

Launch speech of [Catholic Thought and Catholic Action](#)

James Franklin

St Patrick's Church Hill Crypt, 1 Apr 2023

I'm James Franklin. Welcome to my book launch, and thanks for coming to help me celebrate it. Welcome back especially to those who attended my launch of *The Worth of Persons* only four months ago – that shows real dedication.

The book is about how the basics of Catholic thought translate into action, especially action for the poor and oppressed. I've invited Senator Jacinta Price to speak, although she's not Catholic, because she's done exactly that. The worst off living Australians, as a group, are those suffering extreme levels of violence in remote indigenous communities. Years ago, the Christian missions did something for them, as described in two chapters of the book. Now it's Jacinta who's in the lead demanding that remote victims of violence be given the protections that other Australians take for granted. In her first speech to Parliament last year, she said "It is not good enough that the streets of our Northern Territory towns ... have gangs of children aged from 6 to 16 wandering around with no adult supervision in the early hours of the morning. It is not good enough that almost all of these children have witnessed or been subject to normalised alcohol abuse, domestic, family and sexual violence throughout their young lives. ... [It] would not be accepted in the prosperous suburbs of any of our capital cities." That's the kind of demand for justice that's typical of the Catholics that are the subject of this book.

JACINTA PRICE

This is a book about Australian Catholic history. So let me tell you, what Australian Catholic history is for.

I have two speeches: one for Catholics and one for non-Catholics. If you're a non-Catholic, you may never have heard the expression "non-Catholic". But it played a big role in the classification schemes I knew as a child at Catholic schools. We were Catholics, and out there somewhere, in the wider society, there were many non-Catholics, who, often through no fault of their own, lacked the spiritual advantages we had. No hostility to them was suggested, just being aware, since it was likely enough you'd meet some if you later went out to work.

For non-Catholics first – from their point of view, what is the point of Australian Catholic history?

A week ago, the voters of New South Wales decided they were fed up with their Catholic premier. They voted decisively to replace him with a Catholic premier. A few years before that, the federal Coalition rolled their Catholic prime minister and replaced him with a Catholic prime minister. A decade ago Cardinal Pell, then the Archbishop of Sydney, called his mate the Catholic premier and asked him to amend the St John's College Act to allow

him, the Cardinal, to appoint the Council. It was done overnight. Not long before *that* we had a premier who'd written a masters thesis on radical feminist theology. One chapter of my book discusses the Cahill state government of the 1950s and notes that around 1954, the Premier, Police Commissioner, and Lord Mayor were Catholic and that in that year the Departments of Public Works, Attorney-General, Justice, Police and the Housing Commission had Catholics both as their respective Ministers and Permanent Heads. So if you want to understand how politics works in these parts, it might help to inquire into what these people believe - and how they organise.

And it's not just at the top or powerful end of society that Catholics got organised. The anonymous people at the bottom of the heap saw a lot of Catholic action too. Schools, hospitals, orphanages, shelters have all been done on the big scale. One chapter of the book is about the little-known story of Magdalen laundries, which took in teenage girls in destitute and criminal circumstances and did what they could for them.

The point of the book is that those mass activities of Catholics in the wider society are not an accident or a result of individual initiatives but follow from Catholic thought. The thought inspires and directs the action. Catholics take seriously the parable of the Good Samaritan, that random people in need are neighbours and must be helped. Protestants think that too – they have the same Bible – but the Catholic tradition is more institutionally organised, encouraging mass coordinated action. Also distinctive is the Catholic commitment to natural law ethics based on the inherent worth of persons, which gives a basic orientation for deciding what's right and wrong. That enables action too, because you know from the start what's the forward direction for action.

I'll mention just one of those actions with the biggest impact on Australia, the subject of one of the book's chapters: In the late 1940s, Arthur Calwell, one of the most floridly Catholic of Australian politicians and later a papal knight, suddenly imported 170,000 Eastern European refugees from the Red Army, 60% of them Catholic. He believed the result was good for the refugees and good for Australia. Those "New Australians", as he cunningly called them, were the first wave of the mass non-English-speaking immigration that, as everyone agrees, has transformed Australian society. Did he intend that result? Well, without the immigration program, he said, "we would still be a dull inbred country of predominantly British stock." You can draw your own conclusions about his aims.

There are plenty more stories where that came from.

Now, what's in the story for Catholics?

For them (us), what is Australian Catholic history for? Is it just a hobby to amuse old duffers who are sentimental because they've lived through so much of it? I suspect that's the view of the leaders of the Sydney church.

I have another view. It has a role in evangelisation. The original evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke weren't theologians or sermonisers (or if they were we haven't heard about it). They were historians.

Luke starts his gospel with his stance as a historian (“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses ... I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, so I too decided to write an orderly account” etc) Luke’s sequel to his gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, especially resembles what we do – the story of the first Christian community, what it did, how it decided things, how it dealt with trouble ...

At the beginning of Acts are the last recorded words of Jesus. He says to his followers, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts continues the story up to St Paul’s arrival in Rome. That is well beyond Judea and Samaria, but it is not the ends of the earth.

You know where the actual ends of the earth are. You’re standing in them. The story of the Catholic Church here resumed in 1803, when officials in the Vatican received an unexpected letter via Irish connections in Rome. The letter described events in a recently established British colony on the far side of New Holland (you can imagine them reaching for maps to try and work out where that was). It revealed that an Irish priest forcibly sent there, Fr Dixon, was exercising his ministry. Despite the major disruption to Church activities resulting from the French Revolution followed by Napoleon’s occupation of Rome, the church functionaries acted enthusiastically in response. They sent Fr Dixon an official letter. It excused him from any defects in canonical forms that may have proved necessary in his difficult circumstances, urged him to organise where possible the conversion of the Pacific Islands, and granted him the impressive title, “Prefect Apostolic of New Holland.” That story is in chapter one of the book. The later chapters give a selection of the many things that happened after that.

As with the Acts of the Apostles, there are some role models, some warnings, some chance of historical perspective. (It’s not all positive news – history is what happened, not what you wish had happened – for example one chapter is about Fr Ridsdale, Australia’s worst pedophile priest.) A present-day believer can learn something, get a sense of being part of a longer story, and see the present day as just the transient edge of a long and growing saga. A sense of what the Australian Catholic community has done over two centuries gives shape to what we are doing now.

Before we finish, there’s time for a few QUESTIONS.

A few words of thanks: to Gerry Nolan for a lot of work sub-editing the book; to Ingrid Letkeman for organising the event, she’ll organise yours if you ask her. And to the catering team from Brew, to Yvette Maree for selling the books. Especially to Jacinta Price for finding time at the end of a Parliamentary sitting week, sometimes till 4 in the morning, and in which she also appeared on Q&A among other events.

The book is on sale. Listen carefully about how to buy it and about the price. Cash is OK. We don’t have credit card facilities, as it’s too hard to arrange and it’s too slow. So, each book

has a slip in it with bank deposit details for you to pay later. You're all ethical people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and I know I can trust you to do that.

Now, the price: It depends on who you are. The default price, the price for most people, is \$30. If you are an impoverished student or similar, it's \$5, just say so to the seller. If you represent an organ that deserves a review copy, it's free, just ask.

One last thing before I let you back to the food and drinks. I know a lot of people here don't know anyone else. So after time for polite applause, I'll count of three. Then could you please turn to the nearest person you don't know and introduce yourself. Give your first name and what connection you have with Catholic things or the author, for example, "I taught James in kindergarten." Many thanks for coming. Any applause goes in here. Now, 1 ... 2 ... 3 turn and introduce yourselves.