

Launch of the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (NSW)
publication
*The Congregational School: Its History and Significance in Catholic
Education in NSW and Australia*

St Ignatius College, Riverview

**DISCOVERING THE PLATYPUS:
THE CONGREGATIONAL SCHOOL IN
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

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Commentators on Australian Catholic Education have sometimes described it as being like the platypus. Have you ever seen a platypus? If not, don't worry. You know what it looks like. You carry a picture of it around with you every day because it's the animal on our 20c coin. What those who liken Australian Catholic education to the platypus mean is not that Catholic education has a big beak, or a big tail, or that it is venomous, like the platypus. No. They mean to highlight that it is unique to Australia. It's true that the organisation and funding of non-government schools in Australia, especially Catholic schools, is a unique model. Taxpayers make a major contribution to all Catholic schools, including Riverview and all the other schools represented here today, yet in Australia individual Catholic schools enjoy a fundamental freedom to decide who gets to enrol in the school, who gets to teach in it and what is taught. Elsewhere in the world there have been, and still are, major public battles over all these issues. We have only minor skirmishes. How that uniqueness came about is part of the story we are celebrating here today in launching the Congregational School document.

You may know that the colony of NSW was already ten years old before Europeans first laid eyes on the platypus and when descriptions of this strange animal first reached London the British scientists decided it had to be a hoax. No such animal could exist, so they thought. So when Governor John Hunter sent a drawing of the platypus and a platypus pelt back to the London scientists in 1798 they were very suspicious. They thought some clever convict prankster had sewn a beaver onto a duck's bill and they set about looking for the stitching marks in the dried skin of the platypus.

To many, especially in other countries, the story of Catholic education in Australia looks equally unreal. They too search for the stitching marks in its skin. They find it hard to believe that Catholic schools are so well- resourced, that the teachers in them are as well paid as in government schools, that their academic standards are generally high, that new schools continue to be built and that Catholic schools educate one in every five young Australians or 20% of the population. That's what's unique about Australian Catholic schools. "*How did you manage that?*" they ask.

A key explanation for how we managed to create that unique model of schooling is set out in the Congregational school document being launched this morning. The document reminds us that Catholic schools in NSW date back to the 1820s. In fact the first known Catholic school which has continued to 2009 is the school founded in 1820 which later became Parramatta Marist now at Westmead. By the way, in case you're wondering, the oldest Catholic girls school in NSW is St Vincent's Potts Point (1858) and the oldest Catholic boys school is not Riverview, but St Stanislaus' Bathurst (1867). The document also reminds us of exactly how our Catholic schooling platypus evolved. It was in 1880 in NSW, slightly earlier or later in other states, that government financial support for Catholic schools was withdrawn. The colonial parliaments who agreed to this action had expected that Catholic schools, along with Anglican schools and Presbyterian schools, would wither on the vine. The prevailing liberal doctrine of the time presumed that educating all students in a single secular school owned and operated by the government would take the sting out of religious dispute and sectarianism, once and for all.

Enter the religious congregations. They saved the day for Catholic education in the 1880s. The Australian bishops, almost all of them Irish of course, turned to the religious congregations of Ireland and England but also Europe to supply teachers to replace the lay teachers whom they could no longer afford to pay. The congregations themselves generally flourished until the 1960s when the times began to change once more. By now, Catholic schooling was expanding too rapidly for congregations to keep supplying nuns and brothers to teach in them. At the same time, the Church set out to resolve its own challenges through the Second Vatican Council which opened discussion not only on the nature of the Catholic school but also on the nature of life in the religious congregations, forcing sometimes painful reviews of long established practices. Then numbers of religious began to decline.

If you look closely at the story of each of the congregations over the period from the late 19th to the early 21st century you can see its common threads. I'm currently reading a new history of the Patrician brothers in Australia which demonstrates the brothers' deep personal dedication of Faith and life to generations of families, a religiously founded belief in the individual, a sometimes ferocious commitment to academic application but a care for students which was deeply appreciated and

valued, except in the diocese of Bathurst where they were unceremoniously expelled by the bishop in the 1920s. It's an inspiring and instructive story, echoed in one way or another by every religious congregation who has worked in NSW schools and is represented here today. It's also a story of profound transformation as the Patrician brothers now wrestle with the problem of ageing and diminishing numbers but still possess a vibrant legacy in their schools.

By the 1970s Australian Catholic schools needed rescuing once more, this time it was through the restoration of government financial assistance which enabled the decreasing numbers of religious to be replaced by lay teachers with only minimum disruption to coverage or quality of Catholic schooling. Commonwealth and State Government funding, or 'State Aid' as it was first called, created a climate of stability for Catholic schooling. In that climate Catholic schools have been able to consolidate, get organised into supportive systems of schools, including congregational schools, and establish credibility as quality educational institutions open to all Australians who choose them. In the heyday of the religious congregations almost all their students were Catholic, now on average only 80% are Catholic.

Government assistance has been particularly valuable to religious congregations because it has taken much of the financial pressure off them. Unlike the situation in many other parts of the world, I would argue that the unique Australian model has given congregations the breathing space necessary to rethink and regroup.

Congregational schools, as we now know them, have generally been fortunate to retain in some way the direct presence of the religious and the powerful influence of their charism or tradition. That influence is most evident in secondary schools in NSW and in Special schools. Indeed, in 2009 all the Catholic special schools in NSW are owned and operated by congregations. They remain core business for the congregations concerned. This document is a sign that congregations have seized the moment and are now sure of the way ahead and of their integral contribution to Australian Catholic education.

Finally, if it helps to think of Australian Catholic education as like the platypus because it is a story unique to our island continent, always remember that it is different in one important respect. The platypus is considered a protected species. It's

not endangered, but must be protected at any cost. For now and the foreseeable future, the Australian Catholic school, including the congregational school, is neither endangered nor in need of special protection. For that we can thank generations of resolute bishops and some enlightened politicians. We can also thank the generations of parents who demonstrated faith in their schools and supported them through their more difficult times. Above all, however, we have to thank those who taught in them, led them and nurtured them – the various and diverse religious congregations of women and men. Their work endures, their spirit still inspires, their ideals still encourage. The *Congregational School* publication illuminates their past, present and future. They can look back with pride and forward with hope. I commend it to you.