

## SHEPPARTON HOMILY

**01 March 2009: St Mel's Church, Shepparton, Victoria, Australia**

*Fr Michael Grace at the Thanksgiving Mass for the  
50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Daughters of Divine Zeal in Australia*



In 1969, Bishop Bernard Stewart welcomed the Daughters of Divine Zeal to St Mel's Parish in Shepparton. At that time, Bishop Stewart said, "The opening of this new Kindergarten at St Mel's is a day of rejoicing, thanks to the Daughters of Divine Zeal. Some mothers need to be come breadwinners and this new Kindergarten in the Parish will provide help."

Bishop Stewart had a smile on his face and hope in his heart because in those days we had plenty of Sisters in the Diocese and plenty of Priests. For example, we had Franciscan Priests at Eaglehawk, Augustinian Priests and Echuca, Kyabram and Rochester, Scalabrinian Priests at St Mel's, as well as Diocesan Priests – some of whom had come from Ireland to help our own Australian Priests. There were several communities of Sisters in the Diocese, including Brigidines, Mercy's, Presentation Sisters, Josephites, Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood, FCJ's, Poor Clares, and Sisters of Charity. We also had the Holy Angels from Sri Lanka and the Daughters of Divine Zeal from Italy. Twenty years later, a decision was made by the Mother General of the Daughters of Divine Zeal that, due to a shortage of vocations, the Italian Sisters would be leaving St Mel's.

Sadly, the same fate came to many other orders in the Diocese. The Sisters from Sri Lanka left Wangaratta and move to Geelong. They had provided care for the elderly at St Catherine's Home in Wangaratta. No longer do we have Scalabrinian Priests, Augustinian Priests or Franciscan Priests in our Diocese. So what has happened to that lovely rainbow we had forty years ago?

Has this place, this Diocese, become a wilderness with very few vocations? In today's Gospel, we heard that Jesus spent forty days in the desert. Have you ever noticed that Jesus begins and ends his public ministry in the wilderness? In the beginning – forty days in the desert – and later, at the end – condemned to death at Golgotha, a desolate place.



In the desert, the devil tried to tempt Jesus to abandon his mission. On the cross, it was the crowd that tried to tempt Jesus to give up. They yelled out, "Why don't you work a miracle – why don't you come down off the cross and save yourself?" The first reading today fortunately reminds us that God made a covenant, an agreement with us, that He would never abandon us due to His benevolence and care of creation. The symbol of the Covenant is the rainbow. That lovely symbol of the rainbow is ideal, so appropriate, especially today as we welcome back the Daughters of Divine Zeal. Their presence helps our self-esteem. We thank them for their contribution so many years ago. The very title they have – "Daughters of Divine Zeal" – is an inspiration to us. Following on from their example, our own Kindergarten Directors, like Mandy Christoe and now Alana Cruse, are zealous, and sharing the same charism.

At no stage did any of us be tempted to give up running the Kindergarten, which has become a model in this Diocese. So many other Parishes would love to have the same. That symbol of the Covenant – the rainbow – is most appropriate for our Kindergarten. We have here in Shepparton, many people of different backgrounds, different religions, different cultures, all living in harmony, accepting each other, beginning at the Kindergarten. They learn to live with and to appreciate each other.

May this Eucharist be our Prayer of Thanksgiving. THE TRADITION LIVES ON, thanks to the Daughters of Divine Zeal, who arrived in Australia fifty years ago.