**AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY: A.G.M. [21 MARCH, 2021]**

**PRESIDENTIAL REPORT**

Like so many others, ACHS endured a difficult year in 2020: but we have survived! The devotion of both our members and our presenters has been an inspiring reminder of the importance of such a society and, further, that it should flourish (for both intellectual and personal reasons). In March, I took the advice of some clinical colleagues and (ahead of the Government), cancelled the March meeting and the following three. We took advantage of our enhanced web-site (the great improvements to which had been driven by Dr Power and Professor Franklin) and posted the film which was planned for May but, even so, when we were allowed to resume our public activities in July, the sense of the attendees’ collective delight was almost palpable. Without question, that enthusiasm was an encouragement to your Council that their efforts are worthwhile. And that, by the way, is why I referred to the resumption of our “public activities”, because the work of the Council in sustaining the existence of CHS continues: on your behalf it is my pleasant obligation to thank them for that dedication.

That July session – a commemoration of (and a reflection on) the sesquicentenary of “Vatican I” and its promulgation of the contested *Pastor aeternus* (Papal infallibility) -- was brilliantly presented by Robert Gascoigne and Paul Collins (in the absence of Edmund Campion, following a mishap); then, in August, Paul Crittenden paid affectionate tribute to his colleague, David Coffey (a great theologian amongst us!), and conquered the daunting challenge of making Coffey’s profound thinking lucid. [This session was in accord with my strong view that it is important to remember that our distinguished intellectuals and artists are no less relevant in our history than politicians, explorers and bishops, a disposition which was reinforced in February, 2021, when Stephen McInerney was inspirational on the late poet, Les Murray.] In September, 2020, in the midst of COVID-19, Janice Garaty took us back to the appalling post-World War I Influenza pandemic (at its most intense in 1919); and in October the non-sectarian character of ACHS was put to the test when the sometimes inconsistent Catholic and Protestant biblical traditions were brilliantly considered by Meredith Lake, the eminent young historian and broadcaster. Our year ended (because, regrettably, the Christmas Lunch and Mass had to be abandoned) with the “triple-treat” of Ronald Perry, Bryan Gray and Alison Turner who grippingly (and sometimes emotionally) presented their personal perspectives in a “Witness Seminar” on the history of an important local venture, “The Sydney Institute of Counselling”.

All in all, therefore, the year ended far better than any of us could have expected in March.

Another brilliant development last year came about through the extraordinary generosity of John Kenny. He is a lawyer by profession, but it is clear that “sound” is his true passion. He donated his skills by recording our presentations, editing the results to a thoroughly professional standard and posting them on the ACHS home-page: they can then be enjoyed not only by those members who were unable to attend but to historically engaged people around Australia and beyond. This is, like the magnificent journal which James Franklin produces, an impressive extension of the activities of ACHS which I cannot commend too highly.

Finally, there is another way in which we can become an even more important force in Australia’s intellectual life and in our history, notably its *Catholic history* (broadly understood): that would be achieved if we could build a larger membership (especially a ***younger*** membership). Self-evidently, this would be financially beneficial; more important, it would increase the strength, diversity and sheer energy of the society. One of the major obligations for every company, organisation and institution (universities and, indeed, the churches, alike) is to secure the succession – in short, to ensure their survival. Without a dynamic and foresightful membership that aspiration is likely to fail. Therefore, if each of us could attract just one new member, that would, at a stroke, double our membership, but –even more important – would be a step in ensuring the continued life of ACHS. I plead with *every member to* recognise and accept that challenge. Remember, in the face of the daunting and inevitable vicissitudes of life, survival is true achievement and it certainly cannot be taken for granted, as the last testing year has, surely, reminded us. The fact that I have said this before does not diminish its importance or urgency.

*Per ardua ad astra!*

John Carmody,

March 2021