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St. Patrick's Gift to Australia: Catholic Universities

Glenn Morrison

The article tells the story of a hidden gift of St. Patrick to Australia, the humility and strength for Catholic Universities to “not be silent” in the confession of faith. The voices of hope and even lament from the past unveil as a gift not only for the present, but also for the future. From the ashes of memory, there is a story to tell about a serendipitous discovery of an archive unveiling an Irish-Australian's vision for a Catholic University, a hope partaking of the spirit of St. Patrick's Confession.

Beauty and truth are transcendental or heartfelt qualities of good University education. Such qualities can also find their way in nurturing the Gospel calling to be the hidden “leaven” (Matt 13:33) in the world. People of faith should not be afraid to interrupt and contradict a world bent on destruction and fear. Where a Catholic University takes on the pastoral vocation of being the leaven in the world, there is witness to the inspiration of faith: to “not be silent”, “to shout aloud” “words of confession” and “testify in truth and in great joy of heart before God and his holy angels” that “the true sun” is “Christ”.¹ In such leaven of confession, to “believe in and have reverence for God” even to “the ends of the earth”,² there is willingness to be personal, to “shed my blood” from the “depths of my heart, my very gut feelings”.³

St. Patrick's Confession gives light to see God as mystery growing into the reason of enlightened knowledge and truth, namely that Jesus is the Christ. Where did such boldness come from? Such affectivity of boldness of faith and humility in knowledge speaks of St. Paul's robust spirituality. In the letter to the Colossians, St.

1 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, trans. by Pádraig McCarthy (Roman Roads Media), no.'s 1, 3, 12, 60, 61, <https://files.romanroadsstatic.com/uploads/2015/06/StPatrickConfession-V2-0.pdf>

2 Ibid, no.'s 1, 62.

3 Ibid, no.'s 57, 59.

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Paul writes: “I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2-3). St. Paul also testifies to “the promises of heaven”⁴: “as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Cor 6:10). Such a spirit found its way into the life of St. Patrick who no doubt added the gifts of simplicity and openness to reveal truth through dignity, to contradict the pomposity of arrogance and pretension, namely the sullenness of human faces looming.⁵ In his old age, St. Patrick struggled with his critics, brother bishops in Britain. His Confession brings to light the essence of the gift of confession: to be the hidden leaven in the world (Matt 13:33). God works through a “broken, wounded and vulnerably frail humanity through which the glory and grace of God show their power”.⁶ St. Patrick’s life and Confession evidences the gentleness to inherit the earth (Matt 5:5). In the Confession, he writes:

In the knowledge of this faith in the Trinity, and without letting the dangers prevent it, it is right to make known the gift of God and his eternal consolation. It is right to spread abroad the name of God faithfully and without fear, so that even after my death I may leave something of value to the many thousands of my brothers and sisters – the children whom I baptised in the Lord.⁷

These words may not make much sense today. Yet, they speak enough truth to contradict and interrupt a world bent on unbelief, impatience and indifference. They are words of confession and light, of mission and responsibility to be the leaven in the world. Here, within these words, are a special teaching for Catholic Universities to be open to receive the gift of mission. Such a gift can also appear like a fortunate discovery wherein the Spirit of God is willing to walk decades or even centuries “to spread abroad the name of God” “even to the ends of the earth”⁸ like Australia. Here there is a story to share how St. Patrick’s gift and boldness of mission made its journey to Australia as a hidden leaven (to “not be silent”) and hope for establishing Catholic Universities in Australia.

4 Ibid, no. 55.

5 Noel-Dermot O’Donoghue, “The Spirituality of St Patrick”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* Vol. 50, no. 198 (Summer 1961): 152, 161.

6 Séamus Mulholland, “The Confession of St Patrick: A Spirituality of Broken Humanity”, *The Furrow* Vol. 43, no. 3 (March 1992): 167.

7 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, no. 14.

8 Ibid, no.1.

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ARCHIVE SURPRISE

Books can act like friends. They inspire, inform, challenge, excite and seek to stir the imagination. They can at times also act like an archive, a place to store memories or sacred remembrances to walk decades of time. Over a decade ago, I discovered one book entitled, *Solemnities of the Dedication and Opening of the Catholic University of America, November 13th, 1889. Official Report*.⁹ Perhaps more, the book discovered my attention revealing an obligation, an order and command¹⁰ to open its contents. I opened the golden leaf-edged burgundy book, and found its hallowed pages witnessing to ceremony, dedication, and a banquet of presentations and addresses, all to celebrate the beginning of a Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Exploring further, an archive surprise was made. There awaiting in the centre of the book was an oxidised pale brown newspaper clipping, likely undisturbed for around nine decades. The clipping contained an article published in *The Freeman's Journal*¹¹ on January 5, 1922 and entitled in bold letters: "IF AUSTRALIA HAD A CATHOLIC UNIVIERSITY: WHAT IS WOULD MEAN TO THE LAITY".¹² The author stood behind the initialism, A.J.M.

The hundredth anniversary of the article came and passed, but not without a momentum or collision of spirit and energy, a calling to "not be silent". The stirrings of A.J.M. felt like a command to respond. Some "archive fever or desire"¹³ set in. This led to discovering the possible identity of "A.J.M." as Father Arthur J. McHugh (20 Sept 1883 – 13 Jan 1954) of Campbelltown NSW, an Irish Australian priest, a "cultured"¹⁴ man whose interest in music¹⁵ was matched by his affinity to scholarship, learning and poetry. His personal friendship with the poet priest, Fr. (later

9 Catholic University of America (CUA), *Solemnities of the Dedication and Opening of the Catholic University of America. November 13th, 1889. Official Report* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1890), 58.

10 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1, 75.

11 A Catholic Newspaper published in Sydney, NSW now called, *The Catholic Weekly*.

12 A.J.M., "If Australia Had a Catholic University: What it would mean to the laity", *The Freeman's Journal* (January 5, 1922): 10. The article can be found online at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/116780925?searchTerm=If%20Australia%20Had%20a%20Catholic%20University>

13 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 30.

14 "Silver Jubilee of Rev. Father A. J. McHugh", *The Catholic Press*, (Thursday, December 8, 1932): 16, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/106350425?searchTerm=Fr.%20Arthur%20J.%20McHugh>

15 Marie Holmes, *Arthur J. McHugh. St. John's Church, Campbelltown 1931-1954*, A Souvenir of the Eighth Ivor C. Thomas Memorial Lecture, 8th August, 1998 (Campbelltown NSW: Campbelltown and Airds Historical Society Inc., Campbelltown, 1998), 2.

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Msgr) Patrick Hartigan (pen name John O'Brien),¹⁶ author of the books, *Around the Boree Log*¹⁷ and *Men of '38*¹⁸, was essential to provide evidence of the likely identity of A.J.M. as Fr. McHugh. Notwithstanding one must affirm, "... how incomplete and tentative any conclusions must be in our reconstructions of ... history".¹⁹ Despite "the incompleteness of the archive,"²⁰ A.J.M.'s visionary dream speaks as a gift of St. Patrick's humility and boldness to renew the pioneering energies that make a Catholic University.

TOWARDS A MESSAGE OF HOPE

A.J.M. imagined an enduring "Catholic atmosphere" "to create a reverential knowledge".²¹ One could imagine that his prophetic words are a living witness of "The Confession of St. Patrick" journeying through the centuries to arrive at Australian shores where he writes:

The foundation of a Catholic University is within the range of possibility. It is because great schemes have often appeared impracticable. The very audacity of an idea may be its inspiration. It may serve as the opportunity for a great venture of faith and of co-operation with powers that are more than human. Catholics, who have already achieved the seemingly impossible in this country, can find in the idea of a Catholic University a great stimulus to their enthusiasm. It would be fitting that, at the end of a century of wonderful development in Catholic life, a new century be inaugurated by an undertaking on a level with the achievements of the past.²²

Back on Irish shores, some three and half decades earlier, "The Archbishops of Armagh, Dublin, Cashel, and Tuam, in the name of the Irish Prelates," presented an intimate message and appeal of hope "sent directly to the University"²³ for the Inauguration of the

16 Ibid, 8-9.

17 This book was "first published by Angus and Robertson in 1921". See Father F. A. Mecham (nephew of Father Patrick Hartigan), "John O'Brien" in John O'Brien, *Around the Boree Log: A Selection from Around the Boree Log and the Parish of St. Mel's*, illustrated by Patrick Carroll (North Ryde NSW: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1988), 6.

18 John O'Brien, *The men of '38 and other pioneer priests* (Kilmore, Vic.: Lowden Publishing, 1975). The book relates a "History of Irish priests who arrived in Sydney in 1838". See <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/696936>.

19 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 51.

20 Ibid, 52.

21 A.J.M., "If Australia Had a Catholic University", 10.

22 Ibid.

23 CUA, *Solemnities of the Dedication*, 58.

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Catholic University in America in 1889. In the message of “these precious words,”²⁴ they wrote:

The Catholic University of America is, indeed, a mighty name to write upon the first page of the new record. It is an achievement and a promise. It is the fruit of the steady growth of Catholic Education in the United States for the last hundred years; and it contains the seeds yet for greater development to come. We have learned too well in Ireland what it is to be without a Catholic University equal to our needs. Year after year have we deplored the disabilities that either deprived our Catholic youth of higher education altogether, or drown them, in their search for it, whither our blessing could not follow them. From our inmost hearts, therefore, we felicitate you on the glorious inauguration of your Catholic University; and we pray that the blessing of Leo which speeds it on its way, may guard it through ages yet to come, to be a guiding light to the great intellect of America, and the nursing Mother of those whose wisdom and whose sanctity will instruct her noble people unto justice.²⁵

In the 19th Century, Ireland did have a private Catholic University, *The Catholic University of Ireland*, which Blessed John Henry Newman had helped to establish. It opened in 1854. Such a foundation led to Newman's “seminal” work, *The Idea of a University*.²⁶ However, “After Newman left, the University declined with enrolments reaching just 3 students in 1879”.²⁷ Barr points out that, “After 1865, the *Catholic University* was kept alive more as a cause than as a place of learning”. It is interesting to note that one of the reasons of its failure was that, “Although Newman's fame attracted a number of foreign-born students during his time in Ireland (some thirteen from England and Scotland and fifteen from Continental Europe), he was unable to make the Catholic University a truly transnational institution”.²⁸ One can therefore understand the sense of lament fashioned in the words of “The Archbishops of Armagh, Dublin, Cashel, and Tuam, in the name of the Irish Prelates” - “We have learned too well in Ireland what it is to be without a Catholic University equal to our needs”.

Nonetheless such pensive sadness or melancholy gives way to questions of hope and the want of giving blessing. For the cries and prayers of the “inmost hearts” found its way to another continent,

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid, 58-59.

26 Colin Barr. “The Failure of Newman's Catholic University of Ireland”, *Archivium Hibernicum* Vol. 55 (2001): 126, DOI: 10.2307/25484188.

27 Ibid, 136.

28 Ibid.

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North America. Such traces of lament through the humble spirit of St. Patrick, carried through Irish immigration, would also find its way to Australia as we see in A. J. M.'s 1922 reflection on *If Australia had a Catholic University: What it would mean to the laity*.

Where beauty is the prayer of a “nursing Mother”, where truth reveals “wisdom” and “sanctity” and boldness becomes the instruction of justice, the affectivity and pastoral vocation of a Catholic University today and for the future speaks of what A.J.M. alerts to in his final words as a “reverential knowledge”²⁹ (“for those who believe in and have reverence for God”³⁰). Here he quotes from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem, *In Memoriam*, to exemplify the need for such “reverential knowledge” lest Catholics become “insular”:

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell;
That mind and soul, according well,
May make one music as before,
But vaster.³¹

Discerning St. Patrick’s gift to Australia as “Catholic Universities” may sound almost strange given he confesses that he is “a simple country person”.³² Yet there the symphonic message of his Confession reveals a spirit of “reverential knowledge”, a mission to confess “a Catholic atmosphere”³³ of boldness through a narrative of humility, struggle and vulnerability. St. Patrick’s selfhood proclaims a story of faith, more of “poverty and calamity ... than riches and enjoyment”.³⁴ Can then Catholic Universities live up to “the knowledge of this faith in the Trinity”, such endurance of hope, to discover with St. Patrick the leaven of *mission* and *confession*?

In *Australia*, The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) in Fremantle, Western Australia was established by an Act of State parliament in December 1989, two hundred years after Georgetown, the oldest Catholic University in America was founded (1789), and one hundred years after the Catholic University of America (1889). UNDA eventually opened its doors to students in February 1992 whilst Australian Catholic University opened to students slightly

29 A.J.M., “If Australia Had a Catholic University”, 10.

30 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, no. 62.

31 A.J.M., “If Australia Had a Catholic University”, 10.

32 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, no. 1.

33 A.J.M., “If Australia Had a Catholic University”, 10.

34 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, no. 55.

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earlier on January 1 1991.³⁵ To be a message of hope, taking note of the spirit and Confession of St. Patrick, how might Catholic Universities today take on the narrative of being the leaven in the world? – a mission almost invisible unless revealed through the eyes of faith (1 Cor 2:9).

CONCLUSION: LEAVEN AND CONFESSION

In the hidden leaven of the Confession of St. Patrick, there is wisdom enough to pass on to form and build up the mission and identity of Catholic Universities: “I cannot be silent”.³⁶ The bold words of St. Patrick speaks of the challenge to be personal and share stories of faith amidst adversity, and to interrupt and contradict the pressures of injustice and totality in society with the gift of confession. For today, this may very well mean to encourage the youth and laity of today and tomorrow to become the hidden leaven in the world, to confess Jesus as the Christ.

In his 1922 article from *The Freemans Journal*, A.J.M. wrote the following under the subjection, “Students Leave Catholic Atmosphere”:

At present, the Catholic student must enter the secular University if he would acquire the higher branches of learning. Accustomed hitherto to a Catholic atmosphere, he becomes subject to an influence that is non-religious, if not positively irreligious. His faith may be endangered. The rationalistic, liberal, speculative ideas of a university that has banished religion from its wall may carry him off his feet if his faith is weak. To pass through our non-Catholic universities, is to become convinced of their purely secular character. Amongst the great body of students religion is taboo, unless as a duel of wits. The religious organisations are merely sectional, non-Catholic and probably anti-Catholic, appealing little to the great majority of the students and utterly failing to impart a religious tone to university life. A secular system of State education is completed by a university equally secular in which the goddess of reason sits enthroned.³⁷

These words are traces of the past, ashes of memory. *Now* they have an opportunity to bear some new life by reminding that God

35 See Peter Tannock, *The Foundation and Establishment of The University of Notre Dame Australia*, 1986-2014 (Fremantle WA: UNDA: November 2014), 10, https://www.notredame.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0029/32789/Founding-and-Establishment-of-Notre-Dame-WEB.pdf. See also the ACU Handbook, <https://www.acu.edu.au/handbook/handbook-2021/australian-catholic-university>.

36 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, no. 3.

37 A.J.M., “If Australia Had a Catholic University”, 10.

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speaks to humanity as St. Patrick relates in his desire to return to Ireland: “not so much I as Christ the Lord, who told me to come here to be with these people for the rest of my life”.³⁸ Such words are disarming like the boldness of hope that interrupts and contradicts a sense of optimism “that is happy enough with the system”.³⁹ Pope Francis writes in his 2018 Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate* [Rejoice and Be Glad], no. 132: “Parrhesia [boldness] is a seal of the Spirit; it testifies to the authenticity of our preaching. It is a joyful assurance that leads us to glory in the Gospel we proclaim. It is an unshakeable trust in the faithful Witness who gives us the certainty that nothing can “separate us from the love of God” (Rom 8:39)”.

A *Catholic University* called to mission will be one that holds to a boldness to foster a spirituality of listening to God, a pastoral vocation not to be silent in a world of unbelief, impatience and indifference. The hunger and thirst for a Catholic University, imbued by saints, visionaries and pioneers, remains as an enduring gift of confession to be as leaven in the world. There may be failure (more “poverty and calamity” than “riches and enjoyment”), yet the realisation that “Christ the Lord became poor for us”⁴⁰ may make everything possible. God comes to us in weakness and powerlessness, in the gentleness of spirit (Matt 5:5). Blessed Cardinal Newman states: “from the very first month of my Catholic existence, when I knew nothing of course of Catholics, wished for a Catholic University,”⁴¹ he evidences a confessing spirit. He continues, stating:

In the course of years I have made many mistakes. I have nothing of that high perfection, which belongs to the writings of Saints, *viz.*, that error cannot be found in them; but what I trust that I may claim all through what I have written, is this – an honest intention, an absence of private ends, a temper of obedience, a willingness to be corrected, a dread of error, a desire to serve Holy Church, and, through Divine Mercy, a fair measure of success. And I rejoice to say, to one great mischief I have from the first opposed myself. For thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion. Never did Holy Church need champions against it more sorely than now, when, alas! it is an error overspreading, as a snare, the whole earth ...⁴²

38 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, no. 43.

39 Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 5.

40 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, no. 55.

41 Ian Kerr, *John Henry Newman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 462.

42 Kerr, *John Henry Newman*, 720.

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Leaven and confession seem a good mix for moving towards hope to carry on the work of building and forming Catholic Universities open to all and moving towards the 22nd Century. Blessed Cardinal Newman lists the healthy qualities of humility, honesty, selflessness, service and faith. If in the 22nd Century, just a few of these traits survive, there is hope for the invincible spirit of St. Patrick, who listened to Christ from the heart, to interrupt and contradict the world with the charism (vulnerability) of mission and confession: "From where did this wisdom come to me, a wisdom which was not in me? I didn't even know how the number of days, much less did I know God. Where did such a great and life-giving gift come from then, to know and love God, even at the cost of leaving homeland and parents?"⁴³

To speak of St. Patrick's gift to Australia of Catholic Universities is in the end to reflect about the *pastoral* and *spiritual* vocation of Catholic Universities. It means not to be afraid of employing the mysticism of faith that gives light to being personal and vulnerable in a world bent on worshipping images and experiences of self-interest, power and the "goddess of reason". St. Patrick understood about the meaning of "gift" as the blessing "when our lives change when we come to know God, to praise and bear witness to his great wonders before every nation under heaven".⁴⁴ May this gift endure in Catholic Universities to make "believers and those who listen to be children of God and co-heirs with Christ".⁴⁵

43 St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, no. 36.

44 *Ibid*, no. 3.

45 *Ibid*,no. 4.