Among the University’s traditional strengths are its activities in health, education and the arts, Sir James believes, while its focus on meeting current social challenges is also highly relevant, including its contributions to “informed debate”.

“ACU National’s activities in health care are linked to the early days of Christianity,” said Sir James, pictured above. “During a smallpox epidemic in the third century, the early Christians were notable for the way in which they nursed the victims back to health.”

Their selflessness and generosity, which generated many conversions, was a driving force that increased “the Jesus movement” from a very small group into a religion extending throughout most of the population of the known Western world.

“It’s important to recognise that the drivers of that care were women. Moreover, the early Christians were noted for their strong opposition to female infanticide, which was rife at the time.”

More recently, the first hospitals in the world were created by the Catholic Knights of St John, now known as the Order of Malta, in about 1098, and that tradition was carried on throughout the medieval period by Catholic Monastic orders.

“This link with health care and care of the sick is very important for Catholic universities, and should be remembered. Care of the dying – palliative care – remains enormously important.”

A second great legacy of Catholicism is the cultural, and especially Catholic artistic achievement during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, made more accessible with education.

“You don’t have to be Catholic to enjoy these cultural experiences. You can’t begin to understand the fantastic contribution of the Florentine and Venetian schools, not to mention those of other parts of Europe, and indeed the beautiful music traditions, such as the Gregorian chant, and other rituals of worship, without understanding the Catholic tradition.”

In a multicultural Australia, Sir James is particularly appreciative of ACU National’s current initiatives in promoting interfaith dialogue. (See pages 14 to 17.)

“When people feel their own cultural background is undervalued, if not scorned, it creates resentment which can sometimes lead into militant and dangerous behaviour, and even terrorism.

“We must have the opportunity for a real dialogue between faiths. The Australian Multicultural Foundation has urged for years that immigrants have to have an overriding commitment to Australia, beneath which they must be free to maintain their cultural traditions and faith, and at the same time respect the rights of others to maintain theirs.

“That’s why I think a Catholic university has a special role to foster open discussions, while at the same time being able to draw on a repository of longstanding Catholic faith and tradition. This is not a dialogue which avoids hard questions, but it is always full of respect and honesty.”

The University’s role in researching history is also important, Sir James believes.

“Informed debate requires prior research and study that shows up what history and experience have demonstrated. It is from there that we move on.”