

Monash Graduation Address by Michael Lynch on **May 12, 2014**

Mr Chancellor
Distinguished Guests
Fellow Monash Graduates and Friends,

It is 50 years since I and other foundation-students at Monash graduated in 1964. I had the privilege of being the first graduate. How did it happen? There were 67 to graduate from three Faculties: Arts, Economics and Science. There was a ballot to determine which Faculty would be presented first, that was won by Economics. When a further ballot was held to determine who would be the “first”, my name came out.

Australia in 2014 is almost unrecognizable from the Australia of 1964. It was pre-computer and before the Internet. There was no Google, Facebook or Twitter. The population then was less than one half what it is now.

And, Monash, Victoria’s second university is also very different. Today it is Australia’s largest university with several locations, including overseas campuses. Like all modern universities, Monash utilizes the latest in internet and on-line learning.

Reflections on Monash – the early days

I remember Monash’s first day. There was only the Clayton campus. It was the second Monday in March, Labour Day. We gathered for an Address of Welcome by Vice Chancellor Dr Louis Matheson in which he said that the reputation of this new university will be determined by the quality of its graduates.

There were fewer than 350 of us which meant that most had come from high schools that were larger than Monash itself. The majority were male, vastly different from the situation today. We were mostly about 18 years of age or perhaps a little older. While some appeared confident and sure of themselves, the rest of us knew very little about universities and were more than a tad uncertain. We just went with the flow!

From the beginning I felt Monash had an air of ‘quiet excitement’ – academics and students were aware that, together, they were part of a new enterprise. There was a spirit of friendliness throughout the campus.

It was nicknamed “The Farm” – perhaps because it had been established on a site that was formerly a market garden. We were especially reminded of this on wet days as we avoided puddles (a decision had been made to delay the laying of paths until a pedestrian traffic flow was established!)

Travelling to Monash at Clayton was a challenge for some. Not many students had cars and distances made bikes a poor second choice. Those of us who relied on public transport were happy to be offered a lift home by members of staff. I remember it was in just the second week of term that Professor Rufus Davis, who was teaching me politics, offered me a lift. It was the start of a friendship that endured long after I left Monash.

My lecturers and tutors were mostly male. Ms Bev Downes who taught Statistics was my only female teacher. I felt we had good teachers. They challenged and encouraged us to be self-reliant in the search for knowledge.

By 1963 there was a small group of overseas students at Monash, most of whom, I think, were from Malaysia under the Colombo Plan. They were a welcome presence on campus and the start of a much larger program for students from abroad.

Whilst overseas students may feel that they have gained much from their time here, I have no doubt that Monash has been greatly enriched by their presence.

What have I done with my life?

I have been quite busy over the past 50 years. I have done a number of things. I’m very grateful for the opportunities I have had.

After graduating in Economics and Politics I decided to join the Salesians, a Catholic Congregation of priests and brothers. I was attracted to the Salesians because of the founder Don Bosco and his work for social justice, especially through education and self-help projects for needy youth.

In my first year of teaching there was young fellow who followed the same football team as me, Footscray. The team then was struggling but had potential for a better future. I said to the lad one Monday morning, “Well, what happened on Saturday ?” He look at me with wide eyes and said: “WO”. I asked what does that mean? He responded “Wasted opportunities.”

Wasted opportunities are a chapter in everybody’s life. But no opportunity is really wasted if we use it as a means of doing better.

In 1973 I was offered the challenge of being Headmaster of our school in Adelaide. I was not yet 31. I chatted about it to Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor Kevin Westfold. His comment was he thought it would be good for me to get out of whatever comfort zone I had in Melbourne and work in a new environment. I appreciated his support.

While a good deal of my time over the 50 years has been in secondary schools as teacher and Principal, for the past 18 years I have been in charge of Salesian Missions – the overseas aid and development office.

My work is now largely fundraising and supporting development projects in Don Bosco schools and centres mainly in Asian – Pacific countries. During field visits I often meet Monash graduates. It always serves as an easy introduction.

What Monash has meant to me

I regard it as a great blessing having been at Monash in those early years. Individuals interacted with each other as we looked at and discussed ideas and opinions. The foundation I received at Monash prepared me well for my future work and graduate studies at Harvard. I realize that knowledge of itself does not mean much; rather it is what is done with the knowledge that counts.

Monash was a major influence on my life and development though I have not had much direct association with the university in recent years. However, the friendships have endured.

Conclusion

In closing I would like to reflect briefly on Sir John Monash, the man after whom this University takes its name. Born in 1865, he was an outstanding scholar, military leader, engineer, lawyer and businessman.

It was in the late 1920's, when Monash, as General Manager of the State Electricity Commission, submitted a proposal to the Victorian Government for funds for essential development. Robert Menzies, a young junior Minister in the Government, tells the story that Cabinet turned down the proposal. Within minutes, Monash was knocking on the door of the Cabinet Room.

As Menzies tells it: "The Premier, Sir William McPherson, said bring him in. He was given a seat at the table. He turned to the Premier and said 'I gather Cabinet has rejected my proposal.' Yes, he was told. 'Well', he said, "that can only be because you have failed utterly to understand it. I will now explain it."

Menzies said Monash for the next 30 minutes went through the proposal line by line. Cabinet became convinced of the error of their ways; the decision was reversed !

This story from a different era tells us something of Sir John Monash. His knowledge, courage, vision and commitment to the community is a great example for all of us. It is no surprise that in his time he was regarded as the greatest living Australian. He died in 1931 at the age of 66.

I close where I began – by congratulating you on your achievements. Whether the degree you are taking out today has, or will, fulfill your hopes and desires, is question that only you can answer.

I hope you will see your Monash education is a platform to build on and that you will be true to the University motto (in Italian) "Ancora Imparo" – "I am still learning."

I conclude with the words of Sir John Monash: "Equip yourself for life, not solely for your own benefit, but for the benefit of the whole community".