My thanks to all the priests, principals and RECs – my chief collaborators in the great task of evangelising and educating our children – for your involvement today. I also thank Associate Professors Kevin Watson and Gerard O’Shea from The University of Notre Dame Australia for their contribution today, Executive Director of Schools, Mr Greg Whitby, and his team for organising us, and those who have joined us from the independent Catholic schools.

1. Day of Four Popes
Two men dressed all in white attend the throne of God. They are not the two St Luke tells us gave the holy women trauma counselling on Easter day and gave the apostles grief counselling on Ascension day (Lk 24:4; Acts 1:10-11). No, they are two popes at whose recent canonisation I was privileged to concelebrate with two other popes, our current Pope Francis and our Pope Emeritus Benedict, 800 or so bishops and a million or more of the faithful. They streamed into Rome, as if into the heavenly Jerusalem, to rejoice that the two most famous Catholic leaders of the 20th Century have joined the heavenly court and are now interceding for the Church. (You can read my blog from the canonisation, including some photos, if you are interested: http://anthonyfisherop.wordpress.com/category/canonisations-jpii-john-xxiii).

Our two new pope-saints have been called the bookends of the Second Vatican Council because one was its initiator and the other its great interpreter. Today I’d like to suggest that they and their Council have much to say to Catholic education in the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta at this exciting time of implementing Faith in Our Future and responding to the RE Review.

2. Two New Pope-Saints on Personal Holiness
Good Pope John’s spiritual autobiography, Journal of a Soul, reveals his great holiness. As Pope he asked a young boy what he was going to do when he grew up. The boy said he was either going to be a policeman or a pope. “Aim high and be a policeman,” John said. “They’ll take anyone as Pope – just look at me.” I’m not sure whether those were the only careers little John considered himself. But already by adolescence he exhibited a deep desire to know God and come closer to Him in Christ. He adopted certain spiritual habits, such as praying for 15 minutes upon waking each morning, followed by spiritual reading and meditation. In due course he added daily Mass and the Divine Office. Each week he’d go to Confession and fast on Friday and Saturday. Each month he’d ask a trusted friend to observe him and point out his faults. Each year he’d go on retreat, and so on. Few of us are in such a helpful rhythm of prayer and even fewer are humble enough to ask that our faults be regularly identified – though many of you have spouses for that! But young Johnny started these good practices while still a school-boy and that made it easier for him to be prayerful as a busy adult. Not praying became as unthinkable as not
brushing his teeth. As educators know: what you start at school can set you up for life.

John Paul the Great was no spiritual slouch either. As pope he’d pray before the Blessed Sacrament for up to 90 minutes before saying his Mass. On returning home after an especially arduous international journey, his minders led him to his bedroom – only to find his bed untouched the next morning: he had spent the entire night on his knees in prayer. When Parkinson’s disease confined him to bed where his minders could not, he asked for the Blessed Sacrament to be reserved in his room so he could be close to his Beloved. Once again, there is ample evidence that his intense spiritual life began in his schooldays. As the Jesuits say: get them at seven and you’ve got them for life!

God may not be calling all of us or all our children to be such spiritual superheroes, though there’s every reason to aspire to – and even expect – saints from our Catholic Education system. Indeed the Second Vatican Council suggested that God is calling every one of us to sanctity. The Council’s ‘revolutionary’ idea was that personal holiness is not the preserve of the clergy, religious and a few lay eccentrics renowned for their strange ascetic practices. Nor is holiness icing on the cake, as if Christian life were living a middling-good-middling-bad life and hoping, after a long purgatory, to scrape into the back rows of heaven just before closing time. No, said the Council and its two popes: personal holiness is foundational to any Catholic life, let alone for those who lead and form others, such as priests, principals and RECs!

John Paul II commented that vital to a Catholic school’s identity is the witness of the adults working there: transmission of religious knowledge is necessary but not sufficient; children need the teacher’s own example and passion for the faith. Moreover, he pointed out, holiness is the touchstone of all sound planning such as we have been doing in Parramatta lately: we must not “settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity”; no plan based on that would be worthy of our high calling. Concepts such as ‘love’, ‘gift’, ‘reciprocity’ and ‘communion’ are fundamental to Catholic education and part of an educational ideal which “moves educators to be credible witnesses in the eyes of young people”.

And there’s the rub: many leaders and staff in Catholic education are comfortable enough with having high ideals for our students; but when we say we expect leaders and staff to be making progress towards sanctity, then we start to shift in our chairs. We can feel a bit like the disciples who rather than being excited by the miraculous haul of fish tried to send their divine provocateur away (Lk 5:1-11). Earlier this year I offered you a text to goad your thinking about these things. It suggested we must all become more truly “intentional” in our discipleship and more “up front” about it; around the same time Pope Francis made the same point when he called us all to be “missionary disciples” of Gospel joy. Some found the book a little confronting. It might seem a bit much to ask ordinary people coming from very different backgrounds and spiritual levels, to be so intentional, so missionary, so out there and intense, about their faith.
What’s the alternative? That we say credible witness matters; that we recognize that savvy young people have inbuilt phoney detectors and won’t believe our religious talk if we don’t live and breathe it ourselves; but that we let things slide and just hope for the best? The fact is: many supposedly Catholic institutions around the world have St Mauds or the like on the sign out front, a few religious symbols here and there inside, fine-sounding mission statements and some humanly very good activities: but their Catholic soul has departed. Can we be happy being a hybrid between the state school down the street and the posh private non-denom school up on the hill, a bit more spiritual than the one and a bit cheaper than the other, but without the Catholic mission and identity? No: the fact is that if our discipleship is not intentional, not missionary, it is not discipleship.

3. Two Pope-Saints on Catholic Schools

Next year we’ll celebrate the golden jubilee of the Second Vatican Council’s document on Catholic education Gravissimum educationis, a document begun but not complete before John XXIII died. He had taught that the purpose of Christian education is to enable students to breathe in a Christian atmosphere that more and more permeates their hearts, strengthens their wills and sets them up for life as children of the Church. The Council document cited the thought of Pope John – and that of his apostolic namesaint – when it aspired to the Catholic school being a place where the young learn “to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23)”.

For Catholics, of course, truth is not just an abstract concept: it is first and foremost a person, Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). On one occasion, in Bologna, John Paul II shared a platform with Bob Dylan. After Dylan sang a couple of songs he handed the microphone to the Pope. JP resisted the temptation to sing a Polish pop song. Instead he asked the large gathering of youth, “How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?” And then he answered, “There is one road, and Jesus Christ is that road, that Way.” (Prof) Gerard O’Shea spoke at length to us about the “Trinitarian-Christocentricism” – which is, as he explained, theospeak for our lives being centred on Jesus Christ, who reveals the Father to us in the communion of the Holy Spirit. For John Paul the Catholic school represented a unique meeting place between young people and Christ and an opportunity
to develop that “personal relationship with God and to discover that all things have the deepest meaning in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.” That is why “prayer and the liturgy, especially the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance, should mark the rhythm of a Catholic school’s life.”17 With our two new pope-saints I encourage you and your staff to take whatever opportunities you can to further develop your relationship with Christ along with that of your young ones so that we really walk our talk. After a long day’s work and prayer Pope John XXIII used sometimes to escape the Vatican walls to walk amongst the ordinary people: this gained him the nickname “Johnny Walker” amongst the Romans.

4. CCE on Renewing our Passion for Catholic Education
Where have we come in Catholic Education since the two pope-saints and their Council? A few weeks ago the Vatican published another document on Catholic Education entitled *Educating Today and Tomorrow: Renewing a Passion*.18 It is a preparatory document for the upcoming celebrations of *Gravissimum educationis*,19 and it reprises that conciliar text and the eight major documents on Catholic education that have appeared since, including one late last year.20 (It means our excellent literature review is already dated, and I am pleased to learn from Gerard that he will be updating it.) The newest document recalls the theological and spiritual vision of those texts, reviews our changing social and educational context, asks what kind of Catholic schools we need for the 21st Century, and articulates some aspirations for them. “At the heart of Catholic education there is always Jesus Christ: everything that happens in Catholic schools ... should lead to an encounter with the living Christ,” the document claims. To meet the great educational challenges on the near horizon “we must keep alive the memory of God made flesh in the history of mankind – in our history.” Catholic schools are places “of testimony and acceptance, where faith and spiritual accompaniment can be provided to young people”, places “where the transmission of knowledge is key” but as part of “an integral education ... that includes religious formation ... [that helps] young people realise the beauty of faith in Jesus Christ and of religious freedom in a multi-religious universe.” And if this is to happen “Catholic educators will have to be credible witnesses.”

The document is aware of the challenges of our contemporary educational scene: our secularising and individualistic culture; pressures of technocracy and economy; the woundedness of many of our children and their disconnect from other aspects of Church life; the challenges of limited resources; exaggerated and ever-changing expectations of education; and so on. If we are to renew our passion for Catholic education, so that our schools are oases of evangelical hope and love of truth, they’ll need spiritual vision and good interpersonal relationships. The *how* of teaching and learning will be as important as the *what*, the relationship that is paedagogy will be consciously examined and developed, learners will be central, and schools will collaborate and contend with all that is learnt outside the school.

A bishop, recalling John Paul’s amazing memory for names and faces, told of returning to Rome after some years and after putting on a good deal of weight.
“Is your diocese growing?” the Pope inquired. The hefty prelate assured him that it was indeed expanding. “So is the bishop,” said John Paul with a twinkle in his eye. (Before you ask if it was me, let me assure you it was an American bishop. Pope John Paul did tease me at least twice that I recall, but it wasn’t about my girth.) Unsurprisingly, the new Vatican document has a bit to say about bishops – fat or thin – and their relationship to schools. “Particular attention,” the document says, “must be devoted to the selection and formation of school principals” so that they will be not merely bosses but the pastoral eyes and hands and voice of the bishop in the school (“the bishop’s reference persons inside the schools in matters of pastoral care”), accepting co-responsibility for “a shared and living mission” and capable of providing the teachers with the “mutual encouragement and assistance” they need. Teacher training must itself be seen as a lifelong project with an evangelical identity. The document argues that we must not resign ourselves to having a ‘parallel population’ of teachers in our Catholic schools – those committed to the mission and the others. “What is needed, instead, is unity among the teachers, who together are willing to embrace and share a specific evangelical identity, as well as a consistent lifestyle.” The document concludes with a sage warning that amidst all the targets and league tables in contemporary education we must not lose sight of the fact that much of what we do has invisible effects or effects only obvious in the long term and so not well captured by these measures. Nor should we forget that Catholic education is only one part of the person’s formation across a life-span.

5. The Diocese of Parramatta on Faith in the Future of Catholic Schooling

In our Gospel today we heard Jesus instruct the first pope-saint to put out into the deep, whereupon Peter paid out his nets and drew in a great catch (Lk 5:1-11). St John Paul II used this very text at the turn of the new millennium to charge the Church with the New Evangelisation.21 I also cited this text in the introduction to Faith in Our Future, calling upon the faithful of our Diocese to engage with energy, dedication and great trust in the Lord in hauling in His fish.22 Many factors make it vital that we grow our faith and grow our faithful. Our plan calls us to deepen our relationship with Christ in Word and sacrament; to reach out especially to those with no spiritual home; and to identify ever more closely with our local Catholic community and that community of communities that is the Church universal.23 It calls the Catholics of Western Sydney to mature, intentional, missionary discipleship. And it looks to our schools to play their part in this great mission.

I won’t rehearse today the dozens of ideas in the Diocesan Pastoral Plan immediately bearing upon our schools. We all know St John XXIII’s famous answer to the journalist who asked innocently, “How many people work in the Vatican?” “About half,” His Holiness replied. Well I am convinced the average is higher in our CEO and schools and I know I can trust them already to be working with our parish communities and other agencies in applying the pastoral plan to the renewal of our ministries. One initiative heralded in the plan was the Review of Religious Education in our schools conducted with The University of Notre Dame Australia. Since then, we have received the
completed review – a report of great weight, both intellectually and physically! I thank Prof Margie Maher, Dean of Education at UNDA, Assoc Prof Kevin Watson, Director of Research who oversaw the project from beginning to end, Assoc Prof Gerard O’Shea for his literature review and evaluation of Sharing Our Story and, along with his colleague Edward Waters, for the analysis of the raw data. I congratulate them on a prodigious and insightful report.

This review helps us know where we’ve come from in RE, where we are now and where we might go in future. It sets us up well to respond even better to the conciliar and post-conciliar documents and to the perceived needs of the faithful of Parramatta who with their clergy contributed so generously to our pastoral planning process. (Prof) Kevin Watson has already taken us through the 11 main recommendations and I am pleased today formally to adopt them. They will be stepping stones on our path to making Catholic schooling in this Diocese even more clearly the missionary project it is called to be.

Our religious education curriculum Sharing Our Story, with its “Shared Christian Praxis” (SCP) methodology, is now more than two decades old. The last time it was thoroughly reviewed was in 1995, with some modifications made in 1999. The present review takes stock of how it has gone, our present catechetical context, and the aspirations of the Church today. I was especially helped by (Prof) Gerard O’Shea’s insightful analysis of SCP. It acknowledges its strengths, such as the emphasis on forming, informing and transforming students “as they grow in Christian discipleship, the recognition that there are certain core truths, the need to support faith communities and families.”24 It also identifies some shortcomings by 2014 standards, including a tendency to make the student “the arbiter of what is true, based on personal preferences” which is hardly appropriate with respect to scientific and historical truth, let alone revealed theological truth.25 The review also points out that Sharing Our Story is too “classroom based”, failing sufficiently to immerse students in and prepare them for a post-school sacramental life.26 More strategic focus needs to be given to helping students develop an ongoing commitment to Catholic faith and life.

It’s time, therefore, to build on our achievements in RE while investigating new ways to help bring students into lifelong friendship with Jesus Christ. That will require systematic explication of the Catholic faith, based on the Catechism. But as the recent Vatican document highlighted, the how is as important here as the what. Every means of encouraging and deepening faith, rather than unsettling and deconstructing it, must be pursued. Meaningful participation by staff and students in the Church’s rich sacramental, devotional and prayer life is basic here, and not just during the week but on Sunday. International, national and local festivals, pilgrimages and retreats; study of scripture, theology and Church history; works of justice and compassion – all these are important. School links with families and parishes must be strengthened.

In addition to these matters highlighted by the review, there is the question of what to do in Years 11 and 12. Today I commission Greg Whitby with his team to investigate an alternative to “Studies of Religion”, so that our students may
complete their Catholic schooling with a Board-approved course in *Catholic Studies* that reinforces and capitalises on their RE experience across their school life, and assists them towards further education as other Board-developed courses do. I don’t underestimate the inertia that we may face in trying to do this, but I am convinced we can do better by our students in their final years before they enter a world that may challenge their faith deeply.

The RE Review also recognises the challenge of raising up new leaders for Catholic education. Teachers who are willing and able to serve our school communities and our system as leaders will need to be identified and supported in various ways: they are the DoSPs, principals, deputies and RECs of the future. I therefore also ask Greg Whitby and his team to investigate what structural and formative changes would better support the religious leadership of our priests, principals and RECs and assist in identifying and forming the next generation of leaders. To this end I am pleased to announce that a new program will be introduced in 2015 for teachers who begin a leadership role for the first time. We will also be introducing a new program for Religious Education Coordinators. Called FIDES, which is of course Latin for ‘faith’ it is an acronym for “Forming Intentional Disciples in Every School”. It will build the capacity of RECs to form intentional disciples and focus on collaborative leadership, mentoring and formation of staff. A highpoint of the FIDES program will be a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Rome. Specifics of this program will be available at the conclusion of today’s meeting.

From 2015 there will also be a new Beginning Teachers Overnight Retreat, focusing on forming teachers as intentional disciples. I also ask principals to continue to ensure that at least one staff development day each year is spent on the evangelisation and formation of staff, as one-off experiences for beginning teachers and top-ups when moving into leadership are not enough. We might usefully call these *Evangelisation Retreats* to distinguish them from other PD days.

The RE Review highlights some deficiencies in, and the Diocesan Pastoral Plan highlights some aspirations for, the school-parish relationship and today I ask the Episcopal Vicar for Education and Formation, Very Rev Fr Chris de Souza VG EV, to establish a working party to consider ways we might enrich that relationship. In particular, we might review chaplaincy and other involvements of clergy in our schools, liturgical and other involvements of schools in our parishes, and ways of knitting the communities and apostolates of the two more closely together.

Later this year Sherry Weddell will spend some time with us reflecting upon our challenges and opportunities. In August next year we plan to bring out (Most Rev) Michael Miller, former secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education and now Archbishop of Vancouver. He is a champion of Catholic education and will be very engaging. I would also like us to explore ways of connecting with the Global Convention on Catholic Education that will take place in Rome from 18-21 November 2015, marking the 50th anniversary of *Gravissimum educationis*. 
Conclusion
When John XXIII visited the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome he was introduced to the nun who ran the hospital. “Holy Father,” she said, “I am the superior of the Holy Spirit.” “You’re very lucky,” said the delighted pope, “I’m only the Vicar of Christ!” It’s dangerous to let your bishop go and keep company with four popes. He may come back full of excitement about what those new saints have to say to Catholic education. But there you are. At a time when we could easily be demoralised by nightly news of past failures, we must redouble our determination to be better for the young people of Western Sydney. I am convinced our Church can be and that Catholic Education has a crucial role to play here. We need all the enthusiasm we can muster. We can take our two new pope-saints with their conciliar and post-conciliar documents, our pastors and people with their new pastoral plan, and our education leaders and staff with their RE Review – as well as the various initiatives announced today – as encouragements moving forward. What you do is absolutely crucial for the mission of the Church and for our young people. Thanks be to God for each one of you!

5 Vatican Council II, Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, ch V, especially n.39.
6 St John Paul II, Address to Bishops of Ecclesiastical Regions of Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee (USA) on their Ad Limina Visit, 30 May 1998, n.4.
7 St John Paul II, Novo Millennio Inuente: Apostolic Letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee Year, n.31.
8 Congregation for Catholic Education, Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilisation of Love (2013), n.47.
9 Sherry Weddell, Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus (Our Sunday Visitor, 2012).
12 St John XIII, Mensaje En El XXX Aniversario De La «Divini Illius Magistri»
   www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/messages/
   pont_messages/1959/documents/hf_jxxiii_mes_19591230_uterecht_sp.html
13 Vatican Council II, Gravissimum educationis: Declaration on Catholic Education (1965), n.2.
14 St John Paul II, Address to Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee Bishops, n.3; Veritatis Splendor: Encyclical Letter on Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church’s Moral Teaching (1993), n.4.
17 St John Paul II, Address to Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee Bishops, n.4.
19 Vatican Council II, Gravissimum educantibus.