

St Mary of the Cross MacKillop Oration 2026

Looking Through Difference to see Dignity

Duxton Hotel, Perth. Thursday 11 June 2026.

Dr Jerry Nockles

Good evening, Your Grace Archbishop Costelloe,
My Lord Bishops,
Distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends.

And thank you Auntie Donella for your warm welcome to country. It is always important to situation ourselves in the context of country – a context stretching back millennia.

We often think of the gift of the Word to First Nations people – of the revelation of God through the life of Jesus. But First Nations people give us a gift.

Pope John Paul II said *“their unique heritage and integration of ancient traditions with the Gospel are a vital gift to the universal Church.”*

... and it is wonderful to be on this country again – I have spent quite a bit of time in Western Australia: probably 5 or 6 years over two postings with the Royal Australian Navy, and I always enjoy coming back. I was last here this time last year and had the very great pleasure of hearing the Archbishop’s oration and I will reflect a little on part of that very fine teaching.

I do love to travel – other than leaving my family behind, it’s always a joy and it’s always an opportunity for learning.

One such experience for me was in 2011, I was privileged to be in Washington DC on the day the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial was dedicated on the National Mall.

It was a momentous occasion.

President Obama spoke with his signature poise and grace.

Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin performed – and these are voices that haven’t only entertained people of all ages for generations, but who carry the soul of a movement, don’t they? The heartbeat of a people.

So, picture the scene, if you will: there were about 10,000 people in the National Mall that day – mostly Black Americans. And me – an Australian born and bred in rural New South Wales, standing amongst them.

Now you can probably imagine, that when Aretha Franklin or Stevie Wonder sings in front of a crowd like that, the entire audience starts to move and ripple, and they move as one – the whole crowd in unison.

Everyone, that is, except one person.

Yours truly, doing something akin to what could be best and most charitably be described as Daggy Dad dancing.

I can tell you friends; I have never felt so white in my life!

But as awkward as I was, it was a profoundly humbling experience. And it was personally special for me.

My mother-in-law had been at the March on Washington in 1963 – the day Dr King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

So, to stand there, where history was made, to witness the memorial of a man who dreamed of justice and equality, was deeply moving.

And I do love history, and I have long loved American history, and an important part of that history is, of course, the civil rights movement.

On another occasion, I visited Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas, where the “Little Rock Nine” – nine Black American teenagers – bravely sought to attend a previously all-white school in 1957.

They were initially blocked by the Arkansas National Guard, under orders from the Governor of Arkansas.

But President Eisenhower intervened, sending the 101st Airborne Division to escort and protect these young students as they entered the school.

This story, like Dr King’s dream, reminds us of the courage it takes to confront injustice, to break down walls of division, and to claim the dignity that belongs to every human being.

I mentioned I had the pleasure of listening to Archbishop Tim’s oration last year as many of you would have. And I think it is always a pleasure to listen to and engage with our Bishops.

I try and call on them when I travel around visiting the members of CSSA. And I get a great deal from these encounters.

I was with Bishop Tim Norton in Broome earlier this week and I took a great deal away from our conversation – a great deal indeed. We spoke about witness and presence, and attraction, and what that means, and I came away much the better for it.

The Bishops are our teachers, and we are blessed to have them.

Now the Archbishop reminded us last year that St Mary of the Cross gave us two pieces of vital advice.

First: *Never see a need without doing something about it.*

This is the logic of social services.

But second – and it is so important: *Never forget who it is you are following.*

This is at the heart of our Christian discipleship.

At Catholic Social Services Australia, this has become something of a catchcry – a guiding light in our mission.

We never forget who we are accompanying – the vulnerable, the marginalised, the broken.

But we also never forget who we are following.

We follow Jesus.

Archbishop Tim reminded us that following Jesus means that when we see a need, we must ask ourselves:

What does responding according to the mind and heart of Jesus look like?

Every person's situation is unique.

Every response must touch their concrete reality, their needs, their hearts.

And it must always respect their dignity as beloved children of God.

This is the *how* that Archbishop Tim spoke of – the way our faith is lived out in concrete acts of love and service.

It is the integration of the *what* – the truth of who Jesus is – with the *who* – the person of Christ we follow – and the *how* – the compassionate, respectful response we are called to embody.

This harmony is essential.

Without it, our work risks becoming no more than good intentions or a well-meaning NGO.

But with it, we become the Body of Christ in the world – a living, breathing witness to God's love and mercy.

And we saw this at the Lifelink launch at Corpus Christi College earlier this week. And Archbishop Tim, and Bishop Don, and Bishop Nelson spoke to the children in a wonderful way.

Archbishop Tim reminded us of St Teresa of Avila and those wonderful words of being the Body of Christ in the world.

Christ has no body but yours, she said.

*No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world.*

This compels us to action, doesn't it.

At the that same event we saw the contributions of the various schools, and I was struck by an image that formed part of the presentation from St Munchins – it was a large sign that said: “Be the one”.

Be the one.

I think that is wonderful, because if not me: then who? If it's not us, friends: then who?

Who will be the hands and feet of Christ?

The Bishops Conference has recently made a submission to the Royal Commission into Antisemitism and Social Cohesion.

And I will be making a submission as well, representing Catholic Social Services Australia.

This Royal Commission's work is vital – confronting the scourge of antisemitism and *all* forms of hatred and division that fracture our society.

It reminds us that the call to social cohesion and respect for human dignity is urgent and ongoing. It is indeed a need we see that we must do something about. It is St Teresa's call to be the hands and feet of Christ in our world.

Antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, ageism, xenophobia – these aren't isolated problems.

They're all symptoms of the same disease: a failure to recognise and respect the inherent dignity of every human being.

When we fail to see the divine image in others, when fear, prejudice, or ignorance cloud our vision, we open the door to division and hatred.

This failure fragments our communities, undermines social cohesion, and offends and wounds the very fabric of our shared humanity.

The Bishops will also launch the latest Social Justice statement in August titled: *Living the Gospel in Times of Social Division* – and this will be a very a timely contribution in this country.

The social justice statements continue a critical conversation between the Bishops and our Church in Australia, but also to all people of good will. Building on what is often referred to as the Church’s best kept secret – Catholic Social Teaching.

This year marks 135 years since Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum* – often regarded as the foundational encyclical of modern Catholic Social Teaching.

Yet, for me, Catholic Social Teaching does not begin in 1891.

It begins in Genesis.

It begins with the eternal truth that every human being is lovingly made in the image and likeness of God.

This truth is not 135 years old; it is 5,000 years old.

It is the bedrock of our faith and the wellspring of our commitment to justice, compassion, and the common good. And it is a truth that is so gravely needed in the world today.

The Holy Father, speaking recently in Madrid, offered a timely and urgent reminder for our fractured times.

He said:

“Today, the temptation to gain popularity by fanning the flames of polarisation seems to have grown rather than diminished, and human dignity continues to be violated.”

He warned against “sterile simplifications” and called for a “fruitful appreciation of complexity” – a challenge to move beyond divisive narratives and embrace the rich diversity and nuance of our societies.

He appealed to Spain’s history as a place where languages, religions, and knowledge once coexisted in dialogue and peace, urging it to serve as a model for the rest of Europe and the world.

These words resonate deeply with the challenges we face here in Australia.

Our country is marked by increasing fault lines – divisions that threaten to fracture our communities and our shared future.

But the Catholic Church offers a unique and powerful gift to this moment.

And to say that is not to be arrogant or self-righteous – it's an underserved gift we have been given and we – through Grace and courage – can share that gift.

This gift – these eternal truths - they transcend politics. They transcend culture.

Truths that call us to recognise the sacred dignity in every person.

Truths that invite us to think carefully about the way we *look* at each other.

The way we *see* each other.

But let me return to my travels if you will. I also visited the Lorraine Motel in Memphis – the hotel where Dr King stayed on the night he was assassinated.

The Lorraine is now the National Civil Rights Museum. The final part of the tour of the Lorraine is the room Dr King was staying in.

Looking out towards the balcony where he was shot, you hear the words of his “Mountaintop” speech playing in the background – that incredible and prescient speech he made on the night before his death.

It was April 3, 1968.

Dr King knew his life was in grave danger.

He spoke with the calm certainty of a man who – in his words – had seen the promised land, even if he might not get there.

On the night before his assassination, he concluded his speech with these words:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so, I'm happy, tonight.

I'm not worried about anything.

I'm not fearing any man!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!

Dr King was an optimist – not a naive one, but a hopeful one.

He lived in the knowledge that justice and peace were coming, that God’s kingdom was on the horizon.

As people of God, we share that hope.

We live with a hope that never disappoints.

A hope that sustains us through struggle, division, and hardship.

A hope that calls us to keep climbing, keep striving, to keep loving – even when the path is steep and the night is dark.

A hope that reminds us to never see a need without doing something about it.

And there is much to learn from the reason Dr King was in Memphis.

Many of you will recall he was there to support the sanitation workers’ strike.

Two sanitation workers – what we might have referred to as garbage collectors – Echol Cole and Robert Walker, had died tragically a few months before.

They had taken shelter from the rain in the compactor at the back of their garbage truck – because no shelter was provided for them – and were crushed to death when the compactor activated.

This was not an isolated tragedy.

A year earlier, two other workers had died in similar circumstances.

The sanitation workers – almost entirely Black – endured dangerous working conditions, lower wages than their white counterparts, no uniforms, and no shelter when it rained.

In response, 1,300 sanitation workers declared a strike on February 12, 1968.

Many of you will instantly recognise or remember the sign the strikers carried that simply read: **“I Am A Man.”**

I am A Man.

These signs were more than slogans.

They were a declaration of dignity and humanity.

The origin of those signs was a man by the name of Reverend James Lawson, a key organiser of the strike. He said to the sanitation workers:

“For at the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person.

You are human beings. You are men. You deserve dignity.”

His words embody the message behind those iconic placards. But for us they echo those eternal truths I referred to.

This struggle for dignity, for recognition of humanity, is at the heart of what we are speaking about tonight.

Because every person here, and every person beyond this room, is lovingly made in the image and likeness of God.

I’m no theologian, but please let me unpack the way I think about this.

To be made in God’s *image* – the Hebrew word *tselem* – is to be a living reflection, a shadow cast by the infinite light of God’s being.

It is not a faint copy, but a profound imprint of the Divine.

To be made in God’s *likeness* – the Hebrew *demuth* – is to be called into a journey of growth and transformation. To be in close relation with the pure relationality of the triune God.

It is an invitation to become more fully who we were created to be, through faith, love, justice, and mercy.

We are made in the likeness of pure relationality, to be relational. For me, being human doesn’t really make sense if we are not in relation with God, and if we are not in relation with each other.

I like to think of this as being a *shadow* and an *echo* of the God who created us. The God who created us *with* love, *out of* love, and *for* love.

Together, these truths tell us that human dignity is not something earned or granted.

It is inherent.

It is inalienable.

It is the foundation of all our relationships and the foundation of our social service work.

Dignity is the sacred worth that belongs to every person simply by virtue of their existence – a worth that no failure, no flaw, no difference, and no circumstance can diminish.

To recognise this dignity is to recognise the presence of God in each other. The Divine spark in one another.

And this recognition calls us to *respect*.

And that word, respect, is very important. It comes from the Latin *respicere* – meaning to *look back* or *look again*.

It invites us to pause, to look afresh, and to reconsider what we thought we knew.

To *look again* is to refuse to settle for that first impression.

It leads us to open our eyes and open our hearts to the fullness of the person before us.

That is easy to say, and I know I struggle with this.

Because there are many filters, are there not? Filters that obscure that ability to see through difference.

But for me, respect is not only about looking *back* or looking *again*; It is about *looking through*.

I borrow this language of *looking through* from economics.

We hear it when the Reserve Bank is considering raising or lowering interest rates in response to inflation. The Bank makes a careful consideration to ‘look through’ surface changes – like electricity rebates or fuel excise cuts - to discern the deeper trend – the true rate of inflation, in the hope that that underlying reality guides sound decisions.

In our lives, in our communities, in our country, we need to do the same.

To *look through* the surface differences – the divisions, the fears, the misunderstandings – and see the deeper truth.

The truth that every person, no matter their background, their story, their struggle, their failures – each person bears the divine image.

To *look through* is to see the person behind the prejudice.

The hope behind the hardship.

The dignity behind the difference.

It is to recognise that our common humanity is not diminished by our diversity – it is enriched by it.

And this is not a call for uniformity over unity – on the contrary. We are a marvellous people, a wonderful people, precisely because of our diversity.

As the Holy Father said, the “*fruitful appreciation of complexity.*”

But difference can be challenging for some, indeed for many. It can be alarming. It can be confusing. It can be frightening.

When difference is a challenge for us, we need to *look through* to see that dignity.

So *looking through* difference isn't a passive act.

It's a courageous choice.

It requires us to move beyond fear, suspicion, and division.

Now that is a statement of the blindingly obvious, isn't it.

Of course, we know this. But knowing something and doing something about it are two different things.

Because if we just identify an issue without changing our own behaviour or indeed for us in social services, for challenging others' behaviours or the social structures that harm, we are just admiring a problem aren't we,

Dr King didn't just admire a problem. St Mary MacKillop didn't just admire a problem.

They spoke with a courageous truth. A truth that challenges all of us.

Pope Leo, in his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, reminds us that:

"Truth is not a territory to be defended, but a good to be shared."

This truth challenges us to reject polarisation and defensiveness.

In a world too often fractured by division, this call to shared truth and the common good is urgent.

It is the foundation for social cohesion – the glue that binds us as a community, as a nation, as a world.

It is the path to healing, justice, and peace.

And it is the legacy of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop.

She saw need and did something about it.

She saw hardship and responded with compassion.

She taught us that love is not easy, but it is necessary.

That dignity is not optional, but essential.

And that's the Church we need to be.

As I travel around and meet with Ministers and Parliamentarians, I give them a copy of the Holy Father's apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te*. And when I do, I draw their attention to a number of paragraphs that I find particularly inspiring or that I think might move them, but this one in particular – paragraph 120 – speaks to me in this very moment and about who we need to be as the People of God:

“Christian love breaks down every barrier, brings close those who were distant, unites strangers, and reconciles enemies.

It spans chasms that are humanly impossible to bridge, and it penetrates to the most hidden crevices of society. By its very nature, Christian love is prophetic: it works miracles and knows no limits. It makes what was apparently impossible happen.

Love is above all a way of looking at life and a way of living it.

A Church that sets no limits to love, that knows no enemies to fight but only men and women to love, is the Church that the world needs today.”

Amen.

Think back to what Reverend Lawson told those Sanitation workers in Memphis:

“You are human beings. You are men. You deserve dignity.”

So, when we *look through* difference, when we *look through* brokenness, when we *look through* failure and sin, when we *look through* fear, what do we see?

We see the divine shadow. And with the Grace of God, we can hear that divine echo in the other:

I am not a Jew. I am not a Christian. I am not a Muslim.
I am a human being.

I am not white. I am not black.
I am a human being.

I am not a prisoner. I am not a migrant. I am not a refugee.

I am a human being.

I am not a stranger. I am not your enemy.
I am a human being.

But I am not alone, because I am a human being.

I have inestimable worth, because I am a human being.

I am loved, because I am a human being.

My dear friends, we live and work in a difficult space, a challenging and sometimes tragic space: but like Dr King on that mountain top, we are optimists.

Not naive, but hopeful.

We live in the knowledge that God's kingdom is coming.

As people of God, we live with a hope that never disappoints.

A hope that sustains us through struggle and darkness.

A hope that calls us to keep climbing, keep striving, keep loving.

In the beautiful words of our Lord on a different mountain:

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

We, as the people of God, carry a wonderful gift for Australia and for the world.

A *light* that shines in the darkness.

A *hope* that never fades.

A *love* that transforms.

My prayer is that with God's Grace we go forth renewed in our commitment to *look through* difference and honour the dignity of every human being – lovingly made in the image and likeness of God.

Thank you. God bless.