LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Recently I attended a celebration at St James’ Primary School in Sebastopol. The event included the blessing and opening of renovations and extensions to classrooms. I was delighted to see how spacious the new rooms are, with colourful furnishings and plenty of natural light making the whole building bright and attractive. The students and staff and a good number of parents gathered in one of the new areas for some prayers and some words of thanks to all those who had been involved in the project. We sang some hymns, with children’s clapping adding to the rhythm section. Those born in Australia and those from overseas all joined in an enthusiastic singing of “Advance, Australia fair!”

This celebration in St James’ Primary School was the fruit of much collaboration. It was made possible because people had worked together on a project that they cherished. In this case, the aim was to provide the best possible setting for students to learn in. To achieve this, the school community had worked with architect and builders to achieve a great result. I have seen such collaboration in schools around the diocese during my visits over this past year – not only for particular projects but also for the tasks that need to be done day after day, week after week, if a school is to provide the best possible opportunities for students to grow to maturity.

I have also seen similar collaboration in my visits to parishes and hospitals around the diocese. In regard to parishes, for example, this past weekend I spent time in Terang and Mortlake and I was pleased to see how people worked together to promote a prayerful celebration of the liturgy and warm hospitality over a cup of tea after Mass in each place. Some set up the altar, others played the organ and guitar and led the singing, others did the readings or helped to distribute communion. Some people brought cakes and scones for the cuppa after Mass. I have seen such varied service in each parish I have visited over the past twelve months.

Sometimes I have been to parishes for special occasions, such as Confirmation or First Communion. Sometimes I have joined parishioners for the usual Sunday Masses. In each case I have been touched by the dedication of those who give of their time and energy so generously to serve their local community. I have also been greatly impressed by the way people work together to foster their community’s prayer and also show their care for those in their community who are sick or in some other need.

In all these ways I have seen how people throughout our diocese are living out their faith in Christ in their prayer and in their practical kindness. It is a beautiful fulfilment of the line from the prophet Zechariah: “I will pour out on them a spirit of kindness and prayer”. (Zechariah 12:10)

In my travels around the diocese I have seen what it means to live as dedicated Christian communities. In January I announced the publication of a document called “Looking Forward”. This is a booklet that contains reflections on our life as a Catholic community, data about the current situation in our diocese and ideas for the future. The document includes a summary of key elements in the life of our diocesan community. We seek to give witness to the teachings of Christ by what we say and by what we do. We celebrate the love of God in the Eucharist and other sacraments. We serve those in need in our society. We reach out to those searching for meaning to share with them the good news of Jesus. The document has provided a focus for reflection and discussion in gatherings around the diocese.
Eight “Looking Forward” gatherings have been held in eight centres around the Diocese of Ballarat between July and October 2014. Altogether, more than five hundred people have attended. At each gathering, issues raised in the “Looking Forward” document were discussed and parishioners shared their hopes and ideas in smaller groups.

One of the most encouraging features of the gatherings has been the willingness to work together to foster the life of our communities. People showed themselves keen to do whatever they can to foster the life of our parishes and our diocese. This certainly includes a readiness to work with one another in our own parish. It also includes a readiness to work with people from neighbouring parishes for the good of each region in the diocese.

I hope we are able to continue this momentum in 2015 through some further gatherings to look more closely at how we can work together to care for one another in our Christian communities and how we can reach out to share the good news of Christ with our society as a whole.

Another event that was particularly significant for our diocese this year was a conference held in Sydney in August. It was called “Proclaim” because it focussed on ways to proclaim the good news of Christ to people today. Ballarat diocese was very well represented with forty-five people from our diocese attending.

Those who gathered for the Proclaim conference heard a range of presentations and shared ideas in workshops with people from parishes around Australia. The main presenters were from a parish in Baltimore in the United States. They spoke about giving special attention to music and to the homily at Sunday Mass and encouraging people to be actively involved in ministry in the parish.

Those who attended from our diocese have brought back ideas, such as taking steps to welcome people as they arrive for Sunday Mass. I hope parishes will try out some of these ideas in the months ahead. Then we will have the chance to reflect on these ideas and discuss their impact on parish life when we gather for a second series of Looking Forward meetings around the diocese in 2015.

To sum up, at this point of the year I am looking back with gratitude for all I have seen of true Christian living in parishes and schools and hospitals around the diocese. I am also looking forward with hope that we will be able to build on the fine foundations already laid. May we be blessed in living our faith now and in the years ahead.

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