

For immediate release

Tuesday, 28 July 2026

More Than 150 Students Celebrate the Success of the Interfaith Encounters Program

More than 150 students from six schools across Greater Sydney gathered at St Benedict's Catholic College, Oran Park, on Monday 27 July to celebrate the conclusion of this year's session of the Interfaith Encounters Program, which they have been participating in over the past few months.

Bringing together students from both Catholic and Islamic school communities, the program pairs schools from each faith, giving young people the opportunity to learn about one another's beliefs, traditions and cultures. Along the way, they discover that, beyond their differences, they share many common values and aspirations.

Hosted by St Benedict's Catholic College, the celebration brought together students, teachers and representatives from partner organisations for a day of engaging activities, recognising the friendships, mutual understanding and respect that had grown throughout the program.

Representing the COMPACT program from Multicultural NSW, Daniel Nour spoke about the importance of supporting initiatives that strengthen social cohesion and foster understanding between communities.

"This project offers culturally safe environments where young people can discuss the sacred with members of other communities, crossing the sometimes-restrictive barriers of culture and ethnicity to connect deeply through authentic conversations. In our fraught times, this work is more needful than ever," shared Daniel.

As the program continues to expand, welcoming more schools and extending its reach, a research team from the Western Sydney University has been measuring its impact. Their evidence-based research is helping demonstrate the program's positive outcomes for participants and the wider community, while providing valuable insights that may inspire similar initiatives elsewhere.

"By listening to the stories and experiences from participants in this initiative, we seek to showcase the incredible impact of this program on the students and wider community in enhancing interfaith understanding and countering racism," shared Dr Rifaie Tammas from Western Sydney University.

The Interfaith Encounters Program was founded by Catherine Towiro, Mission Formation Coordinator at Catholic Mission. Drawing on her extensive and diverse lived experience, Catherine recognised the importance of creating a safe and welcoming space where young

people could openly explore their own faith while engaging in meaningful conversations with peers from different religious backgrounds. By building bridges of friendship, respect and understanding, she envisioned the program as a practical response to prejudice, racism and misunderstanding.

Today, the program is delivered by Catholic Mission in partnership with Together for Humanity, with the support from the Multicultural NSW's COMPACT program.

The celebration also marked a significant milestone for the program, as students shared a heartfelt message of thanks to Catherine Towiro, recognising her vision, leadership and dedication in establishing and growing the Interfaith Encounters Program over the past five years. As Catherine now hands the program over to the next generation of leaders, the strong foundations she has built will ensure its mission of fostering dialogue, friendship and understanding continues to flourish.

ENDS

On behalf of Catholic Mission and our partners:



Multicultural NSW



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About Catholic Mission

Catholic Mission is the Australian agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies – the Catholic Church's global organisation dedicated to continuing Jesus Christ's mission in the world: that all may have life to the full. Catholic Mission contributes funding and project support to critical church-run initiatives in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and South America. These include spiritual formation, pastoral care, education, health, sanitation, and agricultural programs. Here in Australia, we form people to go out and be missionary in their professional and personal lives; to pray, advocate and act for those on the margins. Catholic Mission has offices in 27 Australian dioceses.