In thinking about the Catholic character of Australian Catholic University, it makes sense to start at the beginning. We represent, in a very meaningful sense, the senior branch of the university evolutionary tree.

Great secular universities such as Melbourne and Sydney trace their colonial origins to the 1850s, and before that to the European universities of the Enlightenment. But we represent the unbroken tradition of Catholic universities going back more than 900 years.

It is vital to understand that the notion of a “Catholic university” is a compound one. We are not sometimes Catholic and sometimes a university, trading off one characteristic against the other according to which course seems most convenient.

Rather, we are an absolutely distinctive type of university that always and everywhere – academically, culturally and communally – brings to the process of teaching and research the fruits of nine centuries of intellectualism in the Catholic tradition.

Similarly, while Australian Catholic University is a public university, this in no way qualifies its character or commitment as a Catholic university.

In the first place, we need these days to be much more sceptical about the distinction between “public” and “private” universities in Australia. The great public universities now derive a massive proportion of their funds from private sources, while our two private universities are heavily reliant on government funding. Increasingly, this is a distinction without difference.

In any event, there is nothing about a public university that prevents it from pursuing a mission grounded in faith. Mercifully, Australia is not a country where a culture of institutional agnosticism is a condition of educational funding, and in a higher education policy framework dedicated to diversity, a university with a profoundly Catholic intellectual orientation is a bonus and an enrichment.

There is, after all, no shortage of Australian universities whose missions are deeply secular and largely untouched by considerations of Christian intellectualism. A handful of exceptions can only enliven our nation’s academic and educational culture.

Of course, this does not mean that Australian Catholic University welcomes only those staff or students who are Catholics. Some members of our diverse community who most particularly value the University’s ethos and intellectual tradition are not Catholics, and much of the richness of the University lies in this relationship and dialogue. “Catholic”, in this very real sense, does mean universal.

At the same time, though, the identity and Mission of the University are not to be diluted simply with a view to attracting those who otherwise would find them unsympathetic. Australian Catholic University is open to people of all faiths and perspectives and is inclusive in character and culture, but that does not mean that it is prepared to qualify or downplay its unique character to conform to any more convenient social norm.

This commitment applies not only to more popular aspects of Catholic intellectualism, such as social justice, but also to harder issues concerning the value of life, freedom of the individual and public ethics. Always respectful of the views of others, always courteous in our positions, we must express our truths with intellect, insight and force.

Again, it all comes down to the composite character of a Catholic university. Such an institution cannot pick which of its two aspects it will emphasise. It must be supremely, simultaneously, symbiotically brilliant at each.

With this in mind, this issue of *The Unique* explores the roots of our identity and Mission, and discusses the contemporary relevance of early Christianity. We see how great moral truths can be brought to bear on ethical health care challenges of our times, and how our University is helping build capacity in developing nations.

An intriguing feature on shared concepts in Christian and Indigenous Australian spirituality leads into a series of articles demonstrating our commitment to interfaith dialogue, and then to some of our research and teaching in the important field of environmental sustainability.

We also cover the latest developments in religious education, and touch on some of the ways our University gives life to the rich, cultural traditions we enjoy.

Finally, we look at some of the ways our University influences quality of life and social justice in Australia.

At Australian Catholic University, our quest is to demonstrate that the intellectual Catholicity of a Catholic university is not merely Catholic, but truly universal in its attraction, seeking truth, and adding value, for everyone.

**Professor Greg Craven**

Vice-Chancellor