

# FAITH IN ACTION: WHEN BELIEF ISN'T ENOUGH

*with Dr Debra Sayce*



VOCATIONS OFFICE  
ARCHDIOCESE of PERTH

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Prepared by:  
Perth Vocations Office  
Catholic Archdiocese of Perth

*for Vocations Conversations  
at Mater Dei College*



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# INTRODUCTION

## *Vocations Conversations with Dr Debra Sayce*



### ***Debra's story is a powerful reminder that faith is more than belief—it's action***

For nearly 40 years, Dr. Debra Sayce has devoted her life to shaping young minds and hearts, fostering growth in learning, faith, and community impact.

Starting her career as a physical and health education teacher, she rose to principalship, led WA's Catholic Education system as Executive Director, and now serves as the inaugural Head of Mission Enhancement and Outreach for the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth.

Born in India as the youngest of six and raised in Perth within a Catholic home, Debra's childhood, schooling and professional pathway as an educator has been inspired by family, teachers, and many mentors who all embodied joy and faith in their vocation – their calling.

In an era when many, both young and old, are questioning and exploring spirituality, **Debra's story is a powerful reminder that faith is more than belief—it's action.** Drawing on her experiences as an educator, parish leader, and mentor, she highlights how **modelling a vocation through service, connection, and integrity can transform individuals and communities alike.**



## WHERE IT ALL BEGAN: MUM, THE ROOT OF MY FAITH

One of Debra's earliest memories is walking to Sunday evening Mass with her mum. "Mum didn't drive, so we'd walk together to the church nearby," she recalls.

Sitting in the back pew, young Debra was both curious and a little scared of the parish priest—a tall Irishman with a booming voice. "As a kid, I found him intimidating," she admits, laughing now at the memory.

Debra's family moved from India to Australia when she was just five years old. Her father, an officer in the Indian Air Force, and her mum worked hard to build a new life for their six children. **"It wasn't easy," she says, "but my parents' faith and strength kept us going."**

At home, faith was quiet but always present. "Mum was deeply devoted," Dr. Sayce shares.

"She prayed the rosary, joined novenas, and stayed close to the parish. It wasn't just about prayer; it was about being part of a community."

One of her favourite memories is her First Holy Communion. Her mum made her a beautiful white lace dress and matching mantle, making the day unforgettable.

**"It wasn't just about the sacrament," she says. "It was about feeling welcomed and loved by the parish community."**

That sense of belonging left a lasting impression on her, showing her the power of faith and connection during life's most important moments.

**"It wasn't just about prayer; it was about being part of a community ..."**



“When you belong to something, you want to contribute to it ...”

Her mother set the example, dedicating herself to the (East Victoria Park) parish—teaching classes, helping with the altar society, and visiting people in need.

## TRUE BELONGING IS NEVER PASSIVE

The Sayce household thrived on togetherness. With both parents working shifts, older siblings often cared for the younger ones. “We didn’t have much,” Debra recalls, “but we had each other. My siblings joke that I was the spoiled youngest, but I think I was just well-loved!”

**“Belonging is one of the most deeply valued human needs,”**

Debra explains. Their parish community was like an extended family. Friendships made through the church gave them support—spiritually and practically. “The Catholics in our area really stuck together,” she says. **“That’s how we found our place and grew stronger in faith.”**

For Debra belonging wasn’t just about showing up; it was about being part of something bigger.

**“When you belong to something, you want to contribute to it,” Debra reflects.**

As an adult, she followed in her mother’s footsteps. “I started teaching children’s liturgy when my daughter was four and didn’t stop until she turned 18,” she says. Over the years, she joined the parish council, wrote bulletins, and supported the elderly. **Each act of service made her feel more connected to her vocation – her calling.**

For young people, finding belonging can start with small steps—such as getting involved in what your schools offer – clubs, retreats, volunteering – Catholic schools offer a treasure trove of opportunities to get involved.

“It’s not just about going to Mass,” Debra explains. “It’s about forming relationships and finding a place where you’re valued.”

# THE PATHWAY TO BECOMING AN EDUCATOR

Debra's journey as an educator started long before she ever stepped into a classroom. It began with her family, her parish, and the sense of belonging that shaped her as a child.

She recalled that school in the 1970s was another place where she found a sense of belonging. "Teachers weren't just there to teach," she remembers. "They really knew you."

This personal connection made a lasting impact. One math teacher, for example, took the time to document every solution in a state textbook just to help his students. "His dedication inspired me," Debra shares.

Initially, Debra didn't envision herself in Catholic education. **Her early education career as a Physical Education teacher began in independent schools, where she discovered the power of faith-based values.**

**At one school, the motto "Serve God, Serve One Another" and the principal's servant leadership style left a lasting impression.**

Debra recalls an instance when the principal stepped in to umpire a hockey game in the pouring rain, exemplifying the ethos of "seeing a need and doing something about it."

Experiences like these helped Debra realise the profound connection between education and her vocation—a calling to nurture, guide, and serve.

As a young teacher, the early years were challenging but deeply rewarding. **Teaching multiple subjects and managing a classroom wasn't easy, but seeing her students grow from uncertain teens to confident young adults reaffirmed her calling.**

"High school is a time to grow, make mistakes, and figure out who you are," she says.

"Education isn't just about lessons in a classroom. It's also about helping young people connect with God, their community, and themselves." Organising retreats became one of her favorite ways to do this. "Those moments of openness and vulnerability with students were such a privilege," she reflects.





## WHEN LIFE GETS TOUGH AND BELIEVING FEELS HARD

**Have you ever felt like life is too overwhelming and just believing isn't enough?** Dr. Debra Sayce understands. She's spent years helping Catholic communities, especially young people, figure out what God is calling them to do in a busy, noisy world.

Debra believes being “Christ-centered and child-focused” means meeting every person where they are—especially when life gets tough.

“What does Jesus want us to do?” she asks. For her, the answer is simple: serve others, care for those in need, and stay connected to what really matters.

### **FAITH ISN'T ALWAYS EASY**

Life can feel chaotic, with distractions everywhere—school, social media, family stuff, and endless notifications. Finding quiet moments to connect with God or even yourself can seem impossible.

A study showed that many young Australians call themselves “spiritual seekers.” **Even if you don't always go to church, Debra believes you can still feel close to God.** “Most people crave calm and belonging,” she says. But in a world full of noise, even silence can feel scary.

That's why Debra loves retreats. She's seen how stepping away from the noise—whether it's sitting quietly in nature or sharing stories with friends—can help young people feel peace and connection. “

There's no one-size-fits-all for faith,” she explains. “For some, it's a quiet chapel. For others, it's an exciting youth rally. What matters is finding what works for you.”

### **FAITH NEEDS ACTION**

**“Believing isn't enough,” Debra says. “Faith has to be lived.”** She explains that being Catholic isn't just about saying prayers or going to Mass.



It's about how you treat people, help others, and make the world better. When you go to Mass or receive a sacrament like Confirmation, it's not just a ritual—it's a reminder to act.

"Belief requires action," Debra says. **"It's about loving and serving the world like Jesus did."**

**When you're unsure about faith, Debra has a simple tip: reconnect with creation. "Go to the beach, walk in a forest, or just look at a flower," she says. "It's hard not to see God's work in the beauty around us."**

She also encourages stepping out of your comfort zone. "Don't stay stuck in your room thinking, 'This is it.' Go out, meet people, and explore. You'll find there's so much more to life and faith."

### **YOU'VE GOTTA HAVE FAITH**

Debra knows life isn't always smooth. When she faces tough times, she leans on her faith.

"I ask, 'What is God's will for me?' Sometimes, I just need to rest and pray, and I come back stronger."

For her, faith is about creating moments to experience God—through nature, scripture, or helping others. It's not about being perfect or checking off boxes.

**"Faith is about living what you believe," she says.**

"When you do, it can transform your life, your calling, and the world around you."

**"When you're unsure about faith, Debra has a simple tip: Reconnect with creation".**





## YOUR CALLING: WHO YOU ARE

**Have you ever wondered what your purpose is? Debra believes your calling is simple: to be the best version of yourself.** “Your calling is to be respectful, compassionate, and make the world better,” she says. This isn’t just about what you do—it’s about who you are in every part of your life: at school, with friends, and at home.

**Debra’s advice? Be yourself. “Don’t wear masks or try to be someone else,” she says. “Authenticity is the key to happiness and fulfillment.”**

Figuring out how to embrace your calling—your vocation—with your careers can feel overwhelming, especially during high school. But Debra says this is the perfect time to explore. “How will you know what you want to be in five years if you don’t try new things?” she asks.

Whether it’s joining clubs, trying new subjects, or getting involved in school events, every experience teaches you something about what you like (and don’t like). Debra suggests keeping your options open. “The more general your studies and experiences, the better chance you have to discover what you love.”

She shares an example from her own family. Her daughter started with a general arts degree and discovered a love for politics and law because of an inspiring teacher.

**“Sometimes, finding your passion takes time and a few twists and turns,” Debra says.**

Hobbies matter too! What you do outside of school can also reveal a lot about your calling. “Your hobbies and interests are important,” Debra explains.

Whether it’s gaming, sports, art, or something else, these passions can shape your future career.”

“Sometimes, you’ll need to take small steps to get there, but if you follow what you love, you’ll stay motivated,” she adds.

And if you’re still unsure, that’s okay! “It doesn’t all have to happen by 18,” Debra reassures. **“Life is a long journey, so be patient. Keep trying, work hard, and ask your teachers for guidance.”**

## YOUR ROLE IN THE CHURCH

As an educator and today – as the Head of Mission Enhancement and Outreach – at the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth, Debra continues to create space and opportunities for young people in the Church.

**She believes young people aren't just the future of the Church—they're the present. "Your energy, curiosity, and passion for social justice bring life to our communities," she says.**

She's seen this firsthand at Catholic youth festivals (such as the Christ the King Festival run by Catholic Youth Ministry) and through programs like volunteering at the Shopfront, one of the Archdiocese's outreach agencies.

Whether it's helping those in need, joining parish activities, or attending youth events, there are so many ways to be involved.

"Stay open to opportunities to put your faith into action, into service for others," Debra advises.

**"If you close off faith in your life, how will you know what's possible?"**

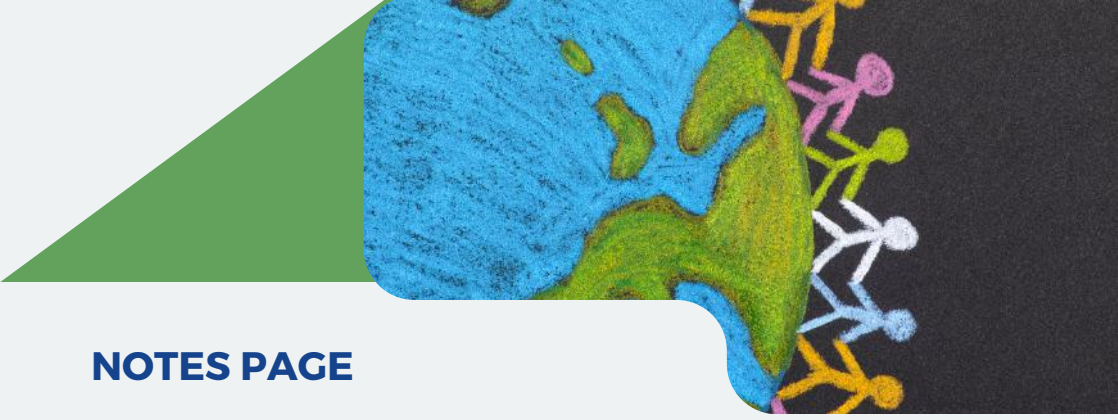
Her advice is simple: "Never give up. Try different things. Fall in love with something."

Whether it's through your faith, friendships, or future career, you have the power to build a meaningful and fulfilling life.

**And remember: your life and your calling is a journey, but it's one worth embracing fully.**

... Your life and  
your calling is a  
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# ABOUT THE PERTH VOCATIONS OFFICE

The Perth Vocations Office is responsible for the promotion and support of vocations to the ordained ministry and religious life, and to guide and assist each person to act on their calling from God to love, care and serve others in their own way.

We do this by nurturing, growing and supporting God's call to love and care for each other within the Archdiocese of Perth and the wider WA community.

## Our Mission

Our mission is to nurture a culture of vocation within families and communities in the Archdiocese of Perth.

In the next five years we aim to build an awareness of vocation as a call to holiness from God.

In particular we aim to encourage people to explore God's unique call to them in the ordained ministry, religious life, single life, married life or in any other life endeavour.

## Our Work

### 01.

To promote vocations within the Archdiocese of Perth in collaboration with Parishes, Catholic Schools, Universities, Catholic agencies, and various multicultural communities.

### 02.

To support and sustain those discerning vocations, especially for the ordained ministry journey.

### 03.

To manage the administration, process, assessment, interview and recommendation for those wishing to journey into ordained ministry.




# VOCATIONS CONVERSATIONS

*with Dr Debra Sayce*

## Get in touch with the Perth Vocations Office

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 [perthvocations.org.au](http://perthvocations.org.au)



## For volunteering opportunities with the Archdiocesan Agencies:

 Catholic Youth Ministry:  
[cym.com.au](http://cym.com.au)

 Personal Advocacy Service:  
[paswa.org.au](http://paswa.org.au)

 Other agencies, please email:  
[agencysupport@perthcatholic.org.au](mailto:agencysupport@perthcatholic.org.au)



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