

Dear Members of RMC and Staff Colleagues

This is the last time that I will have the opportunity to speak to you at a College Valedictory Dinner and so let me take a moment to look around at you and try to fix the occasion in my mind. Those of us who are leaving will take many wonderful memories with us; memories rich with the faces of College members, rich with memories of College places and rich with memories of College events such as this one.

After ceasing to be a fulltime student and being a university worker for the past 45 years, including these last 7 years at RMC I have to tell you that no other job that I have had:

Has been as much fun as this one at RMC

Has given me such close encounters with so many individual students' lives as this one

Has provided such competent and amiable work colleagues

Has been as free from workplace apathy and indifference as this one

Has energised me as this one – the energy of the student body is infectious.

No other job has given me more worries than this one – worries about the health of members, worries about the safety of members, concerns about staff, concerns about money and budgets, concerns about good order in the community, concerns about the new building and concerns about my own capacity;

And no other job has given me such confidence in God's good provision in all things

Seven years at RMC has left its indelible mark on Jan and me. We will not lightly forget you but rather we will treasure you; and RMC will always have a special place in our hearts.

Tonight I want to say a very big thank you to you the members of this College. Year by year it has been my privilege to welcome new and returning members and to see how so many people contribute to the enrichment of our shared community experience. There are the obvious groups – Roshan and the Duty Officers, Jarrod and the members of the Student Association Executive and all 8 of our hard working Residential Tutors. There are the many who contribute to a musical item, a dance or a menu item at our various cultural and social occasions. There are the many that put on a team shirt and represent the College at sport or the sport of debating or who attend to cheer on our teams. There are those who assist with library and computing, publications and grounds maintenance, with TCM services and with fund raising activities. And there are those who share the experience of living in community with those in adjacent rooms or sitting at the same table here in the dining room. Thank you for all those gifts of friendship we share together and for all acts of service to others that give us hope for the future.

I want to thank and farewell those of our number who are leaving the College at the end of the year. Many of you have shared 3 or 4 years of your life with us, others 1 or 2 years. You have been a blessing to those who will be returning next year through your friendship, your questions, your participation in College life, your leadership in service and perhaps also leadership in pranking. If you are amongst the leavers I want to offer two comments. The first is some advice. It may sound simplistic but here it is. If it is at all possible, choose to live within walking distance of your job as I have for the past 17 years - 10 in Dublin and 7 at RMC. It will save you hours every day and you won't need to buy a car either. The second comment is a request. Please stay in touch, join the Alumni association and come to the annual dinner, let *RMC Now* know about your marriage, children and promotion and be a thoughtful and generous supporter of the College. RMC needs more active alumni.

There are many other people I need to thank with regard to these past 7 years. I will have the opportunity to speak to College staff at large at our annual luncheon in another couple of weeks time but tonight I do want to say a special word of thanks to Paul and Nicole, Scott and Debby, Paul and Vicki and Jo Dear. This is not to diminish the exemplary service of other fantastic staff but just to recognise the particular affinity and affection that comes from those I have named having their homes on site with us. Our lives, like those of student College members, revolve around that triangle made up of the College premises, the University campus and the Macquarie Centre. No wonder we are all a little tragic! Also I want to congratulate Paul, Cathryn and Vatsala on yet another great College dinner event.

Some of you have been asking me what we will be doing next year. Here are some of the things that are said to happen to people in retirement.

People phone at 9pm and ask 'Did I wake you?'

There's nothing left to learn the hard way.

Things you buy won't wear out.

You can eat dinner at 4pm – (sounds just like RMC).

You enjoy hearing about other people's operations.

You have a party at home and the neighbours don't even notice.

Your investment in health insurance is finally beginning to pay off.

Your secrets are safe with your friends because they can't remember them either.

Actually Jan and I will be leaving the College and going to live in our house near Clovelly Beach sometime in late December. We are expecting to be pretty busy with our 6 grandchildren – 3 of whom will be living nearby and the other 3 in Lane Cove. We have a few acres of non-agricultural land with a furnished farm shed in a gorgeous valley near the village of Rylstone. When we need quiet we can go there – no phone, no TV, no internet, no

electricity, no hot water unless you first light a fire to heat it – just beautiful nature, peace and quiet, wombats, kangaroos and screaming sulphur crested cockatoos flying up and down the valley.

When I go to the farm one of the things I really enjoy is the opportunity to read a good book. I am working my way through AN Wilson's magnificent book 'The Victorians'. This is not a story about the Australian state south of us whose capital is Melbourne. It is a biography of 19th century England, England at the time of Queen Victoria, from 1837 to 1901. Wilson is a masterly writer and he brings the energy, inventiveness, passions and sometimes brutal awfulness of Victorian England to life in a way that is a little bit like Charles Dickens but with fewer words. Last weekend I enjoyed reading his chapter on the growth of 19th century newspapers. He damned the motivations of journalists as consisting of sensationalism, moralism, prurience and cynicism; some might say - similar to the newspapers of today.

Wilson is now in his early 60s. For the last 20 years or so he has been a bitter critic of any religious belief. Earlier this year he wrote about his own life – life as an atheist - in an article in *The Spectator* magazine. I want to read you some of what he wrote:

"By nature a doubting Thomas, I should have distrusted the symptoms when I underwent a "conversion experience" 20 years ago. Something was happening which was out of character - the inner glow of complete certainty, the heady sense of being at one with the great tide of fellow non-believers. For my conversion experience was to atheism.

I realised that after a lifetime of churchgoing, the whole house of cards had collapsed for me - the sense of God's presence in life, and the notion that there was any kind of God, let alone a merciful God, in this brutal, nasty world. As for Jesus having been the founder of Christianity, this idea seemed perfectly preposterous.

As a born-again atheist, I now knew exactly what satisfactions were on offer (for the converted). For the first time in my 38 years I was at one with my own generation.

But religion, once the glow of conversion had worn off, was not a matter of argument alone. It involves the whole person. Therefore I was drawn, over and over again, to the disconcerting recognition that so very many of the people I had most admired and loved, either in life or in books, had been believers. Reading Louis Fischer's Life of Mahatma Gandhi, and following it up with Gandhi's own autobiography, The Story of My Experiments With Truth, I found it impossible not to realise that all life, all being, derives from God, as Gandhi gave his life to demonstrate. Of course, there are arguments that might make you doubt the love of God. But a life like Gandhi's, which was focused on God so deeply, reminded me of all the human qualities that have to be denied if you embrace the bleak, muddled creed of a materialist atheist.

Watching a whole cluster of friends, and my own mother, die over quite a short space of time convinced me that purely materialist "explanations" for our mysterious human existence simply won't do - on an intellectual level.

No, the existence of language is one of the many phenomena - of which love and music are the two strongest - which suggest that human beings are very much more than collections of meat. They convince me that we are spiritual beings, and that the religion of the incarnation, asserting that God made humanity in His image, and continually restores humanity in His image, is simply true. As a working blueprint for life, as a template against which to measure experience, it fits.

My departure from the Faith was like a conversion on the road to Damascus. My return was slow, hesitant, doubting. So it will always be; but I know I shall never make the same mistake again."

I think it is fair to say that we live in an age of increasing uncertainty about anything including science and economics. The ongoing disputation about climate science is just one present example of our uncertainty. There is little agreement about what makes the good life or how to live the good life and yet these are some of the most important questions for all of us. It's interesting that when thinking about atheism and belief Wilson has turned to a model or paradigm that comes from the worlds of philosophy and science. This way of thinking is called 'abduction', or 'inference to the best explanation'. That is, we recognise that there are important things on which we cannot have absolute certainty. But we look for the pattern that best fits all the evidence and we go forward on that basis. For me, life, especially life with all its ups and downs, only makes sense in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Otherwise it seems to be a cruel joke played on human kind by the universe at large, a sentiment expressed by the person who wrote on a desk calendar I once owned – 'life is a bitch and then you die.' I recommend looking for the pattern that makes best sense of the available data. That is 'inference to the best explanation'. And on that basis I invite you to consider the possibility that all the future, both the future here and tomorrow and the future beyond the horizons of life, belong to Christ. The alternatives you consider and the choices you make – they are, of course, rightly your responsibility.

I regret that I will not be around to welcome you back for first semester of 2012. But the new Master will be on the job and I ask each member to make it their business to befriend Bruce and Alison Pollard. Please make an effort to get to know and love them and to help them settle in and provide the good leadership that we all know they can provide. Of course I may see some of you if the Student Executive decides to continue with the beach crawl starting from Clovelly as an O Week activity or at the opening of the new building.

Before I sit down I want to offer one more equally heartfelt expression of thanks. My companion, partner, spouse and lover for over 40 years has also been mother of my children, loving grandmother and my constant encourager, critic and supporter. When I resigned from my academic job in Ireland 7 years ago Jan and I went looking for work that

we could share in. We found that work here at RMC. One of our international students once called Jan 'Master wife'. That is what she has been and for that I say thank you Jan.

Goodbye and may God bless you all. Thank you.

Chris Bellenger

11 November 2011