

Marist in step with Aquinas students

FEATURES

University residential colleges have been in the spotlight recently over allegations of 'hazing' but the new rector of Aquinas College at North Adelaide, Brother Michael Green, had nothing but praise for the young adults under his guidance when he spoke to JENNY BRINKWORTH.



HOME AWAY FROM HOME: Pictured at Aquinas College with Br Michael Green are, from left, Abbey Lovell from Mildura, Stephen Sochacki, Mt Gambier, Kiah Morrish, Mildura, and Jack Armfield, Kingston.

It's a case of "new and not new" for Brother Michael Green FMS who has been appointed rector of Aquinas College, Adelaide's only Catholic residential college for university students.

While it is his first time as the head of such an institution, he has 20 years' experience of residential education as a principal in Marist boarding schools.

More recently, he has been in senior leadership positions with the Marist Brothers, including seven years as national director of Marist Schools Australia. A scholar, writer and sought-after speaker, he was commissioned in 2016 to write the third volume of *The History of the Institute of the Marist Brothers*. His appointment to Aquinas is testament to the Marists' high regard for the college and its mission of working with young people.

"It's been a welcome return to working with students," Br Michael told *The Southern Cross*.

"The invitation came from left field...and I jumped at it."

His appointment followed the departure of Brother Paul Gilchrist who after three years in the position has moved to East Timor as head of the local Marist-run teachers' college.

Aquinas College was conducted by the Jesuits for its first 50 years but 12 years ago Archbishop Wilson invited the Marists to the college and it is now regarded as a Marist institution under the aegis of the Archbishop.

“We are very grateful to the Archbishop for the invitation to take charge of the college and we (the Marists) do put a high priority on our ministry here,” Br Michael said.

“It’s our core business, working with young people – and this is a great opportunity for us to work with them in a post-school, young adult situation and in an educational environment of another kind.”

While there were similarities with boarding schools, Br Michael said the relationships were very different, as was the level of autonomy. But he said he felt “very at home” and had found Aquinas to be an “extraordinarily warm and friendly place”.

“The students love being here, they enjoy each other, they are very proud of their college and have a great spirit. But they have it as young adults which is different to the way a school spirit may operate,” he said.

“One of the great attractions for the Marists being here are the opportunities for evangelisation...as young adults they are at a stage in their lives where they are asking questions (and it’s good that they do) and their own faith journeys are at different stages.

“It’s a privilege to be able to accompany them at that point in their lives.

“My initial impression is that there is a great openness to the Gospel, to faith – there’s some young men and women here of very deep faith.”

Br Michael said one of the great traditions of the college was the extensive outreach program.

“The social justice element is very strong, the students get into it, they buy into it well,” he said.

“We are evangelised by the poor, by those in need...so the first-hand encounter of these young people with those in need can have a very profound effect on them personally.”

Referring to recent media coverage of ‘hazing’ and humiliating initiation rituals at university residential colleges, Br Michael said the students at Aquinas had been “very careful” to ensure the first year students felt at home and safe during orientation week.

“The program is very well planned by students and staff, every educational and social event is talked through beforehand,” he stressed. “We had a great O-Week.”

“It’s all about culture, whether it’s school, college or business, culture is the powerful thing.

“When I first came I told the students that institutions such as this tend to have powerful cultures, they can be powerfully good or powerfully toxic but they are powerful, so let’s make it good.”



Br Michael said the major element of life at Aquinas was academics with an extensive tutorial and mentoring program provided by staff and former students.

Personally, he finds working directly with the students “enormously satisfying”.

“As Brothers, we are all about making a difference in the lives of young people and it’s always satisfying to do that directly, one-on-one, rather than just at a policy and strategic level which has been my life for a number of years.”

He said there was also a strong and loyal alumni network which provided placement and work opportunities for students.

“One of the great advantages of colleges like this is the academic and professional support,” he said.

“I think the students who come here are mightily fortunate and privileged, it’s a rich experience, and it aims at a very holistic approach to their growth and education.

“One of the challenges at the moment is a lot of commercial operators are moving into this space and providing basic accommodation for university students. It’s devoid of all that collegiate experience and all that a good residential college has to offer.”



Br Michael’s views were supported by Student Club president Eliza Boulton who described the college as “just like a big family”.

‘It was definitely the best decision of my life to apply for Aquinas,’ said Eliza. ‘The friends I’ve made, the times we’ve had, the pastoral and academic support I’ve received, it’s all just been amazing.’

Alice Fry, who began university this year, said she has been impressed at how different college life was from boarding school.

‘It’s really a quite new experience,’ explained Alice. “It’s a world away from school. At Aquinas it is really a community of young adults who are responsible for their own lives. The thing that really struck me was just how welcome and comfortable I immediately felt, and how easy it was for me to begin uni.”

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