

Br Austin Stephens

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to propose the toast to Br Austin Stephens on his 70 years as a Marist Brother. (Aust would you kindly stand so we can see where you are?)

Youth

John Stephens, Austin as we now know him, was born to Margaret and William Stephens at Hamley Bridge in South Australia on 20th July, 1921. With John's father working in the railways, the family moved a number of times during John's youth, first to Walaroo where he made his first Communion and then to Norwood in Adelaide. Here John began his primary education with the Josephite Sisters where he also learnt to play the violin. In fact, he became such an accomplished violinist that he took up studies at the Conservatorium, eventually being awarded a gold medal for music from Trinity College in Adelaide.

After some years with the Sisters, John's parents informed him it was time to go to the Brothers at Norwood. There he remembers Br Dionysius teaching him to sing, a gift which he has treasured all his life. After some time with the Brothers, John sensed God was calling him also to become a Marist Brother and so on 21st January, 1937, he entered the Juniorate at Mittagong.

Early Life as a Brother

Following his First Profession, Austin was appointed to Church Hill in Sydney where he taught in both the day school and the night school. In 1941 he undertook his Scholastic studies back at Mittagong before being appointed the following year to East Brunswick. There he taught during the day and commenced his University Studies at Melbourne University with Br Ronald Fogarty in the evening. In subsequent years he taught at Kilmore and Sale before becoming a foundation member of the Marcellin College Camberwell staff in 1950. In 1952 he returned to St Joseph's College East Brunswick as Principal and Superior of the Brothers' Community. During this period he completed his Bachelor of Arts Degree.

Educator

In 1955 Austin moved to St Patrick's College Sale and then successively to Bendigo, Kilmore, Somerton Park, Wangaratta, Bendigo and Bulleen. During these years his teaching areas included English, French, Latin, Geography and History and, like most Brothers when in boarding schools, he supervised meals and looked after dormitories.

Austin's love of music led him to enter school choirs in numerous Eisteddfods and to produce many Gilbert and Sullivan musicals. I have it on good authority that when he was based at Somerton Park, Austin was the first to coach the Sacred Heart College First 18 football team to victory against archrivals Assumption College, Kilmore. Austin tells me the Sacred Heart College Headmaster of the time, Br Romuald O'Brien was ecstatic and the College Old Boys celebrated with some gusto that night.

Midlife

During the late 1960s, after 30 years as Principal, teacher, dormitory master, choirmaster and sports coach, and in the wake of the exciting ecclesial and educational outcomes of the Second Vatican Council, Austin began to pursue new educational interests. Coincidentally, at the 1969 Marist Provincial Chapter, he was elected to the Provincial Council and in 1971 appointed Province Supervisor of Schools.

With Gough Whitlam becoming Prime Minister in 1972, educational creativity and innovation came to the fore. Austin helped our schools respond to this new energy, reflected in increased government funding to schools. At this time Austin also oversaw the introduction of co-education into many of our schools, particularly in country areas. Many would say that as Supervisor of Schools between 1971 and 1975, during a time when the numbers of lay teachers were increasing rapidly, Austin played a pivotal role in helping our schools to adopt new leadership structures and become more professional overall.

During the 1970s, Austin also took up part time studies in educational administration at the University of New England in Armidale. This proved to be a pivotal experience for him as it launched him in carrying out his pioneering work on School Boards, which became his unique and greatly valued contribution to the development of Catholic Schools in this country. Austin based his findings on his comprehensive exploratory work in America and England.

Education Consultant

From 1977 to 1982 Austin was Principal of Marist Brothers' College Bendigo in the Diocese of Sandhurst which at that time was under the leadership of Bishop Stewart. In addition to being Principal, Austin undertook the responsibility of being a key witness when the Defence of Government Schools' Lobby took the challenge of government funding to Catholic Schools, to the High Court of Australia. Austin defended Catholic school funding admirably and once again contributed significantly to sustaining Australian Catholic Education.

By 1983, Austin had become a much sought-after educational consultant and it was no surprise when the Director of the Catholic Education Office in Adelaide, invited him to take up a consultancy role across Catholic schools in South Australia. Austin loved this work and for the next 14 years undertook it with passion and commitment.

By the end of 1996, at the age of 75, Austin knew it was time to retire from the Catholic Education Office. What would he do, now, he wondered? No longer did he have meetings to attend every night or the extremities of South Australia to which to drive several times a year. His time was his own.

Theologian

Not being one to stand still, Austin decided to make his spiritual life his priority. This decision gave him a new lease of life, leading him to commence theological studies at the Adelaide College of Divinity. Across the ensuing thirteen years, he has thrived on these studies, most recently completing his Master of Theological Studies with a dissertation titled, and this title shows something of the sophistication of his studies, *The*

Inter-connectedness of Creation, Incarnation, Revelation and Salvation. Next Semester, he plans to audit a Unit titled *Understanding the Gospels*.

Looking Back

In opening his classic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens wrote in 1859

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to Heaven, we were all going the other way.¹

Across his 70 years as a Marist Brother, Austin has experienced each of these ages and seasons of which Dickens speaks and throughout, he has remained faithful to the mission of the Marist Brother: 'To make Jesus known and loved, in the way of Mary'. This is no small achievement.

The Future

Austin maintains his determination to live life to the full. Now almost 88, he undertakes many ministries, including setting up for Mass twice a week at the local Southern Cross nursing home, joining local parishioners for an hour's Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament at Parkside each Saturday afternoon, helping around his Marist community at Netley including taking Holy Communion to one of the elderly Brothers at 7:45 each morning.

And so, on behalf of us all, Austin, I would like to congratulate you on all you have achieved and to thank you for all you are to us. We wish you God's special blessings in the years ahead.

Ladies and Gentlemen, last Friday we received a message from Austin's former student and lifelong friend, Bert Newton. It speaks for itself and I would like to conclude by reading it to you.

Bert Newton's Message

Ladies and Gentlemen, would you please charge your glasses and be upstanding to toast our Jubilarian Br Austin.

Br John McMahon
12th July, 2009

Bibliography

Dickens, C. (1859). *A Tale of Two Cities* Retrieved 10th July, 2009, from <http://www.quoteworld.org/quotes/3649>

¹ (Dickens, 1859)

Jubilee Celebrations 2009

To: Br Austin Stephens

From: Bert Newton

Firstly, I am so sorry that I can not be with you for this great celebration but I am performing in a theatrical show as the result of having a career that Brother Austin prepared me for.

Our paths first crossed in the late 40s at St Joseph's in North Fitzroy when Brother Austin was my grade six teacher. At this stage my academic abilities had peaked but he was able to curb the downward spiral.

For me he was an outstanding teacher who was able to see in me something I don't think I was able to see in myself. It's hard to find suitable words to describe a teacher's influence on someone, but in this case, those that come to mind are faith, dedication, loyalty, discipline and a sense of humour.

He introduced us to music, theatre and a love of the arts. Above all of these things his Marist spirit shone through. Even though I was very young at the time I wondered how he was able to accomplish all the things expected of him, especially when he returned to St Josephs as Principal.

One of the joys of my life is that we have remained in contact over the years and I am honoured that to the roles of teacher, headmaster and mentor, I can add friend.

I know that when Brother Austin eventually meets his founder, Marcellin will salute this wonderful Brother.

However, I have a message for Marcellin, we are not ready to let him go yet!

Brother Austin, together with your worthy fellow monks Brothers Richard, Stephen and Ronald, congratulations and much love at this very special time.

Bert Newton
July 2009