



**Santa
Sabina
College**



Saint Dominic's Day 2017

Good Morning Sr Judy Lawson and all the Dominican sisters here today, members of the College Board, parents, staff, students, ex-students, and special guests including our friends from St Lucy's.

It is 150 years since the Dominican Sisters arrived from Ireland to bring a Catholic, Dominican education to young Australians, first at Maitland, and then subsequently at Santa Sabina Strathfield. In leading up to today's St Dominic's Day celebration we have travelled symbolically with the first eight Dominican Sisters to arrive in Eastern Australia from Kingstown, Ireland. We have been reading diary excerpts for the corresponding days in 1867. These diary excerpts are a historical treasure – not just for Catholics or Dominicans but for anyone with the remotest interest in the settler history of Australia or the early days of sailing ships, powered solely by the wind. The diary was not written for private purposes – it was written to be read by the sisters' community back in Kingstown. This was not the time of instant text messaging, FaceTime or Skype. Letters were the only form of long-distance communication, and they would take months to arrive. There was great pleasure taken in the anticipation of receiving a letter in response. Sr Hyacinth wrote: *"We often speak of the moment when we shall see the hand writing of our loved Mothers and Sisters in that land of which we are hearing such strange things everyday"*.

As we read the diary we glimpse the challenges of that three-month journey at sea in cramped, uncomfortable conditions, contending with sea sickness, cockroaches, and lack of privacy.

The diary brings these Dominican Sisters to life, and it's almost as if the Martha Birnie herself is a travelling companion rather than a means of transport. Our students today have gone one step further of course and allowed us to meet the Sisters. We meet women who are scholars, who are brave, who care for each other, who have deep knowledge of navigation, who have practical skills, and who are warm-hearted women, sad to leave their families and communities. These women "got up from their predictable life, in a

beautiful convent by the sea, and knowing they would never return to see their community, their families and friends, set out for the other side of the world because they believed they could make a difference. This could be said to be a story of courage, and even recklessness, for the sake of belief in the Christian message”.

They had “Truth” as their motto: a truth that meant not the cold defence of dogma, but living with eyes wide open to the reality of their world, and thus allowing themselves to be drawn into a compassion that leads to action.

So, in honouring our pioneers on this very special St Dom’s Day, we can’t just leave them on the page, or even on the stage. In honouring the Dominican tradition as a living and dynamic one, we need to open our own eyes wide to the reality of our world. What do we see?

Looking around we see a large community of sisters, staff, students, parents and ex-students celebrating our identity as a Dominican family. Our liturgy and story telling build a strong sense of belonging to this family. There is a feeling of joy and indeed love. Our Dominican sisters themselves are a living link to the sisters on the Martha Birnie. They proclaim the gospel message of truth, justice and compassion today through education, ministry, and engagement in issues of the day – climate change, human trafficking, interfaith dialogue, justice and peace.

From our youngest students at Mary Bailey House to those about to graduate from Year 12 we see creative and critical thinkers, hear articulate voices, and witness athletic skill and virtuoso performances. We see and hear students who care very much about their world and want to make a difference.

Our Year 11 students standing for the position of College Captain spoke to us yesterday at Assembly about the importance of service and community today, of creating a sense of belonging for all at Santa Sabina, and of the pride they have in their College. Let’s build on the wonderful leadership of these young women as we face our future – your future - with optimism and joy, so that we leave a legacy for future

generations. Let's develop our God-given *individual* capacities but collaborate with others for the common good. Let's develop our own beatitudes:

- be educated about the world beyond our gates
- be creative in problem-solving issues
- be responsible for our environment through recycling, reusing, and refusing excess
- be compassionate – a kind word, a smile or any small gesture that shows peace and friendship
- be activist citizens to promote the common good
- be intellectually curious where no topic is off the table
- be bold as were our pioneering Sisters and break out of indifference and apathy
- Be sure that life is more than Netflix and shopping.

Let these beatitudes for today nurture a shared identity, with a story to be remembered and handed on – a story worth remembering.

Sr Elizabeth Hellwig reflects on what our eight passengers from Ireland would have said when they heard that their beautiful convent in Kingston was to be demolished in 1995 to make way for a shopping centre; that the convent they were so careful to establish would be in other hands; and their descendants would themselves travel to other countries, even to the Solomon Islands, where indigenous Sisters too have heard their story and live the traditions those eight women took with them so long ago? Perhaps they would see nothing unusual in those moves after all they themselves took risks, changed direction, launched out to meet new needs...

As a community of faith, be joyful for what we have inherited and what we will hopefully hand on to future generations. Dominican friar Timothy Radcliffe (recently in Australia) said "I'm not religious because it helps me. I'm religious because I believe it's true, because I think it's a beautiful truth which is the deepest meaning of being alive". He quotes Moses as saying, "I put before you life and death. Choose life. If it's healthy, all religion is about choosing to be alive, fully deeply alive."

On this very special St Dominic's Day, let us all choose life!

Today's beautiful celebration has been a genuine community effort. I would like to acknowledge and thank a number of those responsible including our musicians and actors, and their wonderful teachers for bringing the story alive; Sr Elizabeth Hellwig for her remarkable book, *Up She Gets for Up She Must*; Mrs Helen Smith, Head of Mission and Identity for working with Sr Elizabeth, the drama and music teams and creating today's liturgy; Community Relations, Academic Services, IT Department and Property Staff for the planning, preparation and logistics involved. I particularly want to acknowledge Sr Rosemary Taranto for her expert help in ensuring our very young sisters were appropriately attired in correct habits; and finally, to all of our guests for attending, and to our staff and students for making our community a joyful and generous one.

Maree Herrett
