St Pat's Matters

A magazine for parishioners and friends of
St Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta

Thirty years ago

February 2026 | Issue 124

Tested by Fire

Thirty years since the Cathedral burned

Not long ago the world looked on in horror as the famous Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was massively damaged in a fire started accidentally by workers doing a renovation. Thousands stood in disbelief as they watched it burn, feeling the loss of something precious to the soul of the nation: a familiar place, a holy place, the site of so many baptisms and confirmations, ordinations, weddings and funerals, and of daily prayer and worship, filled with all the treasured contents of a much-loved sacred space.

In our times we have witnessed many Australians losing everything in bushfires tearing through communities, leaving them shocked, helpless and tearful as they pick through smoking rubble. Parishioners from 1996 know those feelings very well.

The Catholic Church is full of anniversaries, global and local. It is 1700 years since the Nicene Creed was formulated; 800 years from the death of St Francis; 400 years since St Peter's was consecrated; 190 years after the first St Patrick's on our site; 90 years since that original St Patrick's was re-built; 70 years since the Presbytery (the former Marist Brothers Monastery) was constructed; 60 years since Vatican II ended; 40 years since Pope John Paul II came to Australia and the erection of the Diocese of Parramatta when St Patrick's became our Cathedral; and 30 years since the terrible day when it was destroyed by fire.

In this edition we look back to the events of 30 years ago to remember, and perhaps to increase our appreciation for what we are blessed with today after much hard work and sacrifice.

St Pat's Matters

We acknowledge the Burramattagal people of the Dharug Nation, the traditional custodians of this area, and honour the spiritual and cultural wisdom of the First Peoples — wisdom grounded in care for Country, reverence for story, and a sacred connection to creation. We pay respects to Elders past and present. May we walk gently together, in justice, healing and shared hope.

Share your stories of Cathedral parish life at
stpatsmatters@stpatscathedral.com.au
Martin Graham

Selected content in this edition:
Alphonsus Fok/ Diocese of Parramatta (photos)
Catholic Outlook (text)

In the afternoon of 19 February 1996, just before Ash Wednesday, an arsonist lit a fire that ripped through St Patrick's Cathedral (the present-day Blessed Sacrament Chapel). It took 40 firefighters from 6 brigades a whole day and evening, pouring 13,500 litres of water onto the flames every minute, but the building's fate was sealed very soon after the fire began. As Dean at the time, Father (now Monsignor) John Boyle states in his recently published book, *Tested by Fire*, "It was like fighting the devil with water pistols," so intense were the flames. Fortunately, no one was injured despite the destruction. Bystanders on the street sobbed openly and at a parish meeting the next day there were more tears in the midst of prayer, song, anger and laughter.

The arsonist Jason Humphries, a troubled 21-year-old, watched the Cathedral burn, and even helped direct traffic around the scene. Police asked staff at Our Lady of Mercy College if they had seen anyone acting suspiciously earlier in the afternoon, and one of them identified Humphries in the crowd. He was arrested, and later convicted and sentenced. Mons Boyle visited him in jail and, prompted by Bishop Bede Heather, offered him forgiveness, an action which received both praise and criticism from the community.

Mons Boyle writes of his dismay at how little the Christian obligation to forgive was understood. He considers that forgiveness was not just part of the story; in a sense it was (and is) the story. However, turning the obligation into something touching the heart took its own time for many. Mons Boyle continued visiting Jason.

To prevent its collapse, the spire had to be lifted off the bell tower and lowered to the ground in front of the Marist Brothers 1918 school building, which later became the Pro-Cathedral.

In the early hours of Tuesday 20 February, Mons Boyle and architect John King discussed building the new Cathedral on the school's footprint and turning the burned-out Cathedral into a Blessed Sacrament Chapel, while reorienting it so that its entrance would face Murphy House rather than Victoria Road. Their thinking came to pass in what we have today.

The following day, Ash Wednesday, saw Mass celebrated in Prince Alfred Park (now Square), the site of the first Mass in Australia in 1803, using powerfully symbolic ashes taken from the ruins.

The Sisters of Mercy offered their chapel and later provided a new sound system and organ. Anglican Bishop

Tested by Fire

Thirty years since the Cathedral burned

Brian King commiserated with Bishop Bede, offered his churches for weddings and gave money towards rebuilding. Likewise, boys from the neighbouring King's School brought a substantial gift within a week.

Messages of condolence and support came from the Uniting Church, Church of the Latter-Day Saints, from Jewish and Sikh communities, among others.

The devastation was felt nationwide with Prime Minister Paul Keating visiting the site several times, along with NSW Premier Bob Carr, Governor-General Sir William and Lady Helen Deane, local Councillors, the heads of other churches and even the Rebel bikie gang coming to assist in the aftermath. Premier Carr presented a cheque for $50,000 towards a restoration fund. Many of the VIPs had personal and family connections to the Cathedral.

Fire and Rescue NSW Commissioner Jeremy Fewtrell AFSM spoke at the official launch of *Tested by Fire* on 19 October 2025 and reminded us of the impact on emergency services personnel too. "These events don't just happen and our firefighters go to them and walk away without thinking about them anymore. They have a personal, direct impact on our people as well. There's that empathy between the firefighters and the people who are experiencing the loss."

The parish community had to manage its own feelings of numbness and disbelief, sadness and anger, blame and second-guessing, discouragement and distress. Parish meetings led to the return of hope and prompted action on the things needing to be done immediately to keep the show going, at the same time as dealing with major disruption and change that no one asked for or wanted.

The physical losses were significant. Archbishop Bede Polding's chair up in flames; the Haydon stained glass windows melted in extraordinary heat; sacred vessels blackened; pews destroyed; organ incinerated; vestments consumed. Allegedly the only items to emerge totally unscathed were the collection plates!

A long road lay ahead to bring the vision of a new Cathedral to life, inevitably taking longer than first hoped. In the interim the Pro-Cathedral was used until it had to be demolished to make way for the new modern building, and the community decamped to "St Pat's in the Fields," a temporary church in the grounds of Cumberland Hospital. The new building had to wait until 2003 for its opening under a new Bishop, Kevin Manning. Thirty years on, we remember.

An iconic mystery

Terry O'Brien has questions

In December the wooden World Youth Day Cross nearly four metres tall together with an Icon of the Blessed Virgin were welcomed back in Sydney where they were last seen in July 2008. Both the cross and icon, travelling together, are reminders of God's eternal love and Mary's constant intercession. Icon is a Greek word for image but for many of us it is a prayer, a shrine and a meditation.

Many of our parishioners will have noticed the image at the western end of our Cathedral to the right of the Crucifix, which is a copy of the "Salus Populi Romani" icon (Protectress of the Roman People) in the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome.

What may be unknown to many of our more recent parishioners is that in the Chapel, our former Cathedral, was another image, subject of weekly devotions by a small band, four of whom are seen in the photo below: Beverley Alford, Felicitas Appathurai, Estrellita Salvador and Joanne Uccello (died 2022).

Stored in one of the Confessionals, unlike other objects destroyed in the devastating fire of 30 years ago, the icon was protected from the flames by the sturdy wooden door, but damaged by the intense heat and subsequently returned to the little group. There was talk of restoration, but regardless of any decision I requested and was given permission to photograph the icon as it was.

The image was marked by ornate crowns, understood to have been added over the haloes of the Infant Jesus and Mary in a solemn ceremony in 1867, but removed in a 1995 restoration. The Cathedral fire, just six weeks into that next year, was one way of removing the crowns on our icon, but at what cost!

Possibly someone seeing this article, even thirty years on, knows the fate of the damaged icon. Where is it now? ☘

Beverley Alford, Felicitas Appathurai, Estrellita Salvador, Joanne Uccello

Mons John Boyle records in his memoir Tested by Fire *that Archbishop Polding's chair had been donated to St Patrick's by Archbishop Clancy. It was to be the Bishop's Cathedra, and Estrellita Salvador had finished refurbishing it only days before the fire. Bishop Heather never got to sit in it.*

Alpha keeps feet on the ground

Terry O'Brien has answers

Terry O'Brien, a parishioner for half a century, relates the following events which could have erupted into a hell of a spiritual barney but, thank God, did not eventuate.

In the October 2025 edition of St Pat's Matters, page 15, is a photo of four groups of approximately thirty individuals with the prominent red background slide welcoming all to Alpha, after partaking in a meal of Parramatta Multicultural (not the usual Irish) Stew.

In the right foreground between parishioners John Starkey and Maurie Mouyatis what appears to be a vacant chair. It is in fact an optical illusion. The space occupied normally by the bulk of himself each Wednesday of the 2025 Alpha Program was instead tenanted by a simple 300 square centimetre envelope containing a Get Well Card chock full of messages, invisible in the photo.

Terry's copy of Tested by Fire is signed by Mons John Boyle

Terry recalls fronting up to St Peter at the pearly gates being greeted thus: "Yes, we do have you down for a tentative booking as we do for every old guy over ninety under anaesthetic. But unfortunately, we have had to cancel the booking, as you have to go back to Parramatta."

At this stage the Holy Spirit chimed in. "I've been sitting, directing his passage through traffic, on this bloke's right shoulder for a lifetime and his wife Annie's spirit on his left for a decade, and it's about time we got a break, or call it long service leave or whatever, but he can't go back when he wakes up." St Peter persisted, put a line through the entry and repeated, "He has to go back," almost promoting a hell of an argument. St Peter's reply to Terry was to "Simply thank all that Alpha mob whose prayers, messages of faith, hope and community support, contained in that simple Get Well card, brought about the cancellation."

Terry reports that at the final wrap-up meeting, a pre-Christmas gathering of the 2025 Alpha Group, on Wednesday 19 November, he got that opportunity.

Alpha is returning in 2026. It's a series of relaxed sessions where you can explore life, faith and meaning in an open, friendly space — no pressure and no expectations. Each session includes food, a short video and real conversations. Whether you're new to faith, returning after a break, or just curious — Alpha is for you.

If you are not a participant in Alpha yourself, you can help those who are by being on the service team. Contact the Parish Office on 8839 8400.

An Irish rebel

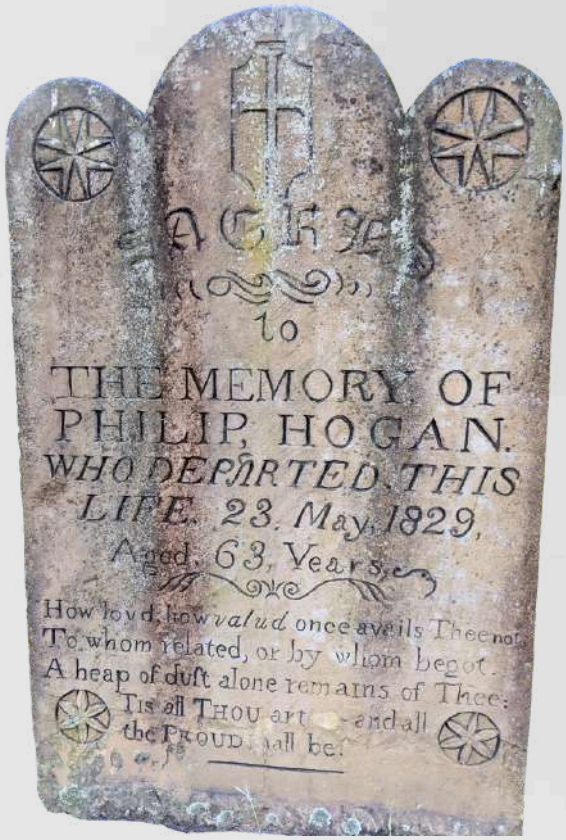
Judith Dunn tells the story behind the headstone

Philip Hogan was transported to the colony for life in 1799 aboard the *Friendship*, after being convicted for political offences against British rule. This ship carried mostly political prisoners who were United Irishmen, a fellow passenger being Father Dixon, also a convicted felon who went on to celebrate the first public Mass in Parramatta on 15 May 1803. The Battle of Vinegar Hill in Wexford between Irish patriots and the English occurred in June 1798 and a wave of Irish political prisoners were sent to the colony soon after. As a member of United Irishmen, it is possible Hogan was one of the political prisoners who took part in the battle and was transported to New South Wales. Unfortunately, the documentation of his trial was lost in a fire in the Dublin Records Office in 1922.

Born in Clonmel, Tipperary, on 1 January 1766, little is known of his Irish background. Leaving Cork, Ireland on 24 August 1799, he arrived in the colony on 16 February 1800. The ship was one of the smaller of the fleet, carrying just 133 male and 21 female convicts of whom one in seven died on the voyage. This indicates Philip was reasonably healthy and strong. Recorded in the convict indents as a labourer, he was educated to a degree as he could read and write.

Hogan was listed in Parramatta in 1806 where he gained his Ticket of Leave and started a relationship with Mary McMahon who was transported for seven years from Clare in 1803 on the *Rolla*. The couple had three children before Hogan was assigned to Reverend Samuel Marsden at Mamre in 1810. It was most likely working for Marsden that precipitated their marriage at St John's Church, Parramatta on 26 March 1810. Marsden once stated that women who married in the Catholic Church were not properly married and were merely concubines so a marriage in St John's may have taken place to placate his master. Between 1804 and 1824 the Hogans produced nine children who were mostly baptised in St Mary's Church, Sydney. It must have taken a great effort to travel to Sydney for the baptisms and shows their desire to adhere to the Catholic faith, despite having married in the Church of England.

Hogan worked for Marsden for many years even after gaining his Conditional Pardon in 1811 which indicates they had an amicable relationship. He was granted land in Liverpool in 1821 and by 1824 was recorded as having 180 acres, 17 in wheat, 1½ in potatoes, and another 40 acres cleared, so the family were very industrious. They also owned three horses, 110 horned cattle, 23 hogs with 17 bushels of wheat and five bushels of maize on hand. His own brand was PH.



This headstone also featured in St Pat's Matters #123, but without the benefit of Judith's deep research revealed here.

Philip died on 23 May 1829 and was buried in St Patrick's Cemetery, Parramatta. The verse on his epitaph is curious:

How lovd, how valud once avails Thee not
To whom related or by whom begot
A heap of duft alone remains of Thee
Tis all THOU art, and all the PROUD shall be

Taken from Alexander Pope's *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, there are stanzas which are softer and more appealing:

Shall thy grave with rising flowers be dressed,
And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast:
There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow,
There the first roses of the year shall blow

This seems to indicate the stanza on Philip's epitaph was chosen very deliberately. It does not matter how loved or important he was, like everyone he returns to dust which was a common religious theme. But was he a proud man? Especially with the emphasis on the words THOU and PROUD. He had kept his faith which must have been difficult while working for Reverend Samuel Marsden who had no great liking for Catholics. Hogan's name is not on the list of convicts who took part in the Battle of Vinegar Hill in New South Wales and he does not seem to have taken part in politics here. From his life's story he had every reason to be proud of his endeavours in the colony: he was a successful farmer, owning land and stock and raised a large family which at his death included 59 grandchildren. ☘

Musical curtain call

Belinda Bugo reflects on 25 Years in the choir

As I step away from the choir after 25 years of singing at St Patrick's, I find myself reflecting on the joy, the challenges and the grace that shaped this journey. The Latin phrase *tempus fugit* — time flies — feels especially true. These years passed swiftly, filled with music, fellowship and moments that lifted the soul.

From my early days under the direction of Anna Kleibert to my final rehearsal on 3 August 2025 with our current Musical Director Bernard Kirkpatrick, I've learned so much, not just about music, but about liturgy, discipline and the deep meaning of being part of a Cathedral choir.

When Bernard took up the position of Director of Music at the new Cathedral in 2006, the choir was introduced to a more extensive and enriching Cathedral music program. From Holy Week to Easter, weddings to funerals, each occasion brought new challenges and beauty. One of the many highlights was the "In Paradisum" Sacred Music Concert in August 2016, featuring works by Mozart, Poulenc, Duruflé and Fauré whose *In Paradisum* remains a personal favourite.

Choir practice was held every Wednesday night from 7:00 to 8:30pm, often stretching to 9:00pm when tackling new pieces. "Rain, hail, or shine," we gathered in the upper room at Murphy House, ready to sing, sometimes with Bernard's baton keeping us in line, and perhaps wishing he could use it more literally when we weren't quite getting it right.

To my surprise and deep emotion, the Dean of the Cathedral, Fr Robert, and Bernard offered a heartfelt farewell speech at the end of the Mass. I was overwhelmed by their kind words and the warmth of the moment — a gesture I will always treasure.

Now, as I sit among the congregation at the 11:00am Sunday Mass, I listen with deep appreciation, not just for the music, but for the spirit and dedication behind it. I thank the Lord for the privilege of singing His praise all these years. It has been a blessing I will always carry in my heart.

Through [song], prayer is expressed in a more attractive way... the unity of hearts is more profoundly achieved by the union of voices, minds are more easily raised to heavenly things by the beauty of the sacred rites, and the whole celebration more clearly prefigures that heavenly liturgy which is enacted in the holy city of Jerusalem.
(Musicam sacram, 5)

I remember vividly when our beloved Church was tragically destroyed by fire on 19 February 1996. In the aftermath, the choir found a temporary home at Cumberland Hospital, rehearsing three Sundays a month to prepare for the Dedication of the new Cathedral on 29 November 2003. Choristers from across the Diocese joined us, a monumental effort that became not only a success but a deeply memorable moment of thanksgiving and renewal.

One of the most joyful memories was performing at the Christmas concert in Parramatta Park, a festive evening filled with music, lights and the warmth of community. Singing under the stars in the open sky, surrounded by families and friends, reminded me of the power of music to bring people together in celebration and hope.

Over the years, I've made lasting friendships through these rehearsals, bonds formed over shared music, laughter and the quiet commitment to something greater than ourselves. These connections continue to bless my life today — a community of faith, friendship and shared purpose.

I was especially grateful that my sister and her family were able to travel from overseas to attend my final day in the choir on 3 August 2025. Their presence made the occasion even more meaningful: a quiet celebration of the journey, the music, and the love that has carried me through these 25 years. ☘

Recognition of service

Award for Bernard Kirkpatrick KSS, Director of Music

The Guild of Church Musicians held its annual festival last November at the Cathedral with musicians from across Australia, local and visiting clergy, seminarians, parishioners and visitors. During the afternoon our Director of Music Bernard Kirkpatrick was awarded an *Honorary Fellowship of the Guild* for his distinguished service to music in the liturgy over many decades.

The service opened with Solemn Vespers led by the Cathedral choir and organists, with Bishop Vincent presiding. Following Vespers, awards were presented by Australian Warden of the Guild, Rev Dr Daniel M. Dries. The citation was read by Associate Professor Neil McEwen, who described the Cathedral choir as one of the finest choral ensembles in Australia.

Bernard has been Director of Music at St Patrick's since 2006. His passion for sacred liturgical music began as a child in Tasmania, playing in his local parish church, and further developed as a music student and organ scholar at the University of Sydney, studying with Sydney City Organist Robert Ampt. In 1991, he pursued improvisation studies in Paris with Naji Hakim, as well as further studies in the United Kingdom.

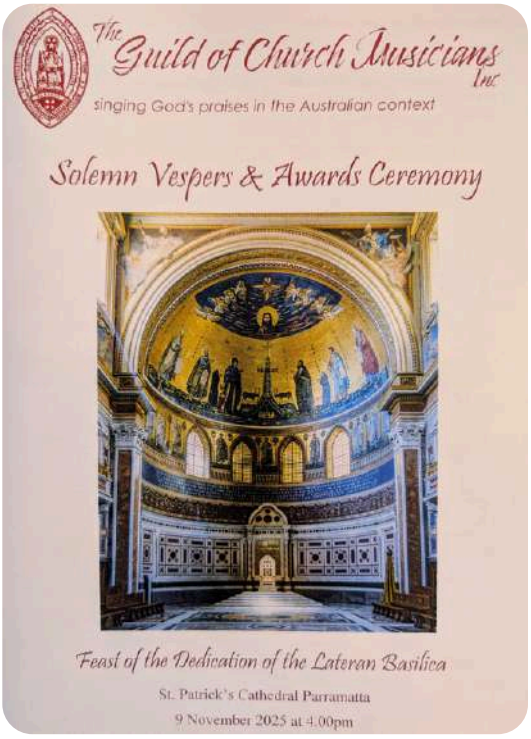
Bernard brings more than 40 years of experience in parish churches and Cathedrals, including more than 10 years as Assistant Organist at St Mary's Cathedral Sydney. In parishes, seminaries, schools and universities, he has fulfilled roles as music director, choir trainer, organist, composer and cantor. In addition to his role at St Patrick's Cathedral, Bernard currently serves as Music Director at the Seminary of the Good Shepherd in the Archdiocese of Sydney and at Australia's only Catholic liberal arts college, Campion College Australia.

He is also Music Consultant to the Australian Catholic Bishops' Commission for Liturgy and served as secretary to the National Liturgical Music Board for 10 years, during which he oversaw the collation and publication of the *Catholic Worship Book II* (2016).

Among his compositions, the *Mass of Christ the Redeemer* is one of several Australian Mass settings approved and recommended for use with the new English translation of the Roman Missal. His work often explores ways to incorporate traditional sacred music styles into contemporary liturgical practice through a synthesis of form, musical language and instrumentation.

In 2021, Bernard was awarded a Papal Knighthood in the Order of Saint Sylvester (KSS) by Pope Francis, acknowledging his contribution to liturgical music in the Australian Catholic Church.

The Guild of Church Musicians in Australia strives to support and encourage church musicians across all denominations and contexts. It seeks to raise the standard of church music, acknowledging that all aspects of worship should be the best that we are capable of offering to God.



Bernard with family and friends from Tas.

Acknowledgment: Catholic Outlook

Piping up

Meet two of our youngest organists

Regular parishioners at the Cathedral may have noticed recently a few additional organists playing for the regular schedule of Sunday Masses. The new faces include Dominic Hart, who joined the music team in 2023 as a choral and organ scholar, and Cynthia Bui who came on board mid-2025 in the wake of Patrick Newman's appointment as Assistant Organist to St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney.

Dominic Hart is an organist and choral musician, currently Organ and Choral Scholar at the Cathedral (2023–present). He was also principal organist for the Upper Mountains Catholic Parish from 2019 to 2023, where he provided music for regular services, Holy Week liturgies, weddings and funerals. Since 2024, Dominic has also played both the Great Hall Organ and the War Memorial Carillon for graduation ceremonies and recitals at the University of Sydney.

Dominic has learnt from Assistant Music Director Eric Grella and Bernard Kirkpatrick, and most recently participated in masterclasses with Daniel Roth, Titus Grenyer and Philip Swanton.

From 2019 to 2024, Dominic performed with the Sydney Youth Orchestra Flagship and Philharmonic, and the Richard Bonynge Ensemble, gaining experience in orchestral and chamber settings under conductors such as Sir Simon Rattle, Roger Benedict, Brett Weymark and Dr Elizabeth Scott. Between 2020 and 2023, he taught keyboard lessons at the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre, preparing students for AMEB examinations and personal musical goals.

Dominic is a recipient of the Ars Musica Australis Scholarship (2018–present), the Malcolm Borland Scholarship and the Richard Bonynge Scholarship.

Alongside his musical commitments, Dominic is in his second year studying for a Bachelor of Pharmacy (Honours) and Master of Pharmacy Practice at the University of Sydney.

Sixteen-year-old **Cynthia Bui** began learning the organ in 2021, building on a strong musical foundation developed since she started piano at the age of four. In 2021, Cynthia was awarded an Organ Scholarship from the Sydney Conservatorium to study the organ with Philip Swanton in the Rising Stars program. At the age of 13, she was awarded her AMusA in organ performance with Distinction. Just a year later, she achieved her LMusA, also with Distinction. Cynthia is a two-time winner of the junior section of the Sydney Organ Competition and has performed at various recitals and events across Sydney. Passionate about broadening her musical horizons, she is eager to continue expanding her repertoire and exploring new works.

In 2025 she accepted the position of Organ Scholar at St Patrick's, and is the first female organist at the Cathedral in over 20 years. Cynthia is looking forward to being exposed to a wide variety of sacred music both in the choral and organ repertoires. She also looks forward to broadening her experience and knowledge of Catholic liturgy at the Cathedral.

Finding my way on ‘The Way’

A pilgrim’s progress on the Camino de Santiago

Finding our way through life is a journey full of many experiences. It’s a walk that one takes alone or one that is shared with others along many pathways. It could take many forms and look different in countless stages and seasons in our lives. We make decisions along the way, seeking joy and fulfilment. Life’s pilgrimage could also take a miniature form symbolised by leaving the comfort of our ordinary life. This could be as simple as taking time away from our routine to travel overseas for the walk of a lifetime. And this is my journey on The Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St James: a glimpse into the pilgrimage of life.

People from all over the world walk different routes leading to the tomb of the apostle James, which is believed to be in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in north-western Spain. Tradition has it that the remains of the apostle are buried there and pilgrims follow the routes as a path or retreat for their spiritual growth. Nowadays, people take the journey for various reasons and purposes, but its traditional origins will always hinge on its spiritual nature. So, I pondered about taking the pilgrimage myself, with a purpose of growing in spirituality where I could further develop virtues that could help me give the very best of myself to God and others. I’ve always felt that that’s a personal calling of mine, to be a blessing to others in the daily activities of my life, but it’s also a calling or an initial vocation for everyone striving to live a holy and virtuous life. I thought maybe the Camino could validate or shed some light on those reflections and desires that I have.

Hence, in the first half of 2024, I started asking friends if they would consider going on a pilgrimage to the Camino de Santiago. Soon, I had four of my friends express their desire to join me and another who was invited by one of my friends. We quickly embarked on the gruelling task of planning. We decided to do the last 120 kilometres of the Camino Frances route, which starts from the town of Sarria in the province of Lugo in the north-western part of Spain. This route is also very popular with pilgrims to get a taste for the Camino, plus it meets the requirements of walking at least 100 kilometres in order to get the official Compostela certificate upon its completion. This traditional religious certificate makes a great memento, and it’s issued in both Latin and English by the Catholic Church in Santiago verifying that you’ve completed the minimum distance for spiritual or religious reasons.

Following several months of planning, we began our pilgrimage in May 2025. We were very blessed to attend mass at Sarria that evening, to be centred on this spiritual journey together and to get the strength and grace we needed along the way.

We started the first day of our walk in prayer and pouring rain. It quickly became evident how important preparation and having good quality wet weather and hiking gear is for what the Camino throws at you. Apart from the rain, we also had to battle cold strong winds and various terrains that could be flat or on a constant incline. However, the surroundings and the beauty of nature more than compensated for harsh conditions. We were surrounded by trees, rivers, lush open fields and astonishing structures which have stood to the test of time.

Darwin Bautista (L) with companions

Apart from the joys of the Camino, we also witnessed a sad part of it on our first day. A few hours into our walk, we heard yelling from other pilgrims in front of us which rang out "Medico! Medico!.." We soon realised that a fellow pilgrim needed assistance. Another pilgrim quickly administered CPR to him while he lay motionless on the road. It was a confronting experience, especially seeing his loved ones in an intense emotional agony. We quickly prayed together as a group, just near the spot where it was all happening, as this was the best thing we thought we could do for him and his loved ones. The ambulance and medical teams arrived rapidly which was great to see, and we eventually continued our walk clearly affected by the situation we had just witnessed.

Companionship

We later found out that the gentleman sadly passed away. It showed us the reality that a pilgrim must face, and that the Camino is not an easy path to take. But similar to life in general, there will always be ups and downs, but there will also be people along the way who are always willing to assist, especially if there's someone who is in a great need. And that's the beauty of the human spirit and companionship. One of the best parts of the Camino is definitely meeting other people from all over the world. Finding more about their story and why they're doing the Camino offers an alternative insight and perspective about what we're all trying to look for in life.

Next day the rain hadn't let up and it even became torrential at some points during our walk. But again, it's an insight into what life is like. In the midst of the "rain" and hardships in life, do we keep walking? Do we persevere or do we just give up? There are many times during the walk where I would be on my own, just for some self-reflection, and times when I would be with my friends or others met along the way. These are all insights into our journey in life and spirituality. At times we journey on our own, but in times of our need, we also journey with others and we keep going, especially when times get tough on our way towards our ultimate destination as believers, that is Heaven with our Lord for all eternity.

Carrying the essentials

What you take on the Camino matters, and every weight that you carry adds up. It is said that you should only carry around 10% of your body weight as you walk from town to town. This is a challenge on its own, but it makes you ascertain what's really important and essential for your journey. Again, what does this teach us about life? Is it essential to have everything and more? Or do we only need the essentials to live life well and to find the happiness that we're all searching for? Carrying such heavy loads is only going to slow us down, and it can exert so much pressure on our bodies that could easily lead to injuries, as we've found out on the Camino. Travelling as light as possible would be my key takeaway, and it's the same as I look at my life in general.

I found most of my joy on the Camino was in helping pilgrims continue on their journey. And it's an objective that I also choose to apply consistently in my own personal journey in life, where I try to find ways to be a blessing to others in my daily activities.

Journey or destination

Unfortunately, one of my friends injured her foot so badly that she couldn't walk on the route any longer. She had to catch a bus from town to town from Arzua onwards. As sad as it may seem, it was clear to me that she had given her all. I came to realise the importance of both the journey and the destination. The Camino is not just about finishing the journey to Santiago, but it's also about the encounters along the way. Those experiences cultivate virtues and forge better relationships with your friends and others.

There was a massive sense of relief, joy, fulfilment and gratefulness that took over the group when we crossed the "finish line" in front of the grandeur of St James' Cathedral. I was overjoyed, but it wasn't for the fact that I had just completed the toughest pilgrimage that I have ever embarked on in my life. The main source of my joy was when I saw our fellow pilgrims whom we helped at the finish line with us. These were the same pilgrims who, at one point in their journey, doubted whether they could reach Santiago. Seeing them there with their big smiles and a great sense of achievement was so pleasing. It was such a blessing knowing that we had a hand in their accomplishments which brought about so much joy into their lives.

Open to the new

The Camino de Santiago has really helped me validate what the initial calling or vocation is in my life, and that is to be of service and a blessing to others. That is where I find my true happiness and that's what I've been looking for all my life. I'll forever be grateful to God for giving me and my friends the opportunity to journey together, and I'd like to think that I've come back a better person having grown in virtue which would enable me to give the very best of myself to God and to others.

So, what are you searching for in life? And where do you find your joy and fulfilment? Open yourself up to new opportunities and encounters, especially to where God may be trying to lead you. Maybe the Camino de Santiago has something to reveal to you, and it's there waiting for you. Don't be afraid to find your way on 'The Way'. – Darwin Bautista.

Answering God's whisper

Cecile Chavez Apolinario's journey as a catechist

There are moments in life when God's call is gentle: a whisper in the heart, a soft stirring in the soul. And sometimes, even if it takes years, that whisper never truly leaves you.

My journey as a catechist began long before I ever stepped into a classroom in Sydney. It began in the Philippines, in a Catholic school where faith was woven into the rhythm of ordinary days. I was in fourth-year high school when something inside me awakened. Part of our curriculum was to teach Religion in public schools. Most of my classmates treated it as another requirement.

But not me. The first time I stood before those young students, something in my heart ignited. I saw how their eyes widened at the stories of Jesus. I felt their eagerness, the way their souls responded to even the simplest truths. That was the moment the seed of my vocation was planted.

My first Yes

Years passed. I finished university, got married, and migrated to Australia with my family. Life grew full: three young children, a demanding career in government and finance, and the slow, beautiful work of building a new life in a new country.

Then one Sunday, at Christ the King Parish in Yagoona, something happened. After Communion, a Catechist stood up to ask for volunteers. And just like that — my heart jumped. It was as though God whispered, "Remember the promise you made?" But with three small children and full-time work, I knew I couldn't say yes — not yet. Still, the desire lingered. It waited. It quietly grew.

Years later, when my children were older, God knocked again. This time at St Francis Xavier Parish in Lurnea. A Catechist stood up once more...and again, my heart jumped. A sacred reminder whispered: "Now. This is the time." After Mass, I walked straight to the table and signed up.

We are only God's instruments

What I discovered was this: you do not need a theology degree. You do not need years of teaching experience. You only need a heart willing to love God and love His little ones. All you need to do is show up. And when you do, God does the rest.

Teaching children about God changed me. The more I gave myself to this ministry, the more God gave himself to me. My faith deepened. My love grew. My trust strengthened.

Children ask the most profound questions: "Why does God allow people to get hurt if He loves us?" and "If heaven is so beautiful, why don't we all go there now?" Every lesson taught me something new about God. Every class felt like grace unfolding.

When God calls again

After moving to Parramatta, I began attending Mass at St Patrick's Cathedral. I thought I would rest from Catechist work for a while and focus on writing.

But God had other plans. One day, I casually mentioned to Doreen, one of the altar servers, that I used to be a Catechist. Not long after, Maria Valentin, our Catechist Coordinator, called me. And that familiar stirring, that unmistakable holy warmth, returned. It was clear: God was calling me again. And when God calls the heart cannot say no. The heart burns until it answers. That same week, I returned to the ministry.

Love in action

Catechists are called not merely to teach but to plant seeds of faith that may bloom long after we are gone. When a child says: "I told my mum about Jesus today," or "Can you pray for my dad?" or "I want to talk to God more," you realise this is not volunteer work. This is eternity work.

Every child is a soul. Every lesson is a doorway. Every story you share becomes a light in someone's life.
I remain a Catechist because teaching children about God is like touching heaven for a moment; because the joy of seeing a child discover Jesus is incomparable; because this ministry strengthens my own faith as much as theirs; because helping even one child come closer to God is a gift beyond measure.

And because I know deep in my heart that this is one of the ways I can give back to the God who has given me everything. When my husband passed away from cancer, God sustained me. Now, this ministry has become one of the ways I return that love.

Gentle yet urgent

If something in your heart stirs as you read this, even softly, please know: that is God. That is his whisper. He does not shout. He invites. He does not ask for perfection, only willingness.

The harvest is plentiful. The children are waiting. Our parish is large. Our students are many. And Jesus is still whispering: “Help me gather my little ones.”

If you can smile, if you can listen, if you can say to a child, “God loves you,” you already have everything you need. When you say yes, grace does the rest.

And the children? They will bless you more than you could ever bless them. One day, maybe years from now, one of them may remember that it was your voice that first told them God loved them.

Someone I taught in high school recently reached out to say, “I’m doing God’s work now because of what you taught us.” What greater gift could we offer the world? So, if your heart is stirring, if something inside feels warm, or curious, or quietly brave, please don’t ignore it. That is Jesus, gently knocking. Open the door. Say yes. Your life and the lives of the children you meet will never be the same.

What is Special Religious Education?

Special Religious Education (SRE) is the time set aside in public schools for SRE Catechists (sometimes also called SRE Teachers) from the local Catholic Church to teach Catholic children about Jesus and his message of salvation.

In a culture that often focuses on the negative aspects of life, Catholic SRE is a breath of fresh air, where students are encouraged to see themselves as God sees them – inherently good, full of potential and capable of being a force for good in our world.

As an SRE Catechist, you will have the privilege of:

- ***Sharing the richness of the Catholic faith**: Guide children and young people in their understanding of Catholic beliefs, practices and values*
- ***Nurturing spiritual growth**: Foster a deeper connection between students and their faith, encouraging personal reflection and spiritual development*
- ***Making a lasting impact**: Shape the lives of young Catholics, instilling in them a strong moral compass and a lifelong appreciation for their faith*

Join the team or enquire
sre@stpatscathedral.com.au

The Red Mass

Once again the Cathedral Parish hosted the Red Mass celebrated by Bishop Vincent to mark the start of the legal year. Fr Robert gave the homily and explained that he was lost to the legal profession after a long, boring week of work experience in a solicitor’s office!

Hospitality from Ian Gilbertson JP

The Order of Malta was represented

Attorney-General Michael Daley (R)

Court Chaplains Diane Smith & Sharyn Widdowson

The Piano

Michael Taylor on the ivories at Central Station

Michael with the youngest player aged 5

With concert pianist Andrea Lam

With some of the other participants

If you've attended Sunday evening Mass at St Pat's, you have no doubt heard (and perhaps seen) me playing the magnificent organ which the Cathedral possesses.

My name is Michael Taylor, and I serve as an Assistant Organist here at the Cathedral, which is one of several churches for which I regularly play. To be able to beautify our supreme liturgies and to bring congregations into a fuller and more prayerful involvement in the liturgy – this is not a job, but a privilege. Indeed I would say that this is a special calling, a vocation. This is particularly so at this stage of my life, since after 47 years of marriage, my wife, with whom I did and shared everything, had to go into aged care, and I, now living alone, have had to find new directions in my life. My involvement with music, especially Church music, has done so much to fill that need.

Harry Connick Jr on Michael:
"This guy can play!"

For me, artistic music is something that touches the soul, that part of our being that represents the highest reaches of what it is to be human. It brings us close to the spiritual. Small wonder that the development of music has always been closely linked to the Church and that the Church makes extensive use of music. As a performer, the thrill I experience whilst playing is something I want to share with the listeners.

I was offered a wonderful opportunity to share my story and my innate love of music when I was included in the TV show "The Piano," screened on the ABC last year, and available on iview. This series of programs (six episodes in all) aims to portray how playing the piano has been integral to the lives of the various participants and how it has helped transform those lives. The focus has been on so-called "public pianos" – instruments that have been placed in public places like shopping centres and railway stations. Indeed, the episode I was included in (episode 1) was filmed in Sydney's Central Station. Imagine trying to provide a convincing performance whilst surrounded by travellers with their luggage weaving back and forth.

Michael's appearance in Season 1 Episode 1
of "The Piano" is available on ABC iview.

But the experience of it all has been exciting to say the least. All my life I dreamt of playing the piano on TV, and now it has happened. Whilst there was a certain amount of staging during the filming, there was absolutely no script. Everything that I was filmed saying in the episode was exactly my choice of words, and I am very happy with how I was presented in the show. I have had a vast amount of positive feedback, both from people I know and from complete strangers. My compliments go to Eureka Productions for their commitment to what I believe was a first-class production.

Senior moments

Melbourne Cup and Christmas celebrations

The Cup has been run and won... Who DID win? It was a while ago. Definitely a jockey on a horse.

In fact it was the second woman to win the Cup, Jamie Melham, riding Half Yours, repeating Michelle Payne's feat ten years previously when she became the first female to win. Jamie had come back from a serious fall two years earlier that required months of rehabilitation. Bravely, she got back on the horse(s). Many of our seniors have had to do something similar to ride again.

But the fun of getting together and meeting people familiar and new, enjoying lovely food and drink, agonising over trivial pursuit questions that again were too hard, picking a horse in the sweep and being disappointed for the nth time – what's not to like?

Q. What colour describes a horse that has a brown body with a black mane & tail?

The only thing to like more would have to be a beautiful Christmas lunch, again punctuated with thankfully easier trivial pursuit questions and newly-introduced bingo. The failure to agree on the racing rules before the jump at bingo only added to the chagrin of the experienced hands who longed for tighter reins. Some of them may have played Housie in the old parish hall decades ago when the stewards maintained the highest standards, before redevelopment of the site.

In the festive atmosphere Marian Polizzi had the chance to celebrate her birthday, while Fr Tom was given the first of several farewells as he gallops out to frolic in green pastures (but not as green as Parramatta's St Pat's of course).

A. Bay

Kudos to Pascarl El-Hage, Pat Preca, Donna Missio, Janelle Moses from the Gift Shop and everyone else who made these occasions so enjoyable. An anonymous donor generously enabled upgraded catering, making every plate a winner!☘

Reaching out

Parramatta Mission, JRS, Open Arms

Cheryl Linus on the highlight of her summer
The Christmas Lunch Service was my introduction to Parramatta Mission. I was kindly invited to visit the centre on a regular day. Being keen on volunteering, and having little else to do over the summer break, I soon became a frequent volunteer.

The staff and volunteers were incredibly welcoming. They comprise both Christians and non-Christians, of all ages, each contributing uniquely to the Mission, from kitchen hands who are up before daybreak preparing meals to conversationalists who sit at tables and lend a much-needed ear. I have also met other university students who are keen about community service. This very inspiring team has taught me much about charity, commitment, humility and love.

The clients served at Parramatta Mission come from different countries and backgrounds. Some require aid to make ends meet, others seek friendly company, and for yet others the Mission is the closest thing to a home. Despite backgrounds of adversity, these beloved guests are delightful and cheery, and twice a day the dining area becomes a lively gathering. Serving them has taught me a lot about the realities experienced by people who face poverty and insecurity.

I was also introduced to the Jesuit Refugee Service, which, like Parramatta Mission and the countless other charitable organisations, sends a strong message of hope. These places are run on donations and volunteers, and are testimony to the overwhelming love of Christ and the extensive work done by the Church.

Joining Parramatta Mission as a volunteer has been the highlight of my summer, and I hope to stay involved with their work in the months to come.

Donated baked goods with morning tea on two Sunday mornings in January raised further funds to support JRS

Dianne Starkey updates us on Open Arms
Wonderful news! Thanks to the generous support of our parishioners, our sponsored Ethiopian family arrived in Sydney on Friday 14 November. They presented with smiles and enthusiasm for our country – now theirs as well.

They were very grateful to the parish for offering them support for their first year here. They are settling into their accommodation in Westmead and the Open Arms core group has been assisting them, on behalf of our Parish, with learning about the area, the services available, and the public transport system. This included taking the family to Parramatta Park where the girls were able to experience the joy of playing on the equipment.

The family does not yet speak English and their native language is Oromo, but they are keen to learn. The core team is helping them to connect with services such as health and education.

On 12 October 2025, a Rotary van came to the parish to provide a sausage sizzle as a fundraiser for Open Arms. Again, a number of parishioners set up goods, cut up onions, served food and drinks and contributed to the funds raised by Rotary on the day. The sausage sizzle and cold drinks raised over $500. Another fantastic donation of cakes and bread made it possible for our workers to sell bread, cakes, coffee and tea and add a further $800 to the funds raised.

Marilyn and Graham Cook organised a Bunnings barbecue on 15 November. The barbecue and cake stall raised $2892.80, thanks to the work of a great group of helpers and the generosity of members of the Social Justice group who donated all of the goods for sale.

Open Arms of St Patrick's Parish (Open Arms) is a Community Support Group under the national Community Refugee Integration Support Pilot (CRISP). It is a project of the parish, initiated by the parish Social Justice group. Five other parishes in the Diocese are supporting refugee families under CRISP. The core group have been in continual contact with the family to coordinate the many things needing to be done, especially in the early weeks of settling in.

When people do reach out

Street Feast touches hearts

The fifth annual Diocesan Street feast on 19 November at the Cathedral was again supported by parishioners, Diocesan staff and local services including Vinnies, Salvos, Thread Together, House of Welcome, St Merkorious Charity, volunteer school students and more. Not only food was enjoyed but guests were entertained by the Sydney Street Choir and other performers, with fun activities such as face and hand painting – all in a spirit of community, solidarity and friendship.

Brandon Lampinen reacts to the news that he's invited to the Street Feast

Incredible! This is such a good idea and I'm grateful that it's happening.

It would do so much to remind us that those who are poor are not some burdensome appendage, but those who bear the likeness of Christ, our poor and suffering brother, sister, father, mother, son and daughter.

It would also do a lot to embrace those who feel like they don't belong in the Church, showing them that they are loved by God and counted among those who are called blessed ("...for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven").

I myself am thankful because I have been welcomed so warmly in this parish despite the social poverty I have experienced and am experiencing.

I often feel like I am sick and impure, and when I look at the parish, I often see people who seem so pure and clean in comparison.

This feeling would often lead me to avoid interacting with others in the parish out of fear that I would do or say something unrighteous, so I often come to Mass and go without speaking to anyone.

I would do well to remember these words from Matthew (9:10-13):

And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Over these past months, I've been welcomed so warmly by so many people in the parish and I am so incredibly grateful. It's been such a blessing to be welcomed in this way so I just wanted to express my heartfelt thankfulness for everyone who has been so merciful towards me. ❤️

Rice is nice

Lentils and chickpeas are good too!

Letter of thanks from Father Brett O'Neill SJ, Country Director, JRS Australia

The Parramatta Rice Club (PRC) was founded by Cathedral parishioners to support the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

Through its foodbank program, JRS distributes 1,000 kilograms of rice each month to refugee families who are lawfully in Australia, but on visas that do not allow access to Centrelink or Medicare, and often do not allow them to work.

The most in demand item for the foodbank program is rice. By purchasing the 1,000 kilograms of rice each month, the Parramatta Rice Club allows JRS's individual donors to concentrate on other items. Buying in bulk means the rice is only $1.32/kg, significantly better than retail.

The PRC also buys other bulk items as requested by JRS. Recently 400kg of dried lentils and chick peas were purchased at $2.30/kg.

The product comes from the warehouse in 20kg packages, and is broken down into 1kg and 2kg bags by PRC volunteers, working in the Cathedral Cloister Hall or at the JRS office. These working bees are occasions of fellowship and fun for participants.

The PRC support has enabled JRS to expand its Foodbank operation from 180 families to 250 families in 2026. JRS and the asylum seekers we accompany greatly appreciate the ongoing support of Saint Patrick's Cathedral Parish, both through the rice club and through food drives.

We are very grateful to those who support the PRC, the individual parishioners and groups (such as Parramatta Catenians), and donors from outside of the parish.

Their regular monthly donations by EFT allow for planning and confidence in supply. Monthly donations range from $5 to $200: every grain counts.

Supporting the PRC is also a way for those who do not have time for volunteering to support the vital service that JRS foodbank provides to our sisters and brothers building new lives in Australia.

To learn more, contact the Chair, Mrs Lynn Mahoney, on 0414 770 143. Every small contribution adds up.

In gratitude, [writing in late 2025] JRS wishes you all a very blessed Christmas, celebrating the coming of Jesus, God who is with us especially in the darkest of times and among the poor and marginalized.

On Sunday 21 September parishioners were invited to visit the JRS at their office and foodbank just across from the Cathedral at 10-12 Victoria Road, where they learned about the JRS, the clients they serve and what help the JRS could use from volunteers. On Mondays when the service is closed, parishioners and others assist with sorting and arranging donated food and other goods so all is ready for the week to come.

Clergy and volunteers

Gifts at the service of the community

Clergy comings and goings

After two short years as Assistant priest, Fr Tom Green has been transferred to Blacktown after completing his appointment on 23 November. Tributes were paid to Fr Tom at the Seniors' Melbourne Cup lunch, the volunteers' dinner and on his final day, coinciding with the parish Bazaar. He was warmly farewelled and thanked for his ministry, particularly with the youth of the parish through scripture study and sport.

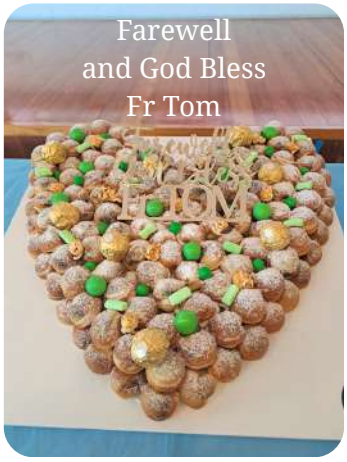
With the departure of Fr Tom to Blacktown, Fr Andrew Rooney has come to us from the same parish to take up his ministry here as Assistant Priest.

A little earlier, in September, Fr Vincent Ojo joined the parish community in the Cathedral presbytery and soon after was appointed Assistant Priest. Fr Vincent is in Sydney on sabbatical. He lectures in a Nigerian seminary which has about 300 candidates in training, and he has a special interest in the prophets, particularly Jeremiah. He is a friend of Fr Philip Alesin who works for Diocesan schools in Religious Education and is also in residence at the presbytery.

There is a variety of gifts, but always the same Spirit... working in all sorts of different ways in different people. (1 Cor 12:4-6)

Thanks for volunteering

The annual recognition of the work of volunteers in the parish was celebrated again with an excellent dinner in the hall on 14 November. People from every parish ministry were recognised for their service to the community across the wide range of parish activities. Of course, parish staff were serving again!☘



Very Special Religious Educators
Mary Wehbe (pictured, L) and Pam Bain (R) received awards for their many years of service as Catechists in the public schools of the parish at the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine Mass on 31 October. Mary has served for 30 years, and Pam for 25 – true dedication.

Australian Catholic Youth Festival
A large group of young people from the Parramatta Diocese attended the ACYF in Melbourne 30 November - 2 December, including some from our parish who loved the experience and one day will tell us all about it!

All those donations need sorting
Volunteers at the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) across the road from the Cathedral take on the task of sorting through bags of donations from the parish and putting it all into some order. Most Mondays when the JRS is closed will see all sorts of labour done with a smile.

Support for our Jewish friends
Fr Robert wrote to Rabbi Kohavi and the local Jewish community in solidarity and prayerful support after shooting violence at Bondi on 14 December took the lives of 15 people attending the first night of Hanukkah, the Jewish celebration of lights. In return, Rabbi Kohavi invited Fr Robert to a local Hanukkah celebration which he attended with other religious leaders. A parish Mass for the Dead was offered on 22 January, Australia's official day of mourning.

The Simpsons are moving - D'oh!
Greg and Marjorie Simpson have left Northmead to be closer to family up north after 30 years of contribution to the life of the parish. Greg sang in the choir and his engineering skills were called upon when the Cathedral burnt down, and many times since; Marjorie's care of the Piety stall and help with innumerable parish events have built community spirit over many years. All the best for the next episode!

Photo: Marjorie, Mili Lee and Greg

Marking marriage milestones
Deacon Dave Dowling and his wife Deidre recently celebrated their silver wedding anniversary (25 years) and were among the large number of couples from across the Diocese attending the annual Mass with their families in October where they renewed their wedding vows.

Lighting up for Kids with Cancer
Andy and Carmen Cutajar's Christmas lights at their Northmead home once again attracted many admiring visitors and donations for Kids with Cancer. Parishioners chipped in too, buying raffle tickets for prizes donated by local businesses. Too many lights? Never!

Growing into faith
Ten years of Lifted Live in the Forecourt was celebrated at the Cathedral on 25 October in a festival atmosphere, drawing parishioners and youth from across the Diocese on a day that included Mass and adoration. Parramatta Lanes was no competition for the stalls, the bands, the breakdancing and the youthful spirits of the participants.

ST PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL

PARRAMATTA