

Cultural Integration in Warrane College, Sydney, Australia

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1. BACKGROUND

If you were a keen observer of the Sydney Olympics and watched the panting marathon runners from the comfort of your armchair, you might have caught a glimpse of Warrane College. It was that eight-storey building on the corner of Anzac Parade and Barker Street, the one with all the cheering students hanging out the windows.

Doesn't ring a bell? No worries. Much as I love it, I doubt that the Australian heritage authorities will ever place Warrane on their roll of architectural treasures. It has a Lego look to it, with its no-nonsense 1960s straight-up-and-down lines in red brick and aluminum.

But that was the necessary consequence of building a large building on a small street-corner parcel of land. Until recently, when the College began to downsize the student population in order to 'right-size' the facilities and 'pastoral care', about 200 people lived at Warrane. About half are Catholic, at least nominally. The two-thirds who are Australian come from all over the country, but mostly from Sydney and the country areas of the state of New South Wales. About one-third come from overseas, mostly from Malaysia and Hong Kong, with a good sprinkling from Indonesia, China and Korea. Normally there is a sprinkling of students from Africa, the South Pacific Islands and Europe as well. It is a very international environment.

Most of the residents study at the University of New South Wales, a relatively new institution, but one which has acquired substantial prestige in Aus-

tralia and overseas. Its programs in engineering, science, computing, commerce and medicine are particularly strong.

Warrane is not the only residential college on campus. It is flanked by an Anglican college and a Jewish college and elsewhere on campus are five other colleges. Residential colleges are well established in Australia. Older universities like the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne have colleges which are over a hundred years old.

But I think that it is safe to say that none of them is quite like Warrane. Although it is relatively new on the scene, it has won a great deal of respect as an academically successful, socially refined and spiritually vibrant college. Running a college for young men has never been an easy job and nowadays it is very difficult. Many Australian colleges have effectively given up. They simply cannot provide pastoral care for their residents to help them internalise upright standards of behaviour. Despite the obvious moral dangers, most all-male colleges have gone co-ed, for example, partly because those responsible despaired of 'taming' young men without the presence of girls.

2. THE TROUBLES

Today Warrane is respected for its track record. But it had to earn that respect. In 1968, when construction began on Warrane College, it was an ambitious project. Not just ambitious, but almost foolhardy. As an corporate undertaking of Opus Dei, Warrane was born in an unusual way. Normally large apostolic works of Opus Dei spring from the needs of the society and from the apostolate of the faithful of Opus Dei. A lot of groundwork must be done before starting.

But the apostolate of Opus Dei in Australia was only beginning when plans for Warrane were being drafted. The first Opus Dei faithful had arrived in 1963. They hardly knew anyone; none of them was Australian; they had very little money at their disposal. What they did have was the encouragement and prayers of Blessed Josemaría. So they knuckled down, found an architect, secured finance, negotiated with the University, and enlisted the help of friends who could understand the apostolic potential of the College.

Constructing the building was to be the easiest of the challenges awaiting the handful of Opus Dei faithful who staffed the College. Forming the residents was difficult, unexpectedly difficult.

When the College opened its doors half-way through the academic year in 1970, there were only eight faithful of Opus Dei amongst about 100 students, almost none of whom had had any contact with the apostolate of Opus Dei. In 1971, the University insisted that the College be filled to capacity. The residents'

lack of formation, lack of familiarity with the apostolic work of Opus Dei and lack of trust of the staff inevitably gave rise to some misunderstandings within the College and on campus. You have to appreciate that this was the early 1970s, a time of great student unrest all over the world, and Australia was no exception. There were violent protests over Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, over discrimination against Aboriginals, over touring South African rugby teams. As well as the general climate of protest at the University of NSW, some students were particularly active in agitating against censorship laws and promoting pornography.

Indeed, there was a small but noisy group of students who needed to be agitated about some cause all the time. At one stage there was a dearth of causes — and they found one in Warrane. It was not just by virtue of its size that Warrane stood out. It had rules — just a few — as Blessed Josemaría had suggested, to help the College become a home with a good atmosphere for study and not a hotel or barracks. However, unlike some other colleges, it required students to respect the rules [...] This was provocation enough. One afternoon in 1971, a couple of hundred radical students and their followers marched on the College and demonstrated outside. Some forced their way into the building. The police had to be called in and the invaders were tossed into waiting paddy wagons. The fracas appeared on television. It was unnerving for the staff, but eventually things settled back to normal. In addition to praying that everything would work out, the staff also made the effort to keep up good relations with the residents and to help them to understand the reasons for these rules.

In 1974, another group of student radicals put Warrane in the news again. Scabrous and unjust attacks had appeared in the university student newspaper for some time about Opus Dei and the rules. Another demonstration was held outside and the Master of the College was burnt in effigy to chants of 'Joe must go!' Under pressure from the radicals, the Vice-Chancellor set up a committee of inquiry to assess whether or not the ideals of Warrane College were consistent with those of the university. The result of the inquiry exonerated the College.

It was a difficult time. Blessed Josemaría wrote letters encouraging the faithful of Opus Dei to pray, to approach these contradictions with supernatural outlook, and to be confident that much good would eventually result. He was right, of course, as he always was about the apostolic potential of apparently tottering projects.

3. WHY ALL THE RUCKUS?

I have not dwelt on these 'dark days' to ask for sympathy. After 30 years, Warrane's sympathy entitlements are well past their shelf life. In fact, those who

lived through them now see all the good that resulted and recall the excitement rather fondly. Rather, I wanted to mention them to highlight Warrane's distinctive contribution to cultural integration. Warrane's role as an international student residence might seem to be the most obvious dimension of cultural integration. There have been small tensions from time to time, but by and large, Australians are an easy-going people who accept ethnic, religious, cultural and racial diversity. In more than 30 years, Warrane has had no race riots, but it did go through two 'counter-cultural' riots and a highly intrusive university inquiry because its Christian culture clashed with the dominant secularist culture.

Broadly speaking, Australia is a peaceful and racially integrated Western society (admittedly, our problems with Aboriginals are a real concern, but are largely irrelevant to Warrane's situation) — but a highly secularised one where integration is achieved through indifference rather than true tolerance and solidarity, through absence of conflict rather than a shared vision of the human person. Asserting Christian moral values is often deemed intolerance, narrow-mindedness or even bigotry. To my mind, then, the marvelous achievement of the spirit of Blessed Josemaría at Warrane is the success of the College's uncompromising day-by-day battle to Christianise the dominant secular culture with which most of the Australians and many of the overseas students are imbued.

Over the years, this will have an impact upon the University environment and Australian society. Warrane's example will show that it is possible to live a full Christian life without compromises and to attract others to live it. Blessed Josemaría wrote in *The Way*, "To compromise is a sure sign of not possessing the truth. When a man gives way in matters of ideals, of honour or of Faith, that man is a man without ideals, without honour, and without Faith"¹. To most people, this might sound impossibly idealistic. Warrane has showed that it can be a reality.

4. THE BATTLE OF FORMATION

a) The challenge

No doubt the problems of Warrane residents have a familiar ring: individualism, consumerism and materialism. These are problems that trouble most developed societies, at least. When people aspire to little beyond their own comfort, pleasure and professional achievement, the bonds of solidarity are weakened and the midday splendour of the transcendent vanishes behind a thick layer of

¹ *The Way*, 394.

smog. At its worst, the victims of an individualist society live an atomised life where little matters apart from acquiring the baubles and trinkets of the information age.

As a consequence, many Australian university students are good-natured, energetic and friendly, but often they have no spiritual horizons of any sort. Their understanding of the human person has withered to the point where a high standard of living and professional horizons are their principal goals in life. It will come as no surprise that often they feel irked by the demands of living in a student residence whose ideal is to be like the home of a good Christian family. It is a great struggle to open up for them not only a Christian perspective on life but also the human consequences of living a deep Christian life.

It is not uncommon to find that some, despite a façade of friendliness and good manners, have little experience of real friendship. Without wanting to simplify the consequences of divorce, I could say that in society where the divorce rate is running at about 40 per cent, you have to expect that some residents' lives have been scarred by the divorce of their parents. Confusion about basic notions concerning a Christian approach to sexuality is widespread.

b) Coping with the challenge

The challenge is exceedingly common in developed Western countries: how can you imbue young men such as these with Christian ideals so deep that they can pass on to their own children without distancing them from their family, friends, future profession and secular society? Warrane's strategy (for lack of a better word) has all been drawn from the example and teachings of Blessed Josemaría: prayer, faithfulness to the family spirit that Blessed Josemaría taught, constantly reinforcing the conviction that faith and life are compatible, professional prestige as a university college, forming personal friendship, creating a truly family environment, and fostering a spirit of service. I would like to expand briefly upon each of these points.

Prayer. It sounds obvious, but prayer can be a last resort for many of us. But to maintain one's human strength and supernatural outlook and to win grace for the residents, prayer is essential. Blessed Josemaría's exhortations to prayer and a plan of life fill volumes.

Faithfulness to the family spirit. Blessed Josemaría wanted all of the corporate apostolates to have the atmosphere a real Christian family, which implied certain demands that at times the residents found difficult to accept (from leav-

ing one's room during cleaning times to not having locks on the doors). When it was difficult to insist on a healthy, family-like environment, the College directors knew that being firm in one's principles always reaped benefits.

Constantly reinforcing the conviction that faith and life are compatible. In a nutshell, this is the message of Blessed Josemaría (reaffirmed by Vatican II). But often one is tempted to give up, to say “this is all too hard”. In this the living example and the writings of Blessed Josemaría have been indispensable.

Professional prestige as a university college. Blessed Josemaría insisted that the corporate works of apostolate of Opus Dei should be centres of excellence. Obviously the College can never be complacent, but it provides an excellent environment for the residents. It is clean and well-decorated and the food is good, thanks to the professional hard work of those who take care of the domestic tasks and the effort made to maintain the family atmosphere of the College. Obviously good tucker and a bright and cheerful environment help people feel at home. About one-fifth of the College receives a Distinction average in their studies and almost no one fails. And in sport, especially rugby union, which is so precious to Australians, the College has recently won the University premiership.

Forming personal friendships. I am sure that this point from *The Way* is a familiar one — “Those well-timed words whispered into the ear of your wavering friend; the helpful conversation that you managed to start at the right moment; the ready professional advice that improves his university work; the discreet indiscretion by which you open up unexpected horizons for his zeal. This all forms part of the ‘apostolate of friendship’². This is not easy. Australian young men seldom have deep friendships, just ‘mates’, guys they hang around with. They are not accustomed to talking about deeper issues. But the College staff try to make sure that every single resident is reached, or at least has an opportunity to make friends with someone with deep Christian ideals.

Creating a family environment. Every night on each of the six floors there is ‘coffee club’ or a get-together for everyone on the floor. After lunch there is a get-together in the Main Common Room on the ground floor. It takes a lot of effort to maintain practices such as these, but it pays off. Former residents often remark how much they miss the family atmosphere. One told the College Bursar not long ago that the only time he had ever experienced family life was at War-

² *Ibidem*, 973.

rane. The College tries to help fellows develop a spirit of service and interest in others in a myriad of small details. One recent example was related by a former resident in the Army Reserves. During one camp, he took orders for coffee from his tablemates and went to the urn to fill up. There he met another fellow doing the same — who turned out to be another College resident.

Fostering a spirit of service. Every year the College organises a work camp in conjunction with other apostolic works of Opus Dei to go to a nearby country (Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga, the Philippines) or to an Aboriginal settlement to build or refurbish for three weeks. Only a handful attend these, but nearly half the College participates in a Neighbourhood Aid Project in which residents help the frail and elderly in their homes or help derelicts through a St Vincent de Paul night patrol. This helps residents to be less materialistic and more generous.

That is the ‘strategy’ — an environment in which residents see that the humanly admirable qualities of honesty, hard work, service and generosity which they see in the fellows around them have their root in the Faith.

Does the strategy work?

Yes, it does. One of the most evident proofs of that, and the most pleasing, is how well students from very different ethnic, racial and social backgrounds live, work and play together. Nowadays, unhappily, some Australians are tempted to think that Christians and Muslims cannot live together in peace. Warrane gives the lie to that. Over the years, we have had a number of students from countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. They have all returned to their own countries or settled in Australia with very happy memories of sport, ‘coffee clubs’, excursions and study together with Australian students. For an occasional visitor — which is what I am nowadays — it is always a treat to sit opposite the College inquiries desk in the evening. A student behind the desk, often from overseas, is discussing the cricket or next week’s soccer match with a few Aussie students. There is a lot of laughter and banter in different accents. You can see that, in a way, they are at home, in a family. It is something that everyone, even overnight visitors, remarks on.

5. OUTCOMES

The outcomes of the effort and prayer of the faithful of Opus Dei are obviously hard to quantify. “Sow, and be certain that the seed will take root and bear

fruit”³, wrote Blessed Josemaría in *The Way*. It can take years for the influence of the College to soak in. There are many stories of residents who left Warrane bitter and unhappy — and returned a few years later to attend activities such as the monthly evenings of recollection or weekend retreats, or to take advantage of opportunities for spiritual direction. This was almost always due to the fact that someone in the College stayed friends with the former residents. That loyal friendship was a thread — perhaps a lifeline — which led them back to a life of regular prayer or even back to the sacraments.

Let me sketch out some of that fruit — as least what is visible.

A deeper spiritual life. Most of the entering students are non-practising Catholics or non-Catholics or non-Christians. However, every year a number of fellows return to practising. A smaller number are received into the Church. Everyone is invited, personally, for example to pray before the Blessed Sacrament during the First Friday all-night vigil. Nearly everyone does, at some stage. Quite a number of fellows at Warrane, over the years, have discovered the radical nature of their Christian vocation as lay faithful in the middle of the world; others their vocation to the priesthood or religious life. Three things are particularly effective in influencing the students to take God more seriously — personal friendship, visits to the poor and needy, and formation through talks on human virtues and Catholic doctrine. Of course, no one is required to do any of these, but many residents feel attracted to them.

Generosity in marriage. A consistent experience of ‘old boys’ of Warrane is that family life in College helped to prepare them for the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood. One former tutor told me that his job taught him a fundamental lesson for his children: if he spent time on his floor, there were very few problems. If he neglected the floor, problems increased. Another commented that his College responsibilities helped him to be more forgiving and patient. The number of families blessed with many children amongst Warrane Old Boys is remarkable.

A balanced professional and family life. University graduates from the University of NSW often become highly motivated professionals who are tempted to neglect their families. Life in College helps them to see that there are more important things in life than professional success and that they have to spend time with their wives and children.

³ *Ibidem*, 794.

A Christian outlook on professional work. Those residents who absorb the lessons of Warrane understand that work is not just a means for ‘earning a quid’, but a service to society. Some residents have gone on to found The Pared Foundation, a company which runs several schools in the Sydney area which have attracted national attention for their academic excellence and the quality of their spiritual and human formation. Another area in which the influence of the College is quite noticeable is Medicine. Over the years a number of doctors have entered the profession who have a pro-life attitude on issues like abortion, contraception and stem cell research. Not only are they committed to a pro-life stance out of loyalty to their Catholic Faith, but also because they have a deep understanding of the medical and ethical issues involved. They are active in explaining them to medical colleagues and lay audiences.

Respect for the College. What Warrane stands for is well-known in Sydney. But because of its professional achievements and the quality of its human formation, it has become a respected institution. Both the Australian Prime Minister and the Premier of New South Wales wrote letters of congratulations for its 25th anniversary. The editor of a major national newspaper who oversaw a series of scathing articles about Opus Dei is now a strong supporter of the College — its only ‘life member’ who never lived there. Implicit in this support is a perception shared by many others — that Warrane is an outstanding environment for fostering the leaders of the future.

6. THE INFLUENCE OF BLESSED JOSEMARÍA

This is a conference about Blessed Josemaría and it may seem strange that I have not mentioned him more often. But in fact, without his prayer, his encouragement and his firm conviction that the Faith has the answers to many of the questions which perplex modern society, Warrane would not exist at all. His constant message, then and now, is that a deep spiritual life, genuine friendship, professionalism, and unwavering fidelity to his spirit and the Catholic Faith is attractive and effective. “Work [...] to drown evil in an abundance of good”⁴, he often said. Hard work. Loving perseverance. Loving fraternity. Unshakeable faith. Abundant grace. Together they work miracles.

⁴ *The Forge*, 848.