

Mr Ronchetti, distinguished guests, staff, parents and students. It is a great privilege and a great honour to stand before you as dux today.

Six years ago, it was as a scrawny but eager Year 7 that I first stepped out onto the faded green astroturf of the B-Block yard. My blazer was a couple of sizes too big, and frankly, I'm pretty sure I'd never called someone 'Sir' in my entire life. What's more, I'd never seen a game of handball played with such passion and intensity. But perhaps above all, I knew no one, and yet, was welcomed straight away.

Well, I'm here today, a newcomer no more, and proud to count myself as one of this community that numbers over a thousand. When I look around at this familiar room and the faces in it, I am filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and humility. Success in the HSC is a product of the encouragement, support and inspiration offered by so many people in a Year 12 student's life – be it parents, peers or staff. I am acutely aware of this fact, and so would like to begin my address today by thanking my family.

To my Mum, Dad, and amazing sisters, thank you so much. Everything I am is because of you. You have never wanted anything more than for me to be happy and have been an unwavering source of love, tolerance and wisdom throughout my life. You have supported all of my academic endeavours, but more importantly, have shown me that it is in my relationships with you and others in my life that true happiness and fulfilment lies.

I would also like to thank all the teachers I've had throughout my time at Pius. Whilst I cannot mention all of you by name, know that you have each played a significant role in my schooling journey.

Firstly, to Mr Hartnett, not only for his infectious enthusiasm for Ancient History but for his constant care for our wellbeing and genuine interest in our lives beyond the classroom.

Similarly, to Mr Rodgers, whose extensive knowledge of the History Extension course, talent as an educator, and continued support over years of elective and HSC history fuelled and energised my lifelong passion for his subject.

Also, to Mr Listo, for showing our class the joy that can always be found in literature, pushing us to be the best we can be, and for three years of memorable English lessons within the four walls of B6.

To Miss Colefax – thank you for your incredible dedication and commitment to our class. Your high standards, vast experience and abiding concern for our success and happiness as young men beyond school, left a lasting imprint on all of us in your Legal Studies class.

I'd also like to thank Mr Balboa, firstly for his wisdom and mentorship over years of Debating and the Edmund Rice Society, but also for his skill and passion as an SOR teacher – the genuine effort you put into marking my seemingly endless stream of practice essays is something I am immensely grateful for.

And to Mr Yue, for his constant support and abiding faith in me and my year group from the moment he first blew his whistle in the Year 7 yard all those years ago.

Of course, thank you also to Ms Janes, Ms Dempsey and Mr Damo, for working hard to keep us motivated, organised and committed throughout COVID isolation in Year 11 and our HSC year. And it would be remiss of me to not mention Mr Couani, whose example of leadership was a constant guiding light for all of us throughout my six years at Pius.

Thank you also to the College Library staff, particularly Ms Mak. From Year 10 to Year 12 I arrived early every morning to study in a seminar room in the library, and by Year 12 spent all my study periods in this same room. Ms Mak made an effort every morning to ensure she arrived on time to open the room for me – rain, hail or shine – and offered regular words of cheerful encouragement and motivation over many cold 7AM mornings. I will always be grateful for the support the library staff offered me throughout my time at Pius.

Finally, thank you also to my year group, the Class of 2022, and particularly to my closest mates. You buoyed me in times of difficulty and made my high school experience one that I thoroughly enjoyed and will remember with great fondness. Over the years, your antics were both hilarious and wild, yet also inspiring and incredibly supportive. You are a group of remarkable young men who I was proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with.

My time at Pius gave me so much – both personally and academically. However, if I had to distil the single message that has been ingrained in me most by my many years at this school, it is that for us to whom much has been given, equally, much is demanded. I'm very mindful that at this school we are privileged, and thus have a duty to live up to the benefits and advantages we enjoy here. This is an ideal that I certainly hope to live up to in my studies and future career. Giving back, finding a way to leave this world better than we found it, whenever and wherever that call of duty sounds in our lives, our careers, our families and our friendship groups – this is the ultimate challenge laid down for us all when we leave.

But this notion can be applied to all of you, right now, in lots of different ways, because it also means making the most of every experience and every opportunity Pius has to offer. I believe that in understanding this lies the key not only to “success”, in the form of a fide, ATAR, internship or apprenticeship, but to enjoying your time at 35 Anderson Street.

Be courageous and throw yourself into music, sport, debating and all the other extracurricular activities available to you. Join the Edmund Rice Society, sign up for the school play, register for Duke of Ed and go on the hikes. And it doesn't have to be you yourself doing these things all the time – it also means supporting other guys when they're getting involved. Go to your mates' debates, drive down to Oxford Falls to watch the 1st XI game, watch your friends playing at the Twilight concert, stand in line on Market Day to buy something, and belt out a few strains of the school song, Ancient Words or Sweet Caroline. And don't wait till Year 11 or 12 to do these things. Whether you're in Year 7 or Year 10, think about what you're going to do right now when you walk out of this hall.

Importantly, living up to these opportunities we've been given also means being intentional in your academic endeavours. It involves choosing to start making a consistent effort, wherever you are now, to work hard and push yourself. You must be proactive in your preparation for exams and assignments. Don't be afraid to be brave, to stick your head above the parapet, to seek out further clarification, to put your hand up in class or to go early to study in the library. Like extracurricular involvement, the earlier you recognise this, the earlier you'll benefit. Academic success is about building up an ethic of hard work and commitment over long periods of time – starting from your first exam blocks in Year 7 and Year 8. Live your life deliberately. Live it with purpose.

It is because of this that I would encourage every student to set specific and concrete goals. Finding a dream will be what drives you to wake up early and to find enjoyment in individual moments throughout your HSC year. At its core, the HSC is about your mindset and consistency. Having a 'why' is integral to both these things.

In the same vein, I cannot overstate the importance of choosing subjects that you love and are passionate about. There were many times throughout my HSC when I was encouraged to consider other factors besides this when making subject decisions, but if anything, my presence here today affirms that doing subjects you love, rather than those that traditionally 'scale well', will not only motivate you to work harder, but will make your HSC so much more enjoyable.

It's also important to use the peer network around you. Reach out to your mates and to boys in the years above. Form group chats for your classes and share resources. Not only will this be of great academic benefit, but there's something strangely comforting about knowing you're not alone. You're all on this journey together, and there are other people who understand how you're feeling.

There will be times throughout your schooling journey when you're stressed, frustrated and even disappointed. In these moments it's important to realise that it too will pass – the HSC is only one tiny part of our rich and fulfilling lives. What's more, at this school there will always be people that care about you and want the best for your future. You might not realise it every day, but we are all part of a very remarkable community – students, teachers, parents, alumni. St Pius is something special. It carries a little piece of each of us with it forever, and in turn, we take it with us through our lives.

Congratulations to all the awards recipients today, you've worked hard and deserve your accolades. To all the award winners, but particularly to anyone not receiving an award today, I would urge you to remember that you all have the capacity to succeed in your endeavours, whether they are academic or otherwise. Be courageous. Find your dream, find subjects you're passionate about and seize the opportunities for academic success and personal growth that Pius offers.

To use the words of the British poet, William Ernest Henley:

It matters not how strait the gate,

Nor how charged with punishments the scroll,

*You are the masters of your fate,
You are the captains of your soul.*