

Our Lady of Dolours

A PASTORAL LETTER
TO OUR PARISH OF CHATSWOOD



PENTECOST
23 May 2021

My dear friends,

Pentecost, as an essential part of the story of Resurrection, celebrates the birth of the Church. The Spirit of God stirs into flame the hearts and minds of the first disciples and sends them forth with the passion of mission. It is an opportune time, therefore, for us to reflect on our own call to mission as a community of faith. In celebrating Pentecost this year, I would like to share with you something of my experience of being with you for the last five months, what I have learnt, and my sense of the opportunities that stretch before us.

It has been a singular privilege for me to have joined you at the beginning of this year. From the very outset I have felt very much at home here at Our Lady of Dolours Chatswood, and the last five months have been personally very exciting. I thank you for your welcome, and for your encouragement both of which have meant a great deal to me. Especially, I express my gratitude to our marvellous parish team for all their assistance in helping me settle into my new service of you, and also to the remarkable group of ministry leaders and coordinators. Thank you to you all for the way in which you have been teaching me, for your patience with me, and for your adaptability with me. Again, I pay tribute to the legacy of Fr Jim McKeon, whom I have succeeded, who ensured that the community retained its vibrancy through the challenging months of COVID. It has been inspirational to me to see how many people are engaged in sustaining the life of the parish.

From my first days with you I have been excited by particularity of our parish of Our Lady of Dolours. We are the only truly city church in our Diocese of Broken Bay. This has occasioned me to keep reflecting on what it might mean to be Church in the city. And not just any city, but in the very multi-cultural context which is Chatswood. This endows our church and parish with a unique character, quite different from other more suburban communities in our Diocese and around. I have recognised that our church truly is a regional hub, a centre to which many people from wide and far come, and from which many people go. This is amplified by the presence of the two high schools in our precinct: Mercy College and St Pius X College. These draw students and families to Chatswood from a wide regional area, joining over 300 of our students at our own valued parish primary school, Our Lady of Dolours. Every day more than 2000 students come to our precinct and depart from us. And our church is in the middle of it all, the point of intersection between all three schools – and for many students an experience of Church by which they will identify for their whole lives.

Consequently, we are a place of welcome for many people, near and far, and at all times of the day and night. It is very pleasing that our church is almost always open. It is extraordinary to see how many people come through the day, taking back to their homes something of the spirit they have experienced. This has made me deeply aware that our parish is constituted by a particular rhythm which is both centripetal and centrifugal – coming in and going out. This twofold energy is illustrated in a wonderful quote by the Scripture scholar, Donald Senior CP:

Jesus' ministry is something like the work of breathing – a drawing in of life into a vital centre; the extending of life to the farthest boundaries of reality. A gesture similar to an embrace, reaching out and drawing in.

If breathing out and breathing in is a metaphor for the divine act in the world, if reaching out in a gesture of compassion and justice to the boundaries of human life and drawing into a vital communion of life and love defines the mission of Jesus, then this is also the fundamental mission of the Church and of every form of ministry.

I would like to add that it is what I perceive as the very character of Our Lady of Dolours Chatswood.

Seeking to listen deeply to the nature of our community, it presents to me that we are an urban hub with six particular dimensions. These dimensions are such that one is not more important than another. Rather, they come together to form a remarkable kaleidoscope of pastoral life.

Firstly, we are place of hospitality for cultural communities and diverse approaches. We are blessed and enriched by our Filipino Catholic Community Chatswood, our Indonesian community, our Korean people, and our people of Chinese heritage. We also have a growing number of Spanish-speaking people. All find a home with us; each make a beautiful contribution. Together, we reflect the nature of the Kingdom of God which brings culture and language together in praise of the one God.

Secondly, we are a community with a strong practice of Catholic piety. This is given expression in the number of people who join us for Morning Prayer before Mass each day, for the number of people that attend Mass, in the praying of the Rosary every day, in the practice of Eucharistic Adoration several times each week, in the solid practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in the number who joined us for Divine Mercy Sunday – to name but a few. This blesses our parish and our church with an extraordinary foundation of prayer, devotion and spiritual sacrifice which we can never take for granted.

Thirdly, our parish enjoys a remarkably active network of ministry. We see this in the number of pastoral, social and liturgical ministries each with their own coordinator who give of their time and talent so generously. Subsequently, we have activities available for many different ages and groups. The back page of our Sunday bulletin is a testimony to the range and diversity of activities we have taking place every week. We are especially blessed with quite a unique and impressive outreach in children's ministry through being a centre of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. However, we have active associations for our young people and our Seniors too!

Fourthly, we are blessed with a vibrant liturgical life. So many people are involved in our celebrations in many different ways. For me, this was abundantly evident at Easter during which we enjoyed such special ceremonies marked by their order, beauty and creativity.

Fifthly, we endeavour to have an active outreach of faith formation. There is a constant offering of opportunities for faith formation and support. Some of these are evidenced in the groups that meet with regularity; others in the occasional series of lectures. Our Alpha program has great vitality; our baptismal preparation team welcome new families into the sacramental life. This Easter we welcomed 19 new Catholics through our RCIA program. Our Men Alive group supports many of our men. However, there are many other groups that meet for prayer and faith education, also.

Sixthly, we are a centre of social and civic advocacy. Our Marian Catholic Action group keep us mindful of various important social and political issues. Our Social Justice Group is re-developing to ensure that we deepen our sense of responsibility for local issues of homelessness and mental health. We seek to have active partnerships with those working in our neighbourhood for those disadvantaged, such as with Streetworks, and further afield, with Jesuit Refugee Services. We support the Parishes of Bourke and Brewarrina, and Maurbara Orphanage in Timor Leste

These characteristics are woven through by a very particular soul, a heart and spirit. The title of our church is not without meaning: Mary, Mother of Sorrows. We are a Marian church, dedicated to the one who stands at the foot of the Cross full of question, full of hope – the one who holds our sorrow in her heart and transforms them by her maternal attention. And therefore, it is the heart of Mary that permeates our life together and all that we do. I am especially attracted to the poem about being a Marian church written by Francois Marc which I attach as an appendix to this letter for our common reflection. It brings to life in a very evocative way the manner in which Mary's disposition informs ours and provides our community with a spirit of welcome and service.

It is against this background that I pledge to keep encouraging our community. 'Encourage' is one of my favourite words. It comes from the French, *en coeur*. It means literally, 'to draw out the heart of the other.' Therefore, I hope to keep drawing out our heart as a parish that it may become all that the Spirit wishes us to be. In this we will be greatly helped by our Parish Pastoral and Missionary Council, along with our Parish Finance Committee.

Then to further this, we will shortly introduce a survey, or a series of surveys, to help gauge how the community may be experiencing itself, especially as we emerge from the long disruption of COVID and to listen and to learn what you might find helpful for the community to focus on pastorally, and in other ways, in the time ahead.

Before us lie some very significant but very exciting opportunities and projects. We have already commenced the renovation of the presbytery which we hope to have completed this year; shortly we will commence on an incremental renovation of our parish office. Next year, however, I would like to put before us the renovation of our church entering its second century. To this end, shortly we will introduce a Community Consultation Paper that outlines the various possibilities before us – sound, lighting, painting, carpet. We have the most significant church building in our Diocese and in the whole of north Sydney. It is important that our church is truly beautiful and well maintained. Given our position, our history and our culture it may even be possible for us to apply for the status of 'minor-basilica'!

And then there is the wider question of our larger precinct which takes into account not only our church but its surrounding area. How might we take the opportunity to develop our entire precinct in light of the major civic developments occurring in Chatswood city in a way that maximises all that we would wish to become as a vibrant community of faith in our urban and multicultural context and also strengthens our identity as a precinct of Catholic education? To this end, I invite you to dream with me about all manner of creative and constructive possibilities. For this, we will go on a journey together over the time ahead.

Pentecost! A time to be en-fired! As we now emerge from COVID we are set on a journey of renewal. Let us take a step at a time, but also with commitment and purpose. Let us celebrate all that makes us a unique community of faith in all of its diverse features, and now let us lay the foundations for the second 100 years of our life.

Fr David Ranson PP VG

Plea for a Marian Church by Francois Marc

A Marian church follows Mary into the mountains going off with her to encounter life.
She visits men and women
and, although things may appear to be sterile, she is on the watch for what is coming to birth, for possibilities,
for the life which beats in things.

A Marian church rejoices and sings. Instead of bemoaning her fate
and the world's woes,
she is in wonder at the beauty
there is on earth and in the human heart. It is there she sees the work of God.

A Marian church knows she is the object of gratuitous love,
and that God has the heart of a mother.
She has seen God, a father standing in the doorway,
on the lookout for what he fears unlikely, his son's return;
she has seen God throwing fatherly arms around the boy's neck, placing the festal ring on his finger,
and organizing himself the home-coming feast. When she pages through the family album,
she sees Zacchaeus in his sycamore tree,
a woman taken in adultery, a woman of Samaria, other outsiders, lepers, beggars,
and a common prisoner on his execution stake. So, you see, a Marian church despairs of no one, does
not quench the still smoldering wick.

When she finds the abandoned on the side of the road, wounded by life,
she is moved with compassion.
With infinite tenderness, she tends their wounds.

She is the safe harbor ever open,
the refuge of sinners,
mater misericordiae, the mother of mercy.

A Marian church does not know the answers before the questions are asked.
Her path is not mapped out in advance.
She knows doubt and worry,
the night and loneliness.
This is the price she pays for the trust of others. She takes part in the conversation
but makes no claim to know everything.
She accepts that she must search.

A Marian church lives in Nazareth, in silence and simplicity.
She does not live in a castle.
her home is like any other home. She goes out
to chat with the other villagers. She weeps with them,
rejoices with them,
but never preaches to them. Above all she listens.

She does her shopping, draws water at the well,
she is invited when there is a wedding.
That's where she meets the people.
Many are delighted to sit and rest awhile in her home. There they breathe in happiness.

A Marian church stands at the foot of the cross. She does not take refuge in a fortress,
or in a chapel,
or in cautious silence,
when others are being crushed.
She is vulnerable, in her deeds as in her words. With humble courage,
she stands with the most insignificant.

A Marian church lets the winds of Pentecost come in, the winds that push outwards
and that loosen tongues.
And in the public square, in the marketplace
she is there to proclaim her message. Not to hammer home a doctrine,
nor to swell her ranks.
She says that the promise has been kept, the battle won,
that the Dragon has been thrown down forever. But here is the great secret
that she cannot but whisper:
to win the victory,
God has surrendered.

True, we are still in the 'in-between time,' the time of human history.
And what a sad history it is!

Yet, every evening, at the end of evensong, the church sings the Magnificat.
For the church knows where her joy resides.

And look:
God has not found our world uninhabitable;
he has not found uninhabitable the wounds of the world, the violence of the world, the wickedness of
the world. Precisely there is where he meets us.
And there, on the cross, we have seen it...
mercy,
the open heart of our God.

It is there, at the foot of the cross,
that a people has been born
a Marian people.
"Seeing his mother, and near her the disciple whom he loved, Jesus said to his mother: 'Woman, there
is your son.'
Then he said to the disciple: 'There is your mother.' From that hour the disciple took her into his home."

Brothers and sisters, let us be this people. Let us take Mary into our home.
Let us go in with her
into the "humble and rending joy"
of loving
and being loved.
And the church will be in this world, As St. Therese of Lisieux said,
"a heart radiant with love."

Come Holy Spirit,
fill the hearts of your faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit
and they shall be created.
And You shall renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit,
did instruct the hearts of the faithful,
grant that by the same Holy Spirit
we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations,
Through Christ Our Lord.

Amen.