

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS A ROAD TO RECONCILIATION WITH FIRST NATIONS

- Chiara Porro¹

Ambassador of Australia to the Holy See

Good afternoon, everyone. It is a real privilege to be taking part in today's event, which is an example of how women are seizing the initiative to find new pathways for change towards more stable, peaceful and prosperous societies. I am grateful to the Auxilium for hosting us today, and my special thanks go to the Chancellor, Madre Chiara Cazzuola, the Dean, Professoressa Ruffinatto and her team for all their hard work in ensuring the success of today's event.

When we first raised the idea of this roundtable, we wanted it to be a forum to share testimonies of how education can be one of those pathways for change. I want to thank my fellow women ambassadors for embracing this opportunity, and for offering such compelling arguments for education as a transformative force.

The dialogue we are having matters because it builds on the considerable work we do with the Holy See in terms of education. Australia regards this as a key interest in its relationship with the Vatican, and, as we mark the 50 years of diplomatic ties between Australia and the Holy See in 2023, education inevitably features as one of the central themes in our anniversary activities.

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Australia is proud of its achievements in this field, ranking highly in the world in terms of academic performance, school enrolment rates and labour-market outcomes. And given Australia's geographic reality, these accomplishments were not a given. The vastness of our continent has challenged us to innovate to ensure education reaches every child and young person even in the most remote corners of Australia.

One of those innovations is the so-called "school of the air" programme. Many students and parents will have become acquainted with virtual classrooms during the Covid-19 pandemic, but the fact is that Australia has been a pioneer in the field of remote education for well over 70 years. The school of the air programme has allowed generations of Australian children in the most remote parts of the outback to receive lessons via high frequency radio, allowing them also to send assignments back to teachers via post. Since 2009, the programme has been upgraded to take advantage of advancements in web-based technologies and improvements in distance learning methodologies. The scheme is still going strong, and just to give you a sense of its remarkable reach, the latest statistics from the Alice Spring School of the Air show that it continues serves some 100 children in an area of more than 1.3 million square kilometres. Some of the students live no less than 1,000 kilometres away from the school.

Of all of Australia's remote and isolated communities, the most hard-to-reach often belong to our First Nations. And frequently, the barriers to education have been not just geographic but also social and economic. And in this sense, the role of the Catholic Church in supporting indigenous communities in the bush cannot be overestimated.

One of the earliest figures to lead these efforts was a woman. In 1866, Australia's first and only canonised saint, Mary MacKillop, founded the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, the Josephites, an order of religious sisters operating schools in rural Australia, and paying special attention to the needs of indigenous communities in the country. Mary MacKillop wanted to complement the work of the many Jesuit missions present across Australia, who had been close to indigenous communities for centuries since the arrival of the first Europeans.

In August last year, I was privileged to travel to one of those Jesuit missions in the Northern Territories, where the legacy of those Catholic missionaries is still very much alive. I visited the small community of Nauiyu, on the banks of Daly River, which lies some 220 km from Darwin and has 510 inhabitants, mostly indigenous. In the late 1800s, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart had established the St Francis Xavier School here, forging a strong bond with the Nauiyu community. In particular, the presence of the school marked the life of one, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, whose inspirational story is one I wanted to share with you today.

When Miriam Rose was a teenager, a teacher from the school spotted that she could read and so decided to quickly make her 'assistant

teacher'. This was the beginning of what was to be a successful career as an educator; in 1975, Miriam Rose overcame all obstacles to become the first fully qualified aboriginal teacher in the Northern Territory. She taught for decades with an inclusive approach, blending conventional western education with aboriginal cultural learning. Even after retirement, she has continued this pursuit, providing new generations with what she calls "a key to the world".

Miriam Rose has also been tirelessly engaged with problems that have afflicted her community, which have sadly included high rates of depression and suicide. Other than an educator, Miriam Rose is also an acclaimed artist, and she has used art as a healing tool. By teaching traditional art forms, she helps younger generations find a sense of identity, which is a source of strength that they can draw on in difficult times.

Miriam Rose's lifework has not only supported and inspired aboriginal communities but has also helped build bridges for reconciliation. In 2021, she was named Senior Australian of the Year, one of our highest honours, and in her acceptance speech she spoke about spending a life "walking a one-way street to learn white people's way. [...]. She then explained: «Now it's the time for you to come closer to understand us... [...] to listen».

I am extremely pleased to announce that we are finalising plans for a visit by Miriam Rose during Reconciliation Week in May of this year, which will include a meeting with Pope Francis and a series of events to share her views on aboriginal knowledge, art, and of course, the importance of education as a pathway for change. I know this will be a historic moment of encounter, and we are very much looking forward to welcoming Miriam Rose to Rome.

Thank you again for taking part in today's roundtable. I very much hope to continue this conversation not just today, but in the months to come.