CARITAS AUSTRALIA & OUR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Recently I was asked some questions by a Year 9 student for a project. Her first question was "How do you think Caritas has benefited Catholic schools in Australia?"

A fascinating question because most people would see it the other way round – how Catholic schools are benefitting Caritas! My young friend caused me to reflect and consider schools' many benefits, some of which I share here.

Catholic schools are called to live the gospel (love our neighbour) and, in doing this, be guided by Catholic Social Teaching. In summary, a call to uphold dignity, end poverty and promote justice which is how Caritas Australia expresses its aims. Through engagement with both students and teachers, Caritas brings Catholic Social Teaching to life and encourages the concept of 'think globally, act locally'!

Caritas offers students the opportunity
- To become aware of how our sisters and brothers are living around the world and to see that life is unjust for many.
- To engage in 'education for justice' as part of a journey to becoming global citizens. This education enables students to actively challenge injustice and to develop leadership qualities necessary to encourage others to do the same.
- To act in solidarity in a variety of ways e.g. Caritas Ks, awakening our empathy for others
- To act for justice by encouraging personal action and by joining campaigns to change causes of poverty e.g. climate justice
- To partner with Caritas through fund-raising who in turn partner with vulnerable communities to bring about long-term sustainable change

This two-way exchange is never more obvious than during Project Compassion. But this was a year like no other and Project Compassion was cut short with school closures. As Project Compassion closes today with the end of financial year, figures are well down as expected but at the same time, I'm moved by the strong commitment of our schools to this partnership.

One inspiring example is Notre Dame College Shepparton who didn't let isolation stop them from standing in solidarity with our global community. This year, instead of doing their usual Caritas Ks 8 Km walk, they held a virtual event 'Push Up for a Hand Up' – doing something tough for those who are doing it tough! Each student videoed their push-ups and sent this into school where they were tallied for each of the 6 Houses – recording over 35,000 push-ups! Each student was also encouraged to obtain sponsorship. Throughout the event, School Captains hosted 2 hours of live-streamed entertainment including interviews with Caritas Australia CEO Kirsty Robertson, Bishop Shane and myself, Sandhurst Caritas Coordinator – a wonderful display of leadership in action.

A second inspiring example is St Joseph's School Cobram whose Caritas Ks event in Term 1 was cancelled. But on the second last day of Term 2, despite all that was happening, and other asks of school families, they held their Ks event. Undeterred by rain, the whole school carried buckets of water around the inside perimeter of the school in solidarity with those who walk, on average, 6 Kilometres every day for water. A meaningful action at any time but particularly now when we're continually being reminded to wash our hands frequently with soap and water. Walking in solidarity with those who have no soap and only dirty water is truly kilometres for compassion. A commitment, no doubt enhanced by the fact that their RE Leader, Carmel Natale, completed a Caritas Global Justice course a few years back and travelled with the group to visit Caritas partnerships in Uganda.

As St Archbishop Oscar Romero said, *"Let us not develop an education that creates in the mind of the student a hope of becoming rich and having the power to dominate. That does not correspond to the time that we live in. Let us form in the heart of the child and the young person the lofty ideal of loving, of preparing oneself to serve and to give oneself to others. Anything else would be education for selfishness…."*

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