Welcome to Blessing of Mercy Chapel and Tabernacle, Catherine McAuley Westmead, Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary, 12 September 2013

Welcome to this Mass of Blessing for the Mercy Chapel at Catherine McAuley Westmead. With principal Margery Jackman I acknowledge visiting principals Kitty Guerin of Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta, Yvette Baird of Sacred Heart Primary, Westmead, and Cheryl Brown of St Anthony’s Primary, Girraween; past principals of McAuley, Sr Barbara McDonough RSM, Sr Edith Angel RSM and Sr Sophie McGrath RSM, led by the Congregational Leader of the Parramatta Mercies, Sr Catherine Ryan RSM and her Vicar Sr Mary-Louise Petro RSM. I also welcome Dr Geoff Lee, State Member for Parramatta, Mrs Sophie Ryan and Mr Ian Smith from the Catholic Education Office Parramatta and other distinguished guests, as well as the staff and students of this school.

I was pleased last year to bless gardens here dedicated to Our Lady and St Francis but I am even more pleased to dedicate this new chapel for staff and students of this school to contemplate the great mysteries of God, the world and themselves and to pray in the real presence of Christ Jesus. I’d like to thank the Principal, Margery Jackman, who has been a passionate exponent of the idea of this chapel since she came here in 2005. Every individual and every community needs its sacred times – such as the Angelus time now all around the Diocese of Parramatta – and its sacred places such as this new one here in the heart of our school. I congratulate Mrs Jackman on her achievement.

Many have contributed to this project, including the school and Catholic Education Office with the space and buildings, the Parramatta Mercies with the tabernacle and sacred vessels, and Chris Finn with the furnishings at such a modest cost. The school’s wooden statue of Our Lady has been restored, a new crucifix with Christ Risen carved by Engelbert Piccolruaz, and windows installed of two educationalists of great faith and courage, St Mary of the Cross MacKillop and Venerable Catherine McAuley. These are great additions to the sacred art of our Diocese.

The Mercy Chapel is so called in honour of Our Lady of Mercy. Happily, this is the week of Our Lady’s birthday and the very day on which the Church celebrates the Holy Name given to her by her Jewish parents in that first week of her life. So you might call this chapel a birthday present to Our Lady of Mercy and we ask our Blessed Mother to accompany every prayer that will be offered here by the girls and staff in the coming years.

Homily for Mass of Blessing of Mercy Chapel and Tabernacle, Catherine McAuley Westmead, Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary, 12 September 2013

Vienna, gateway to Christian Europe, had been under siege by the Ottoman Empire for two months. The West, not for the first time, was in very real danger of being over-run and Christians were likely to suffer terrible persecution as a result. The ‘Holy League’ of Austria-Hungary and Poland-Lithuania, with Venice and the Papal States, were led by King Jan III Sobieski of Poland. Weakened by plague and internal division between Catholics and Protestants, and far outnumbered by the Ottoman forces, the Christians were not expected to win. This day, 12 September 1683, was to prove to be the turning point.

In great fear for his men and thus for the future of Christian Europe, King Jan committed the cause of the Christian forces to the Holy Name of Mary – a long-standing devotion that had recently become an increasingly popular liturgical feast as well. Mass
was offered and having spent the night in prayer and vigil they joined battle. King Jan personally led his ‘Winged Hussars’ and 20,000 horsemen, the largest cavalry charge in history. The Christians were victorious. With as many as 40,000 of the Turks lost the remainder retreated and eventually turned on their own leader. In thanksgiving King Jan paraphrased Julius Caesar’s famous line Veni, vidi, vinci – I came, I saw, I conquered – by saying Venimus, vidimus, Deus vincit – we came, we saw and it was God who conquered. The then Pope, Bld Innocent XI, instituted today’s feast for the whole Church in thanksgiving. Whilst we commemorate this day with Mass, the Viennese took to doing so by making and eating a pastry shaped like the Turkish half-moon – the croissant! Though the feast fell out of practice for many years, Bld John Paul II restored it after September 11.

Many saints have suggested invoking both Christ’s name – first and foremost – but also Mary’s, not as swear-words like so many people do, but as prayers. Lord have mercy, Mary pray for me, are phrases commonly uttered not just by military commanders but many ordinary Christians throughout history, especially when anxious or feeling besieged. St Bridge thought the Devil flees at the sound of Mary’s name. St Alphonsus Ligouri thought it an especially powerful devotion. Of course, those little prayers Lord have mercy, Mary pray for me have a particular echo in this Mercy Chapel amongst the daughters and friends of the Sisters of Mercy.

Our celebration is also timely given what is happening in the Middle East. Whether you get your news from the old media or the new, you’ll know how dire things are in Syria at present. Commentators focus on whether or when the US and allies will attack Syria in reprisal for the government’s use of chemical weapons against its opponents and many innocents. One subplot in this civil war and humanitarian disaster has been innumerable attacks on Christians in Syria, Egypt and nearby. Hundreds of churches have been bombed and Christians killed or driven out of their homeland. The Christians of Syria and Egypt lack any King Jan to champion their cause this time; the best many of them can hope for is that countries like Australia will not close their borders and hearts to their plight as refugees.

Pope Francis has enjoined us to pray and fast that this situation is not further inflamed in the days ahead and that a negotiated peace be achieved. He keeps invoking the Holy Name of Mary to pray for peace and security for people of all faiths. On the weekend, he exhorted all sides in the Middle East, and all of us inclined to grudges and fights, to “leave behind the self-interest that hardens your heart, overcome the indifference that makes you insensitive towards others, conquer your deadly reasoning, and open yourself to dialogue and reconciliation … Yes, you are ‘your brother’s keeper’! To be human means to care for one another. We bring about the rebirth of Cain in every act of violence and in every war.”

Our readings for this celebration in a new Chapel of Mercy naturally focus on God’s mercy and our love (Col 3:12-17; Lk 8:19-21). But there is an interesting realism about the context for such loving. Paul doesn’t just give us the lovey-dovey stuff about being “clothed in sincere compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”: he makes it clear that to dress yourself in mercy – as your school uniform – is to be ready to forgive and forebear. The context is the perennial temptation to store up hatred and unforgivingness. Jesus, too, tells His disciples to love, but is frank about how challenging that can be: people don’t always love us back, or as we would like; they may hate, curse, persecute or rob us. Ours has to be that hard loving that loves even when it isn’t returned, like God the Father’s mercy. This is the kind of loving mercy and merciful love that can change the world; indeed it is the only kind. Otherwise, we are doomed to
endless reprisals and niggardliness; we are doomed to what Pope Francis called “the spiral of sorrow”.

In a violent world it can seem that the Christian response of loving even those who hate us and turning to the Father of Mercy and the Mother of Mercy in prayer is absurdly naïve. “How many (military) divisions does the Pope have?” Joseph Stalin once dismissively sneered, when Churchill asked him to be merciful towards the Poles and other Catholics. Hearing of this, Pius XII is said to have responded, “Tell my son Joseph that he will meet my divisions in heaven”. Calling him son and presuming he would get to heaven was rather generous on that Pope’s part but he, like pastors and faithful before and since, had his eye on the bigger picture and on the mercy without which humanity since Cain has been doomed to tear itself – and each other – apart.

As we now dedicate this Chapel to the Mercy of the God who is Mercy, and to the prayers of the Mother of Mercy, we pray for peace in our world, our school, our families and in the hearts of all who will pray here. We beg the powerful protection of Our Lady of Mercy and her Most Holy Name for all those fleeing persecution at this time and in the future. And we ask her to guard the identity and guide the mission of this school.

Christ, the Divine Mercy: have mercy on us!
Mary, Mother of Mercy: pray for us!