

THE HON TANYA PLIBERSEK MP

MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER

Speech to NSW Catholic Schools IWD Breakfast Sydney Friday, 8 March 2024

I'd like to wish all the women here a happy International Women's Day.

I recall my first International Women's Day after my daughter was born. Anna is 23 now. And I was then the Shadow Minister for Women. I had put out a press release the night before, because the gender pay gap had widened, and it was International Women's Day and I wanted to highlight this issue of the gender pay gap.

And I was up at the crack of dawn to ring around the radio stations to see if they were interested in covering the issue. My husband was leaving early for work, he had a plane to catch – leaving for work in regional NSW, and there I was, ringing 2GB, breast-feeding a baby, to keep her quiet and I thought “International Women's Day, it's really delivered it all for me.”

It is an opportunity to reflect on how we really have so many more choices than our mothers and our grandmothers had in their lives.

And to recognise and value that. I hope that you spend a moment to relax a little too – to celebrate yourself and your friends

What happens on this day is that you fit in a breakfast and then we fit in more things at work – and we do things at work. So take a moment to relax.

Over the years I've seen this day really move into the mainstream, with events such as this – as well as an explosion of social media posts.

I'm sure any of us jumping online today will see loads of people we follow sending love and recognition to the women in their lives – from mothers, to sisters, to wives, to colleagues and friends.

But there is one group of women that I really want to spend today celebrating – and that is nuns.

They are the unsung nation builders – creating much of the Catholic education system that we take for granted today.

Many were feminists before their time.

And even now, as we celebrate women on days like today, I don't think Australia's nuns have received enough credit for the work they have done and the success they have built through pragmatism, persistence and love.

I'm really pleased to see some fantastic, very hard-working nuns here today including those from the Good Samaritans, Sisters of St Joseph, and Sisters of Charity.

In so many cases, it was nuns educating kids who would otherwise have missed out on an education and in so many cases, the girls they educated are the strong, confident women of today.

The nuns went where there was need – they ran towards need.

Australia would be a very different country without the millions and millions of hours of teaching – mostly unpaid - that nuns committed to our kids.

Mary MacKillop, our first saint, is a personification of this effort, but she was by no means alone.

I see their role in Australian education as sprinting hard out of the starting box, in the first leg of a relay, setting this nation up for success in education and values.

And then, as the number of nuns have dwindled and the education system matured – they have passed the baton to the rest of you to continue this great work.

And this morning I'd like to talk about the legacy of those early nuns, the work of nuns today – and what we can learn from their approach.

Run towards need

When speaking to nuns today, they tell me their mission is to seek out the greatest need and run towards it.

It's the same mission as it was 100, and 200 years ago.

A simple mission – but with profoundly positive consequences for this nation.

I was raised Catholic, and a lot of it hasn't stuck, but a lot of it has.

Values such as the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.

Turn the other cheek.

Love thy neighbour as thyself.

And take the plank out of your own eye before reaching for the splinter in your brother's eye.

This set of values, the love of our fellow humans, is shared by many in the Labor Party, the broader labour movement, and those, like all of you here, who work in Catholic education.

Values that you pass on to the millions of Australians who have been educated in the Catholic system.

When you teach large numbers of children the importance of social justice, you change the nation.

In Australia's nuns, I see the continuation of Jesus's radical commitment to justice and serving the poor, driven by love.

And it is this radical commitment, followed by practical action - this running towards need - that we can draw inspiration from today.

History

Imagine being a young woman, coming to Australia from Ireland in the middle of the potato famine.

Things in Ireland during that time were pretty grim for women, particularly if you were from a poor, rural, Catholic family.

Joining the sisterhood provided some independence, a chance to travel, an opportunity to serve God – and really – it would have been one of the few opportunities for women at the time to escape poverty.

During that time in Australia, the nuns effectively built a non-government school system from scratch.

I think we can really learn from what can only be described as an optimistic can-do spirit, a sense of adventure and a huge amount of elbow grease.

Melbourne Sister of Mercy nun Adele Howard put it well when she said,

“They taught in the outback, in remote areas, little country towns. If you can imagine a mental map of Australia, think of all the little schools scattered across the country – all established by nuns. They landed in a port, went inland and established schools. They just spread out and went where the need was.”

Sisters went to the Kimberley and the Great Sandy Desert. They went to rural Queensland. They went to Parramatta. And in my electorate, nuns opened Our Lady of Mount Carmel primary school in Waterloo in 1858.

There was a need to establish these schools – many of which served working class kids, poor kids and kids in remote communities.

In the 1840s, when the Sisters of Mercy opened the first secondary school in Western Australia, there were only a few tiny private schools.

Many children, particularly girls, received no formal education.

The sisters served Aboriginal children, immigrant Irish orphan girls, the poor and the uneducated. That is very much the example of Jesus in action, in the world.

And this brings me to my next lesson.

As well as having a laser sharp mission – running to where the need is - you also need to be focused on practicalities.

It always comes down to the money.

The money

As you all know – schools don't pay for themselves.

And in those early days of setting up Catholic education in Australia – the nuns were distinct from the hierarchies of Rome – and had to raise the money themselves.

These women and their management of money was underestimated by many at the time.

But underestimate nuns at your peril! They were women of action.

Through fetes, fairs, fundraisers, not taking a wage and giving their time – these early nuns built a national network of schools.

And I mean built literally.

Some of these pioneering nuns were skilled in carpentry and building construction

For women in the early days of Federation, being a nun came with a distinctly entrepreneurial bent.

The freedom from Rome gave them the opportunity to teach in a way they saw fit, and they were free to chart a course in the way they saw fit.

My dear friend Michael Egan told me as NSW Treasurer, he had never met a more effective fundraiser than Sister Bernice Elphick who was the driving force behind the establishment

and funding of St Vincent's Private, the Garvan Institute, the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute and the St Vincent's Clinic.

She was a member of the Sisters of Charity and was famously described as “the woman the late billionaire Kerry Packer could not say no to.”

It wasn't just financial skills – but radical love that powered their whole mission.

In discussions around the first Medically Supervised Injecting Clinics, nuns said they were prepared to set up these clinics and were instrumental in early discussions around sites and administration.

The Sisters of Charity were committed to the preservation of life by moving drug taking from the streets and into a safer environment.

They wanted to keep injecting drug users alive, until they could stop using drugs, showing love – not judgement.

Sadly, the Vatican intervened – in the form of a letter from Joseph Ratzinger – who called the initiative “deeply disturbing.”

But St Vincent's has gone from strength to strength in a way that wouldn't have been possible without the tough, entrepreneurial, very numerate leadership of Sister Bernice.

The mission was broad

In those early days, nuns' contribution wasn't just education. In the absence of a welfare state, the role of nuns was central in the early days of colonisation.

In NSW by 1900 sisterhoods operated: five hospitals, including a women's psychiatric hospital and a hospice; seven orphanages; a foundling hospital; a residential school for deaf children; three industrial schools; a servants' home and training school; two refuges for former sex workers; a home for the aged poor and a women's night refuge.

The Sisters also worked with immigrant servant girls; the sick poor in their homes; patients in Sydney Hospital; prisoners in Darlinghurst Gaol; the inmates of government aged asylums and girls in the Government Reformatory and Industrial School.

Where there was distress, poverty and the marginalised – the nuns weren't far away.

Though, this is a time that shouldn't wholly be seen through rose-coloured glasses. There was abuse. There were women in religious orders unsuited to both life in a religious order and a life of teaching.

Some places were cruel, run by cruel people.

The Australian government had a hand in this cruelty – in policies of removal of Indigenous children from their families, and later of child migrants and others who should never have been separated from their families.

Indigenous children in places like Melville Island at the Garden Point Catholic Church mission reported being physically and sexually abused by clergy – including physical abuse by nuns.

And the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse documented the case of the Mercy Sisters' St Joseph's Orphanage, in Rockhampton, and found the nuns had acted cruelly and facilitated sexual abuse by priests.

And there were the laundries, the orphanages and the girls' homes where abuse occurred.

While the majority of nuns acted with care and love towards children, it is important to face the failures of the past.

And I'm sure that is a commitment that all of us in this room share.

The best thing about the pain exposed through the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, is that no child will ever tell an adult about abuse, and face disbelief and punishment – as so many did, for so many years.

I spoke earlier about the work done by those early pioneering nuns, in setting up a lot of Australia's Catholic education system.

This mission continues with you here today, the runners in this leg of the relay.

As contemporary Catholics – we should be continually asking ourselves, “where is the need? And how can I help?” – and then we should run towards it.

The problems that the nuns confronted in early Australia are similar to today's problems: inequality, homelessness, loneliness, and addiction.

We should never stop asking “where is the need?” as long as there is injustice in the world.

A changing mission

Nuns – like all of us - have had to adapt to changing times, changing needs within the community.

But they have also had to adapt to dwindling numbers.

There are now 3500 nuns in Australia – down from a peak of 14,622 in 1966.

But nuns have adapted – and their ways of interpreting their mission in 2024 are as important and vital as they were in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Some, like the Brigidine sisters and the Sisters of Mercy, are fighting for climate justice.

Others like the Loreto nuns, take their mission into Australia's prisons.

And there is Sister Brigid Arthur, a Brigidine sister – who really embodies social justice activism with her work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Sister Brigid has been doing this work since 2001 – and now in her 90s – she is still fighting for refugees and working as a litigation guardian for vulnerable young people.

ACRATH

ACRATH - Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans - does amazing work advocating for and with victims of human trafficking and modern slavery – including forced marriages.

It's been my great pleasure to work with ACRATH over many years - particularly in my time as Minister for Women - and it was wonderful to see them all in parliament again last year, advocating for stronger laws against the exploitation of women and children.

They have taken an interest and engaged in everything from the passage our new workplace relations laws - which of course gives particularly vulnerable workers greater protections.

They are also working on a more comprehensive federal victims of crime compensation scheme and they have long worked on heartbreaking matters like forced marriage, sex trafficking and forced labour.

Then there is my own portfolio – environment, where that mission and energy is still present today.

A lot of sisters around the world are at the forefront of environmental protection – in the courts, at the protests, and working behind the scenes to build coalitions.

So, on International Women's Day, we find a renewed mission in repeating this question: where is the greatest need?

And running towards that need.

Love

The legacy of Australia's nuns can be found in education, in infrastructure, in school, in hospitals.

They ran towards need when others didn't. But what drove their mission was love.

Feminist pioneer Germaine Greer, who was taught by Presentation nuns, says,

“I realise now I had a terrific education..... I think one of the reasons why I was never properly domesticated is because I was actually socialised by a gang of mad women in flapping black habits. I am more like them than I am like my mother. I owe them more in a way because they loved me more and they worked harder on me than my mother did. They really loved us. I realise that now, although I didn't realise it at the time.”

Isn't that a wonderful imagery? The young firebrand feminist, someone who would go on to shape modern, second wave feminism around the world was radicalised early by the love, attention and education of a group of nuns in suburban Melbourne in the 1950s.

Many women in Australia would echo Greer about the education they received by nuns.

And how in this all-female environment, girls' education, dreams, endeavours, skills and talents were taken seriously.

As a result, some of the great minds of this country were able to flourish into adults that made seriously outsized contributions to this nation, and to the world.

Maybe that is one of the greatest lessons of all.

No system is built without love. No school is a community without love.

And no community can thrive without love. No classroom can really educate without love.

That is worth celebrating – and emulating - on International Women's Day.

International Women's Day celebrates how far we've come as women.

It's a chance to thank the generations of women who made that happen, the women who have made us who we are.

And to value their work as teachers, as carers, as fighters for social justice.

And it's a time to recommit ourselves to the ongoing fight for equality to run towards need and to do it with love.