

**The 40th Anniversary of the Foundation of  
Brescia House Convent School**

**THANKSGIVING FOR THE BLESSINGS OF 40 YEARS**

*St Paul tells us to "be thankful". To: "Sing to God with thanksgiving in your hearts."  
(Col. 3:15-17)*

And that is why we are here today: To give thanks for 40 years.

**40 YEARS**

*"The cloud covered the mountain  
and the Lord called to Moses from inside the cloud.  
Moses went right into the cloud.  
He stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights."  
(Ex. 24:16-18)*

Forty is a very significant number in the Bible. It is mentioned frequently and most often in the context of a period of purification, or of preparation, before an important event in the faith journey of a person or people called by God. Sometimes the number might be used symbolically, but it always denotes the completion of an essential period before God's intervention in someone's life, or in the life of a community.

- † the Flood lasted for 40 days and was a preparatory stage leading to the first covenant with God - the rainbow being the sign of that Covenant. (Gen. 7-9)
- † The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years, facing the challenges of the wilderness in their faith and their lives, before God led them to the Promised Land. (Ex. 16:35)
- † When in the wilderness, Moses stayed on the mountain and fasted for 40 days and forty nights, after which he received a theophany (an experience) of God and sealed the Covenant by receiving the 10 commandments. (Ex. 24:15-18)
- † After Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal on the Mount of Carmel, he was weary to the point of death, but God sent his angel to strengthen him to walk for 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God, where he encountered God in the sound of a gentle breeze. (1 Kings 19:8)
- † Jonah gave the Ninevites 40 days to repent and avoid God's judgment - and they did: with fasting, putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes. (Jonah 3:1-9)
- † Before embarking on his mission of proclaiming the Good News, Jesus himself went into the desert for 40 days of fasting and prayer, to prepare himself for the task of being the Messiah. (Matt. 4:1-10)
- † And then, after the Resurrection, he spent another 40 days, affirming the Apostles in their faith and preparing them for the coming of the Holy Spirit, before He finally ascended to Glory. (Acts 1:3).

There is surely some significance in the number 40, for Brescia House today. According to Scripture there is always some special blessing and some special mission for the people of God after the 40 days/nights/years of purification and preparation. In some ways Brescia has had many challenges and difficulties in the last 40 years, but it has had more joys and blessings. It has grown into a sound educational Institution, solidly rooted in Christian values and the Ursuline tradition, living its Catholic Ethos in the spirit of St Angela. We pray that whatever blessing God has for

us after these 40 years may be received with joy and reverence and that we may assume our new responsibility to witness to Christ again, in our school and parishes, our communities and environments, our country and world.

During the past 40 years we have faced challenges. Like the Israelites in the desert were blessed with manna from heaven and water from a rock and the ultimate covenant with God of being His special people, so too have we been blessed with God's special grace and protection on our journey to this celebration.

We are in the process of speaking to people and of going through the archives to prepare a history of the School, but briefly today I would like to share with you some dates and anecdotes gathered from some of the Sisters who were foundation members, one of whom we have among us today: Sr Mara.

- In 1966, when the school started, the long building, which constitutes the present main High School block was the first Brescia House School building and at the School's inception housed Grade 0 - Grade 3, plus Standards 6 and 7.
- Each successive year, the School added one Primary and one High School class.
- By 1974, the first phase of the hall had been completed, together with a Junior Primary block, housing Grade 0 to Grade 4.
- Then there was a time of consolidation.
- By the late 1980's the School had expanded considerably, so the Peace Block as well as a second Grade 0 classroom was added to the Primary School in 1989.
- From then expansion and development started to speed up.
- In 1992 the Music Centre was opened.
- In 1993 the present Junior Primary was opened and the Resource Centre followed in 1997.
- The Science Block and Matric classrooms came into operation in 2000.
- In 2004 the Junior Primary was extended and the new Grade 0 opened in 2005.
- Today, in 2006, we are blessing the New Administration Block, allowing alterations and extensions to the High School Building for extra classrooms.
- Just saying this makes me breathless!

Throughout these years, God's blessing, guidance and protection have been with Brescia House School. But the school is not simply bricks and mortar. The spirit of the School grew with the buildings. The spirit was as firmly rooted in Christ as the buildings are in the soil of Bryanston. Some of the values, which form part of that spirit, will be acknowledged during the Offertory procession. We are focussing today on one aspect of that spirit: gratitude, thanksgiving. Gratitude is a virtue by which we acknowledge those who have been good to us. Today with joyful and loving hearts, we acknowledge God's goodness and faithfulness over 40 years.

As our gospel today indicates, Brescia is about people, especially children:

*"whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me,"*

It is also about those who nurture these children: their parents and families, their teachers and friends, their Pastors and our Ursuline Sisters. The growth of the School

and its spirit are at the heart of the human element, which makes up Brescia. Let me share with you some of the memories of the Sisters. I quote:

The site for the school had been chosen some two years prior to opening. Two places were suggested: one on the downside of N-W Drive and the other on the up-side. The first delved down into a valley, while the other commanded a spectacular view. In the far distance the Brixton Tower, the Northcliff hills; closer to home the mauve of the jacaranda gardens and the stretches of lawn and trees were a glory of colours. This obviously was the site chosen. Now for the trouble! The piece of veld on which lovely Brescia would rise was hardy bush and defiant rock and a challenge for the architect, Mr Michael Waterkyn, who had to work with the request that every classroom face the beautiful view.

In mid-January 1966, workmen were still busy finishing off jobs - planks of wood, dust - everywhere. "Will the school be ready for opening day?" was the question posed by enquiring parents. "We will start as scheduled!" replied Sr Xavier Rowntree, the foundress of the School, firmly. She gave out and circulated the opening date regardless of the bricks and mortar that decorated the surroundings. So, start we did: leaping over mounds of sand - into a school with no locks. A group of mothers spent the day before sweeping, dusting and carrying desks to their respective classrooms.

We knew each and everyone by name - one parent stating that not only did the sisters know the names of all her children, but the names of her dogs too!

As we had no Assembly Hall to begin with, we had to use the facilities of neighbouring schools for AGM's, prize-giving functions, play productions - with lots of extra drams played behind the scenes of each function, e.g. getting drenched in a heavy downpour, trying to carry loaded boxes of trophies and book prizes (which toppled out of the box into a stream of water) to the safe harbour of the car transporting us to an evening function.

Brescia added an extra Primary and High School grade each year and as the school began to fill, certain mothers in great distress were heard to say, "We are like a stock market now!" In other words, the intimacy, friendliness and everybody-knows-everybody-else, were threatened!

After three years, when the first High School group reached Matric, this new, young school achieved a 100% pass, which it has maintained.

### Sport

The school began with four tennis courts and veld, on which, much later, two hockey fields and another set of four courts were built.

Under the redoubtable leadership of Mrs Margaret Gill, who died this year, the Brescia House Horse Show was established and it rapidly developed into an annual inter-school event, which is now known as the Johannesburg Girls' Horse Show.

Initially, we had no swimming pool - we used pools in pupils' homes and trained there to take part in inter-school galas. With strategic planning - using performances of strong swimmers to their utmost potential, we could say "so much achieved by so

few!" Fairly early on, a swimming was built by the PTA; years later this humble pool was revamped and, finally, a larger pool, baby pool and diving pool were added. (Now we have a pool that wears a blanket in summer. I wonder what those early users of the pool at Brescia will think of that!)

In the second year of the School's existence, we entered the Catholic Schools' Athletic competition. As the day wore on, the girls began to get used to coming in either last or close to it. Then the young brother of one of the girls felt it was unfair, so he managed to get the public address microphone and announce that Brescia was very young! (hence the poor performance.)

### BOGs and PTAs

Brescia can never be grateful enough for the efforts of all its Boards of Governors and PTA's: for their advice, support and always the completed piece. They have always and still do work untiringly, with utter generosity, donating their time and expertise with selfless commitment.

And then the mothers: in the first week a self-appointed gardening group came into being. Stones and rocks began to move; compost and soil arrived and then the planting began. Any time of day one could see one or another in the garden giving instructions, but always hands on. No rubber gloves!

The mothers still have the same interest, expressing it different ways, but then and now, still as tuck-shop, lost property, second-hand uniform helpers, and taxi-drivers, who did the job infinitely better than what one experiences on the road today.

### The Sisters:

During those early days there was no convent as such. The sisters had their meals in the present sewing room and one Sister slept in the store room there. Two had cubicles in one of the classrooms upstairs in the school. The other sisters slept in the present Matric locker room. When the Primary School block was completed, two sisters used the classroom storerooms as bedrooms, one of those Sisters being Sr Mary. There were no buildings anywhere around the school, so one of the parents who ran a security firm, used to patrol the property at night. They were probably safer then, than anyone is today. Later the Sisters moved to a house in Bush Hill, but that was not convenient, so the second floor of the convent containing bedrooms was built a few years later.

Those early days are an image in microcosm of what has continued at Brescia in macrocosm during the past 40 years: Parents, Teachers, Students, Boards, Sisters, Pastors: everyone has been part of and contributed to making Brescia a family We have lived the Catholic Christian ethos, but we have lived it in the spirit of Ursuline education and with the charism of St Angela: with care and concern for each individual in her (and his) uniqueness; focussing on academic excellence and a deepening of faith in Jesus Christ; ensuring the full human, physical, emotional health and growth of each person.

With joyful and grateful hearts, we offer God our thanksgiving for all the endeavour and challenges, joy and blessings of 40 years. May our 40 years of purification, make us ready for the significant gift and blessing He has in store for us and may our 40 years of preparation strengthen us for the mission which He chooses to give us for the future.

## **THANKSGIVING:**

*"God has called you together in the one body. And be thankful. Christ's message in all its richness must live in your hearts. Teach each other with all wisdom. Sing to God with thanksgiving in your hearts. Everything you do or say, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks through him to God the Father."  
(Col. 3:15-17)*

Spend some time considering aspects of your life, which are blessings and for which you would like to offer thanksgiving to God.

PAUSE

For example we could mention things like:

(and if I say something that you agree with, whisper, "Thank you, God!" in your heart.)

- Family and friends, including Our Lady and the Saints;
- Extended family and my "communities", e.g. School, Parish, Tennis Club, etc;
- Health and intelligence;
- Skills and ability;
- Food, shelter and the necessities of life;
- Art and music; film and books;
- Faith and God's Love;
- Prayer and Creation;
- Work and colleagues;
- Education, fun and laughter.

Gratitude is a virtue by which we acknowledge those who have been good to us.

In the reflection we have just completed, we recognise God's goodness and faithfulness and it is to Him, first of all, the we, as individuals and as a community, must direct our thanksgiving - for 40 years of blessings.

The value of gratitude lies in the sincerity of those who extend it. The more other-focussed it is, the more value it has. Understood in this light, we see that gratitude is the child of love.

From the earliest days of God's interactions with the human race, as He gradually revealed more and more of His nature and His Love, those He called have expressed their gratitude for this gracious, unconditional and all encompassing love of God, expressing it through prayer, song, gesture and action.

### **Acts of thanksgiving were personal:**

- Abel brought the first born of his flock (Gen. 4:4)
- For being preserved from the flood, Noah built an altar for Yahweh (Gen. 8:20)
- Abraham built an altar for Yahweh who had appeared to him. (Gen. 12:7)
- Isaac built an altar at Beersheba and invoked the name of Yahweh (Gen. 26:25)
- Jacob built an altar at Bethel, where God has spoken with him, on which he made a libation and poured oil, "for God heard me when I was in distress and gave me help on the journey I made." (Gen. 35:3,14-15)

**Acts of thanksgiving were national:**

- After crossing the Sea of Reeds, or Red Sea, in safety, Moses and the sons of Israel proclaimed He "had covered himself in glory." (Ex. 15:1)
- Deborah and Barak, "let those who love you be like the sun", when with God's help they were victorious in battle
- "and the land enjoyed rest for forty years." (Jud. 5:31)

**New Testament:**

In the New Testament we find that St Paul always begins his letter by an act of thanksgiving towards God and he stressed the duty of doing this:

- "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, and for the way in which your faith is spoken of all over the world." (Rom. 1:8)
- Always and everywhere give thanks to God, who is our Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Eph. 5:20)
- Or the reading we had today:
- Sing to God with thanksgiving in your hearts. Everything you do or say, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks through him to God the Father." (Col. 3:16-17)

**Jesus:**

We also find Jesus commending those who remember to say "Thank You!"

- The one leper cured threw himself at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. This made Jesus say, "Where are the other nine?" It seems that no-one has come back to give praise to God, except this foreigner." (Luke 17:16-18)
- For the gift of freedom from sin, a woman anoints the feet of Jesus. Causing him to say: ".her many sins must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love." (Luke 7:47)
- When visiting her cousin Elizabeth, Our Lady proclaimed the greatness of the Lord: "for He who is mighty has done great things to me," recognising that through what He had done to her in her lowliness, all generations would call her blessed. (Luke. 1:49)
- We even hear Jesus uttering thanks to God: as in our gospel acclamation today: "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children!" (Matt. 11:25)

**Preparation for the Eucharist:**

- "Jesus took seven loaves and the fish and he gave thanks and broke them and handed them to the disciples, who gave them to the crowds." (Matt. 15:36)

Later, he was to do something similar at the Last Supper:

- "Then he took some bread and when he had given thanks, broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body which will be given for you; do this as a memorial of me". He did the same with the cup after supper. (Luke 22:19)

**Eucharist:**

These incidents of thanksgiving lead us to a consideration of the most perfect way of thanking God in the New Testament and that is through the Eucharistic Sacrifice - the very word "Eucharist" meaning "Thanksgiving."

In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told of the eucharistic gatherings of the early Christian community,

- They "...remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. ... They went as a body to the Temple every day, but met in their houses for the breaking of the bread." (Acts 2:42, 46)
- "On the first day of the week we met to break bread. Paul was due to leave the next day, and he preached a sermon that went on till the middle of the night (!)." (Acts 20:7)
- "The blessing cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of Christ." (1 Cor. 10:17)

And then Paul proclaims the early formula of the Eucharistic consecration:

- "For this is what I received from the Lord and passed on to you: ... Jesus broke the bread and said:....He took the cup and said...." (1 Cor. 11:23-26)

And here we are, 2000 years later, the Christian community of Brescia House, gathered together for the Eucharistic sacrifice, the "Thanksgiving" sacrifice, to give praise and thanks to God for 40 years of blessing.