

Vincentian Charism Day Presentation

Introduction

Good morning, everyone.

My name is Jerry Nockles, and I'm a very proud old boy of Stannies. I was here between 1980 and 1984 – and for those of you paying close attention, you'll notice that's a five-year stretch, not six. For the scholarly and the curious I will come back to explain why it wasn't six years a little later.

And this place does breed curiosity and scholarly pursuit: many schools pride themselves on teaching the three Rs – reading, writing, and arithmetic. But at Stannies, we improved on the three Rs' – We had the five Rs: reading, writing, arithmetic, Religion, and Rugby!

Indeed, there used to be a sign on the front door of the library – it might still be there – that read, "*Reading is important, but rugby is importanter!*"

That pretty much sums up the balance we all tried to strike here!

2025 was the fortieth anniversary of my year – the class of 1985. And the boys of my cohort – now like me – men in their late 50s, make the effort to come back. They laugh about the times they had here but what brings them back is far deeper than a jovial reminiscence about adolescent glory years – although there is much of that. But 40 years after leaving here – or 41 for me – I now find myself back here as the Chief Executive Officer of Catholic Social Services Australia, a role I began in January this year.

To give you a sense of what that means, CSSA is the national peak body for Catholic social service organisations across the country. We operate in around 700 sites nationwide, with a workforce of about 10,000 full-time employees and another 3,000 volunteers, delivering roughly \$1.4 billion worth of services.

For some years now, my morning prayer has been simply, 'Send me.' It wasn't always clear where that answer was leading me. I had learned important lessons in my life's journey and wanted to shift the needle on poverty and disadvantage in this country. I worked for child-focused organisations like UNICEF and World Vision, and I thought politics would provide the best vehicle to make a difference for the disadvantaged and marginalised – particularly vulnerable children. So, in 2022, I ran for Parliament. I tried and fell short, but God has a plan for us. By trusting Him – albeit imperfectly, and despite the many times I have failed – I have found that He has placed me where I can do more than I ever hoped. I will speak more about these lessons as we go.

CSSA members provide a wide range of vital services including housing and homelessness support, prevention of domestic violence, justice and equity initiatives, assistance for refugees and asylum seekers, mental health support, and reconciliation efforts with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They also engage in advocacy, community development, and leadership rooted in Catholic social teaching.

This is wonderful work, and I am genuinely blessed – truly the hands and feet of Christ in our communities, reaching out to those most in need with compassion and justice.

As I said, I started in January and my very first visit as CEO was to Centacare Central West and Orana right here in Bathurst. That was a deliberate choice because Bathurst is my hometown, and I wanted to start this next phase of my journey here. Bathurst remains at the core of my identity, and I still refer to it as ‘home’.

While I was back, I took the chance to visit my old primary school, St Philomena’s, and reconnect with the Sisters of Mercy. In fact, I met up with two of the Sisters who taught me when I was a small boy nearly 50 years ago – Sisters Michelle and Patricia. The Mercy Charism and the Vincentian Charism provided me a seamless and very valuable formation.

I also made sure to call in on Lindsay and Stannies. This was deeply important to me. My schooling and Catholic faith have brought me full circle to this moment – a twist of fate rich with meaning. And much like Stannies’ yearbook, Echoes, there are unmistakable echoes of my formation here that continue to resonate in my life today. To come back to this chapel, the marble hall, and to walk through this amazing building – a place that has left such an indelible mark on my life – was truly incredible.

The first thing Lindsay said to me was, “Welcome home.” And this really struck me, because it genuinely felt like I was coming home. I was deeply moved.

I must admit, just before that, I had a bit of a triggering moment standing outside Lindsay’s office in the corridor. I was standing right outside what used to be the Dean of Discipline’s office – a place where, with equal parts pride and shame, I admit I waited far too many times to receive the cane for some misdeed or another.

That day, I had a great chat with Lindsay. I was thrilled to hear how the College continues to grow and thrive. We talked about how my life has unfolded and the profound influence this place has had on me. Lindsay asked me to come back on Charism Day and speak about this – I think that was back in January or February, Lindsay? I was very happy to accept.

Today, I want to share how the Vincentian Charism and this wonderful school have shaped my life and continue to influence me.

This is a personal reflection – not just about history or doctrine but about lived experience. And so, I invite you to consider your own connection to the Charism and school as we journey together through this talk.

My Bathurst Upbringing and Early Formation

As I mentioned, I grew up in Bathurst, living from the age of three in public housing down the hill in Alfred Street, South Bathurst – near where the new St Philomena's now stands.

Living two doors down was my lifelong friend Dean Oxley, who with Bev kindly put me up in their home last night.

Life was a challenge for my family at that time. My father had left my mother with five children when I was three. My eldest sister was 12, and my younger sister Elizabeth was just 12 months old.

Many of you will know how the breakdown of a marriage often plunges women and families into poverty. My mother struggled, but I prefer to focus on the blessings I had: a loving, devoted mother; a supportive extended family; wonderful neighbours like the Oxleys; and a close-knit country community. Around me was the example of hard work – the belief that you worked hard to create a better life for yourself and your family.

I don't want to romanticise poverty – it's not pleasant. I recall my mother making a game for my sister and I to search through the house for any loose change we could find. But it was no game – my mother wanted to buy milk for the next morning.

But I was most certainly nourished by faith and formation through two wonderful Charisms – the Sisters of Mercy and the Vincentian Priests and Brothers.

Our family received much kindness and support from the Church. I recall our parish priest, Father Patrick Creed, visiting us and leaving gifts or money. Community groups like the Lions Club were also very kind. If you ever doubt whether those gifts donated to the Lions or Rotary make a difference to some child at Christmas – I am here to tell you they really do.

And I had another incredible influence on my teenage years in local Wiradjuri man, Ian McArtney, who some of you may know. Ian taught me how to walk quietly through life and country.

I mentioned I reconnected in January with Sisters Michelle and Patricia, from St Phil's. When I told my younger sister Elizabeth that I was visiting Srs Michelle and Patricia, she reminded me that the Sisters would provide us lunch on the occasions when we would otherwise have done without. It was a tiny school back then, any my year had just four boys.

Dean Oxley and I, along with Mark Howard and Pete McPhillamy. To give you a sense of the tight community, Pete, Mark and I were all born within a day of each other in Bathurst so our mothers would have been in the maternity ward together. Sadly, of those four, Dean and I are the only ones left. Mark had muscular dystrophy and passed away shortly after completing his HSC exams here at Stannies and Pete died a couple of years ago – Dean and I have a standing \$50 bet as to who will outlive the other!

My brothers and I attended Stannies on bursaries provided by the Vincentians – my mother could not have afforded the fees otherwise and the Vincentians saw to it that we could receive a great education and formation in this place.

Those years were not easy. I think many of you will know that people in difficult circumstances find negative coping mechanisms. My mother's negative coping mechanism

was alcohol, which robbed her of health and wellbeing. For the last years of her life, we moved from time to time between our home in Alfred St and my grandmother's house down near the railway station to give her space to recover.

My mother was not that violent or neglectful alcoholic: more that deeply lonely and sad alcoholic.

My mother's health declined through my years here at Stannies and in August 1984, when I was two-thirds of the way through Year 11, my mother passed away from chronic alcoholism. She was only 50 years old. My younger sister and I were orphaned at that time. I was 16; my sister Elizabeth was 13.

This loss was almost unbearable. I left school without completing my HSC and ran away to join the Navy – having no particular skills or talents to run away and join the circus!

But through all that hardship, I was never alone. The kindness and mercy extended to my family – by the Sisters of Mercy, the Vincentians, and the wider Church community – were not just acts of charity. They were the living embodiment of a deeper call, a call to see Christ in those who suffer and to walk alongside them with compassion and dignity.

This is the heart of the Vincentian Charism – a charism that shaped me then and continues to shape how I live and serve today.

What is Vincentian Charism?

The Vincentian Charism is rooted deeply in the life and mission of St Vincent de Paul, a man whose heart was profoundly moved by the plight of the poor and marginalised.

Born in 1581 in France, Vincent dedicated his life to serving those forgotten by society with humility, zeal, and an unwavering respect for human dignity.

At its core, the Vincentian Charism is much more than charity – it is about accompaniment. It calls us to walk alongside those in need, sharing their burdens, advocating for justice, and restoring dignity. As St Vincent famously said,

“Charity is the cement which binds communities to God and persons to one another.”

This reminds us that true charity is relational, not transactional.

The Charism is built on key pillars that guide both my work at Catholic Social Services Australia and the work of our members across the country:

Humility: St Vincent lived simply and taught that true service requires humility – recognising the dignity of every person without pride or superiority. This humility also opens the door to forgiveness, both of others and ourselves, as we acknowledge our shared human frailty – a theme I will speak about a little more deeply later.

Service to the Poor: He believed that serving the poor was serving Christ himself, famously instructing,

“When you serve the poor, you serve Jesus Christ.”

Compassion and Justice: The Charism calls for practical charity that meets immediate needs but also seeks systemic change to uproot poverty and injustice. Compassion includes the grace to forgive and to be forgiven, recognising that healing and restoration are part of true justice.

Grace: The freely given presence and strength of God empowers us beyond our own abilities to serve effectively and faithfully. It is through this grace that we find the courage to forgive, to reconcile, and to persevere in the face of hardship.

I'm reminded of that wonderful lesson from St Mary MacKillop, who said: "Never see a need" she said, "without doing something about it."

But she also knew that the strength to do something comes not from our own power, but from God's Grace working through us.

In my role with CSSA, I witness this Charism lived out every day – not just as a mission statement, but as a lived reality. The work of our members is inspired and sustained by this commitment to solidarity and accompaniment. It is a call to see Christ in every person, especially those who are vulnerable or marginalised, and to respond with humility, compassion, justice, and forgiveness.

So, the Vincentian Charism goes way beyond the school yard here – it is a way of life. It shapes how I carry myself, how I relate to others, and how I respond to challenges. It reminds me to approach every person with humility, to listen deeply, and to act with compassion, justice, and forgiveness, even when it is difficult. It is a call to recognise the divine spark in every person we meet. To know and understand that the Spirit moves in that other person just as much as it does in me. To be reminded – constantly – that the person in front of me is of equal value – of equal worth – to me; and demanding of dignity – always.

St Vincent's spirit of perseverance and accompaniment – walking with people in their struggles rather than simply offering handouts – is a daily inspiration.

His words,

"Have patience and endure; this is the work of God," resonate with me personally and professionally.

Living the Vincentian Charism means embracing a lifelong journey of service, grounded in faith and empowered by grace. It challenges me to see Christ in every person I meet and to respond with love, dignity, justice, and forgiveness.

St Francis Xavier and Xavier House

In another echo, last week, we celebrated the feast day of St Francis Xavier, the patron saint of Xavier House, where I was proud to belong during my time at Stannies. St Francis Xavier was a missionary who travelled tirelessly across Asia in the 16th century, spreading the Gospel with courage, faith, and a heart for the lost and marginalised.

Though St Francis Xavier's mission was different in context, his spirit aligns closely with the Vincentian Charism. Both saints embody a radical commitment to serve beyond comfort

zones, to cross boundaries – geographical, cultural, and social – and to bring hope to those on the margins.

St Francis Xavier once said,

“Give me the children until they are seven and anyone may have them thereafter.”

This reflects the Jesuit philosophy of forming the whole person from an early age – nurturing not only knowledge but character, faith, and resilience. This is exactly what happens here at Stannies, through the dedicated efforts of everyone – teachers, administrators, maintenance, and support staff alike – all contributing to building young men into well-rounded individuals. I will build on this idea in the final section of my talk.

These saints inspire us to be missionaries in our own right – not necessarily by travelling far, but by reaching out with compassion, justice, and humility wherever we are. Their lives call us to be the hands and feet of Christ, walking with those in need and working for a more just and loving world.

Vincentian Charism in Current Work

In my role with CSSA, I see the Vincentian Charism lived out every day. Catholic social teaching and the Vincentian Charism align closely – both call us to solidarity, justice, and accompaniment.

One story that deeply embodies this spirit comes from a program called SistaCare from one of my members in the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes.

In Parkes, there is a program called SistaCare. It brings together women who are survivor-victims of domestic violence – many of them – in fact – predominantly, First Nations women.

These women gather together to yarn, to support each other, and to love one another whilst learning and undertaking some practical activity like crocheting that facilitate engagement and belonging.

During these sessions, the women each crocheted a square. These squares were then stitched together to form a blanket. But what they did next is what truly moved me.

The blanket was donated to a shelter where women and their families escape domestic violence.

Picture the scene: a young woman with her family, has just fled an abusive relationship. She is worried. Has she made the right choice? Does she have any control over or access to her money? Is the family pet safe? Where will her children sleep tomorrow night? What will she do?

She may have a black eye, or a bruised lip, or be emotionally fractured.

She is frightened; she is anxious. And she is very alone.

And then she receives this blanket that will cover her and her children that night, and with it, a message from her sisters that reads:

“The Parkes SistaCare Group sends their best wishes to you and your family. With every square, imagine one woman’s hopes for you and your children to have a brighter future. Some of our women have spent time in a refuge before. We want you to know that we are cheering you on and we want you to succeed. A safe and happy life is the sign that you have succeeded.”

She is no longer alone. She knows women have been through this, they understand all she feels, and they have her back.

Hope isn’t abstract; it’s tangible.

It's a crocheted blanket. It's a warm meal. It's a safe place to sleep. It's a listening ear. It's a hand reaching out in the darkness saying, "You are not alone."

This is the Vincentian Charism in action – practical, compassionate, and transformative.

Forgiveness

Before I share a more personal story, I want to return to the theme of human frailty I mentioned earlier in the context of humility. Recognising our own vulnerabilities and imperfections is not a sign of weakness but a doorway to deeper compassion and grace. It is this awareness that opens us to the healing power of forgiveness – forgiving others, being forgiven, and ultimately forgiving ourselves.

This journey through human frailty and forgiveness is central to living the Vincentian Charism authentically. It is a theme that has shaped my life profoundly, and I want to share with you how it has done so.

I mentioned earlier that I tried to pursue a career in politics and fell short – indeed, I copped a walloping in the Federal Election in 2022. When asked how I felt about losing an election, I would say very honestly that I had failed at bigger things than that. I suspect many thought that was a throw-away line, but it was actually very true and very personal.

That failure for me occurred on the day of my mother’s death.

It was me that found my mother at the bottom of our back stairs in Alfred Street when I was 16. I was a scrawny kid and attempted to carry her up the stairs but simply couldn’t manage it.

It was in this moment I made the single worst decision of my life – I asked my 13-year-old sister to help me carry our dead mother into the house.

I should have found any other solution than the one I did.

So, when I say I have failed at bigger things, it is quite true.

I failed the most important person in my life at that time – my little sister – and I failed her on the most important day of her young life, the day her mother died.

Failure doesn’t come any bigger than that.

I carried that guilt for many years, but it was years later, when sharing this with a Navy Chaplain, and he asked me: “Do you think Jesus has forgiven you?” I said yes, of course – I know that absolutely. And he asked; “Do you think your sister has forgiven you?” I said yes, I suspect she never felt there was anything to forgive.

Then he asked, “Don’t you think you might be able to forgive yourself?”

And I did.

Being forgiven is powerful, but forgiving is even more so. We say this in the Lord’s Prayer every time we pray it:

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

My mother’s suffering and death hurt me deeply. I was incensed and bitter – my anger was directed at my absent father who had not only left us but had failed to support the family – subjected to poverty, to times of hardship and humiliation, but most of all to the incredible, unspeakable injustice of my mother’s suffering and death. It was so incredibly unfair for her.

That resentment stayed with me for years.

But over time, the anger dissipated and was replaced with a profound sense of nothingness – a hollowness, almost an absence of feeling, like a vacuum inside. It was as if something vital had been emptied out, leaving a silent, vacant void.

Earlier this year, at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) conference in the Hunter Valley, I had a profound spiritual experience. I saw the dignity and grace of First Nations people who had endured so much hurt and injustice yet were full of forgiveness and grace.

Standing on a beach in Newcastle, hearing a First Nations man speak of the spirit and opening up to it – of the Wiradjuri creator God, Baiyaame, and the concept of yindyamarra – the Wiradjuri way of being that emphasises quietness, respect, kindness, and forgiveness – the same thing that Ian McArtney had taught me – and bringing into sharp relief my own understandings of grace, and dignity, and love – understandings formed right here in this place, through the Vincentian Charism. I had an epiphany.

I realised that what I had thought was a vacuum or hollowness was not empty at all. It was actually a heavy stone deep inside – a weight of pain, history, and unspoken sorrow that needed to be acknowledged and carried with grace.

It was not enough to simply accept difficulty and find resolution.

Through grace, I understood I needed to extend forgiveness where once there was only hurt.

I determined there and then to write to my father – the first contact with him in fifty years – to tell him I forgive him and wish him peace and happiness for the years ahead.

This was not to re-establish a relationship – my own daughters have taught me that being a parent is about presence and care, not biology. Nor was it to excuse past actions or reopen wounds, but to release the burden of resentment that weighs heavily on wellbeing.

I hope my letter brings him peace – I know it has brought me peace.

Conclusion

As we reflect on all that has been shared today, I want to bring us back to the heart of why we are here – the remarkable young men who walk these halls every day.

Each year, Stannies sends out into the world around 110 or 120 young men. Young men who will face the challenges and opportunities of life with all the complexities that come with it.

But you can be absolutely confident that you have armed them with something truly powerful – a foundation built on the Vincentian Charism.

This Charism is not just a set of words or ideals. It is a living spirit of humility, compassion, justice, and forgiveness that will guide them through life's triumphs and trials.

They will flourish and fail, triumph and despair, laugh and cry, live and love – but they will always be products of Stannies.

They will always be products of your love and care. It is a light that will help them see the divine spark in themselves and in others, even when the world seems dark.

The work you do – every teacher, every administrator, every member of the maintenance and support staff – is the quiet, steadfast force that shapes these young men. Your dedication, care, and commitment leave an indelible mark on their hearts and minds.

You nurture not just students, but future leaders, carers, and changemakers.

You give them courage to face adversity, resilience to rise after failure, and hope to believe in a better tomorrow.

Never underestimate the privilege and responsibility you hold. The influence you have will ripple through their lives, through their families, and through the communities they will one day serve.

I know because I am one of those young men – shaped by this place, inspired by this Charism, and carried forward by the love and care I received here.

So, as you continue your incredible work, take heart in the knowledge that you are building more than just men. You are building a legacy of faith, service, and hope that will endure for generations.

Thank you for all that you do. God bless you all.