

Two hundred young people, most of them aged between 18 and 22, living away from home and parents for first time, with limited experience of big-city life, all domiciled under the one roof for an extended period, what could possibly go wrong?

Well, in my experience, in truth, surprisingly little. Actually, it's not surprising at all. Yes, the College has had its moments – and some of the more colourful ones, so I have heard tell, belong to earlier times; no mention tonight of cellar parties, or fresher runs, or kings and queens, or ponding, or other experiences that are now lost in the mists and myths of the past. It has been a journey.

The overwhelming and reiterative narrative of Aquinas, however, is one of things going right, going well, indeed going exceptionally well. Let me name briefly my reasons for not being in any way surprised by that. I have three.

One of my most treasured personal memories of my years at Aquinas is interviewing applicants one-on-one in the Rector's Study – typically while they were in Year 12 or in a gap year right after school. It was usually a new experience for them, because for the first time in a major life-decision they were not accompanied by a parent. It was not their parent, I would point out who was applying to come to Aquinas, but them. It was not their parents who would be accepting a place if one were offered, but them. There are some men and women here tonight who may recall that conversation with me. I invited them to share how they saw themselves, to talk about their aspirations – not only professionally or academically, but also personally, their hopes for themselves, the man or woman they wanted to become. We spoke about the person who would be coming to Aquinas – not just in terms of what the College may be able to offer them, but what they would bring to the Aquinas community. They were rich conversations. They left me deeply confident in the calibre of the students who would become Aquinians. I was rarely disappointed.

My second reason relates to the staff team. At a leadership team meeting once, the four of us around the table in the Faulkner Room realised that each of us was a trained and experienced teacher, an educator – something that was not the case in any of the other residential colleges. We recognised that *our* intuitive approach to young people was fundamentally educative. Our way of relating with them, while easy and well-practised, was educative, the culture we wanted to create was educative. And as Catholic educators, our approach was also very much a communal one.

Community has been at the core of Aquinas. Almost 50 years ago, the Jesuit Rector, Fr Ian Howells, in his introduction to *The Aquinian*, wrote that the first priority of the College should be that be a home. Later, in the Marist era, the root metaphor that was being used was almost the same: that Aquinas would be defined by its family spirit. Home and family – such revealing figurative language. In both, you belong, you are known, you are supported and mentored, you matter, indeed you are loved. People want the best for you. And you have some fun. The creation of such a culture depends largely, in my view, on staff – all staff – who 'get' young people, who have not forgotten what it is to be 19 or 20 years of age, who can laugh at quirky undergrad humour and madcap hijinks without compromise to decent expectation, who can accommodate one or two mistakes or errors of judgement as learning experiences but without sacrifice to legitimate expectation. People who can empathise, enjoy, and expect all at the same time.

And thirdly, in something of a segue, I highlight the clarity of purpose that the College enjoys. Aquinas has been faith-based and values-driven since the first conversations about its establishment in what was then the Aquinas Society back in the 1930s. The nuances of that purpose may have been tweaked over the years, and appropriately so along with developments in church and society, but the lens of history shows that whenever the College was clearest on its *raison d'être*, its 'why', then its

'how' fell readily enough into place. In this, its 75<sup>th</sup> year, these are the words that Aquinas puts around its purpose. Let me quote:

*Aquinas College is a residential community of adult learners that draws on the richness of the Catholic intellectual tradition and embraces the best in contemporary approaches to tertiary education and student residential care. Drawing on both Jesuit and Marist spirituality and practice, it invites and supports young women and men to grow in faith and wisdom to become mature and integrated human beings so that they can bring critical minds and compassionate hearts to their engagement with others and with the world.*

That's aspirational and idealistic, sure, but it is no empty rhetoric.

At a time when, in many ways, the campus life of universities is such a limp and shrunken version of yesteryear and when their focus has sometimes diminished to little more than utilitarian job-training, Aquinas offers the bigger, the broader, the memory-making package that university life used to be. You only have to attend the academic awards dinner that is now held at the start of each semester not only to be astounded by the extraordinary scholastic achievement of students but, even more tellingly, to see the collective pride they take in it. Beyond academics, though, there is the liturgical life of the College, its Outreach programme, its extensive pastoral care and wellbeing strategies implemented by both student leaders and professional staff, and of course the enthusiasm around HTC sports, and its social life. The 'shows' - the Fresher Show, the Pond Show, the Footy Show, and a few other unsanctioned ones. Pub nights at The Cally, or The Archer, or The Queens Head, or The Cathedral, or The Royal Oak, or whichever the North Adelaide hostelry of choice might be in any given year. And the Ball, and the music nights, the Marcellin Medallion Dinner and the various themed events. One of the more significant decisions that was taken by the College Council at its very first meeting in 1950, on the recommendation of Fr Con Finn, the first Rector, was that Aquinas should not be a "dry" College! He got his wish in spades. It's a full and fun experience to be an Aquinian.

So, this evening, we gather to celebrate and to be grateful for what Aquinas has become. It is incumbent upon us to recognise and honour all those who have contributed to its foundation and development. That is a huge number of people.

Let us first remember and honour A.J. Hannan KC and others such as Dr Edmund Britten-Jones and Professor John Fitzherbert who not only convinced Archbishop Killian and then Archbishop Beovich of the merits of their dream for a Catholic residential College, but drove its fund-raising – so much of that done at the grassroots in parishes – who purchased Montefiore House and subsequently other properties, who borrowed and built, and who then served on the College Council for decades. With them, we note the work of other Councillors and of the successive Chairs of Council, none more than Archbishop James Gleeson, a great champion of Aquinas, who continued in the chair well beyond his term as Archbishop of Adelaide. Seldom, probably never, did they have the financial and capital resources they needed, but that did not hamper their ambition to make Aquinas College the residential college of choice in Adelaide. They made do, for example, Strangways House and Cathcart, or the infamous Stables which accommodated students as a "temporary expedient" in 1954 and did so for more than 60 years. Those pioneers would be delighted with Aquinas in 2025.

Let us remember and honour those who have been entrusted with the leadership of Aquinas as its 17 Rectors – from the wit, wisdom and scholarship of Irishman, Fr Con Finn in 1950 through to the newly appointed Dr Sarah Moller in 2025 – someone with at least an equal claim to wit, wisdom and scholarship, but maybe in a different register, and the first woman to head the College. Not before time! It is my observation that the tenor and character of the College have been significantly shaped by each Rector. The cultured and academic Fr Michael Scott in the 50s, for example, and others such

as Fr Theo Overberg in the 90s and Professor Denis Ralph in the 2000s both of whom found themselves in circumstances that called for some important decisions that were perhaps more consequential for the direction and culture of the College.

We honour the religious orders who have contributed so much, notably of course the Jesuits who provided the first eight Rectors and played such a defining role in the College's story. The Marist Brothers and the Christian Brothers both had ex-officio seats on Council for many years, reflecting the close historical links of Aquinas with Sacred Heart and Rostrevor; the Marists later taking on the rectorship and chaplaincy. Additionally, the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the Josephite Sisters have made members of their orders available to Aquinas. It has been a work of the wider Church.

We salute all who have served in the College in other staff roles – as Vice-Rectors and Deans, Chaplains, Tutors, Business Managers, Registrars, Professional Assistants, and Matrons in the early years from the formidable Matron Kathleen Brennan, and also those in catering, cleaning and grounds. I highlight as well as the countless volunteers – often Old Aquinians from Laurie Smart and countless others after him – who have given of their time and expertise on Academic Panels, committees, project groups, in career mentoring, pro-bono professional advice, in fund-raising, and in so many ways, and continue to do so.

And finally, of course, to the thousands of men and women for whom Aquinas College exists – its students. From those first 19 men in 1950 in the days before emails, mobiles and social media – no wonder they seem to have got up to a bit – through to the vibrant and wonderful student body of almost 200 today. To those who were appointed to student leadership roles – these days called House Coordinators – so critical to the functioning, order and spirit of the College. To those who have been elected to the positions of Student President and other roles in the Student Club, and others who have contributed in various capacities. And to all students.

Even a casual glance at the social media activity of the College these days, reveals something that has always been its defining feature: it's been about people. It's been about Aquinians, about memories from a quite special and non-replicable time of their lives, about good times and good people, about friendships formed – even some marriages.

As part of the Commencement Service each year now, the names of the new students are placed in a silver heart, joining the names of all who have called Aquinas home since 1950, and that heart sits on the altar in the College chapel, each time there is a service. Your name is in the heart. You are an Aquinian. The editor of the 1987 Aquinian captured it in words that would resonate with all here tonight when she wrote simply, "I love this place."

So, ladies and gentlemen, men and women of Aquinas, can I invite you to charge your glasses, and to be upstanding? To Aquinas College and to all Aquinians.