the Pentecostal Church in Australia suffer from an overly circular model of the Church. They find it hard to bring order and unity. Quite often each community seems to develop its own theology. The unity of the Church is under threat. I find it of great interest how many of these Pentecostal leaders are fascinated with Pope Francis. They clearly see him as very Pentecostal in his Ministry yet he is the leader of the hierarchical Church! They often come to me and talk to me about what could be described as the Petrine Ministry of the Church and how to develop that in their own Churches.

But both the Marian and the Petrine dimensions of the Church come together through the Holy Spirit.

As we head towards Christmas, we understand that we are celebrating the Nativity of Jesus 2000 years ago when God became one with us in the flesh in all things except sin. But we are also looking forward to the Second Coming of Jesus at the End of Time when there will be another Nativity of God. He will then come to us in Glory. We are now in the in-between time. The time between Christ's First Coming and Second Coming. We could say we are in the time of the Nativity of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, our Creed says, is "The Lord and Giver of Life". The Holy Spirit is the love relationship between God the Father and God the Son. The Holy Spirit is the God of energy and power. We often use the word 'fire' in regard to the Holy Spirit. It is this fire of the Holy Spirit that brings the different dimensions of the Church together in unity in Christ. The Marian and the Petrine dimensions of the Church come together by truly appreciating that it is God the Holy Spirit that is leading us as we make this pilgrimage and travel together towards the fullness of the Lord's Kingdom.

The Holy Spirit is the soul of all Evangelisation. Hence while I call it the 'Archbishop's Office 'for' Evangelisation'. It is not the office 'of' Evangelisation.

Just to conclude I would like to mention a little image that comes from the soon to Saint: Cardinal Francis Xavier in one of his books on hope.

In making reference to the Church and its different dimensions he brings forward a beautiful image that summarises all I've said above.

I quote him directly. "... like the person who bought coloured lamps and strung them throughout a village which had no electrical generator. When night came and the village remained pitch black, the villagers learnt the truth: the person's lamps could decorate, but could not light up anything".

As we go on with our day when we are looking at different ways in the Religious Education curriculum and the ways of teaching religion in these troubled times, let us remember this image. We might come up with the best curriculum and books to assist us and resources to match, but it is the Holy Spirit that gives the power for anything that we do to help us to bring people to Jesus.

It is the Holy Spirit who brings together these coloured lamps (Petrine Ministry), which are so beautiful but are not museum pieces. It is the Holy Spirit that brings them

together and draws light out of them in the midst of the darkness (Marian Dimension).

It ought remind us that no matter how competent and professional our resources and curriculum are, it really comes back to the Faith of the Religious Educator him or herself. We are a relational and encounter religion as Christians. We bring our personal encounter with Jesus alive in His Church to those that are sitting in front of us in our classrooms. We must bring together the Petrine and Marian Dimensions, together in the Holy Spirit. It is our greatest challenge and our greatest joy to do so.

May you feel my encouragement and blessing upon each one of you as you continue your great Evangelisation Ministry to make Jesus known and loved in the school in which you teach. May God bless you as Christmas approaches.