



Catholic Education Commissioning Mass Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
Tuesday 31 January, 2017

As many of you would know the man whose feast day we celebrate today, Saint John Bosco, is the founder of the religious congregation to which I have belonged for the last 40 years. The Salesians of Don Bosco, although not as well known in Australia as other religious orders, are one of the largest religious families in the Church with over 30,000 priests, brothers and sisters, and a vast army of collaborators, scattered throughout the world.

It is particularly appropriate that we should be celebrating this Commissioning Mass on the feast of Don Bosco, because his whole life was dedicated to the care of young people, and especially those who were poor, disadvantaged or pushed to the margins. And in particular, Don Bosco was committed to providing the young with the best education possible. This was recognised when, 19 years ago today, Saint John Paul II formally proclaimed St John Bosco as the Father and Teacher of Young People. As we look for inspiration to the great figures in our Catholic tradition to keep us grounded in our work for the young, Don Bosco is certainly one of those people who have something valuable to teach us.

In his letter of proclamation, John Paul highlighted the complex political and social environment in which Don Bosco had to operate. It was a time of rapid cultural change, revolutionary ferment, mass migration from the rural areas to the growing cities, and a widespread disdain for the Catholic Church. Not so different, we might say, from the situation many of our young people face today. People in general and young people in particular were, and indeed often are also today, insecure, confused and in many ways cast adrift from the structures and values which had previously provided them with a solid foundation upon which to build their lives.

For young people in particular this was especially problematic. Where could they find their footing in such a fluid situation? What could they rely on, and fall back on, as they sought to make sense of their lives? In a world where everything was up for grabs, where could they find their sense of security? It was into this context that Don Bosco stepped, bringing his own experience. His father had died when he was just three years old, his mother had to deal with an older son who was jealous of young John's intellectual gifts, and they lived in a poor rural village many kilometers from the nearest city, Turin. A single mother, a dysfunctional family situation, a lack of financial stability and very poor educational opportunities: you might think that young John had everything stacked against him.

However he was gifted with a good brain, a strong body, a passionate nature and, thanks to his mother, a deep Catholic faith. He carried all these gifts with him into adulthood and, once he had



achieved his goal of becoming a Catholic priest, put them to good use as he dedicated his life to young people.

In reflecting on Don Bosco this afternoon, I want to offer two ideas which I hope might become really important aspects of your own work in Catholic education here in our Archdiocese in 2017.

The first relates to the name Don Bosco gave to his collaborators and followers. Followers of Saint Francis of Assisi are called Franciscans, followers of Saint Dominic are called Dominicans, followers of Saint Norbert are called Norbertines – but followers of Don Bosco are not called Bosconians: they are called Salesians. This is because Don Bosco wanted them to model themselves after Saint Francis de Sales. And why? Because more than anything else, Francis de Sales, who lived in the sixteenth century, was known for his gentleness and loving kindness and Don Bosco was convinced that the best way to work with and care for the young was to treat them in exactly this way – gently and with kindness.

My experience in our schools in this Archdiocese is that this approach is already deeply established – I certainly hope so. But while it is easy enough to deal with young people this way when they are in good form and we are in good form, it is a bit more of a challenge when their behavior is confronting or disappointing or when we ourselves are finding life difficult. As we start a new school year, therefore, I want to encourage you all to deepen your conviction of, and commitment to, the importance and value of treating each of your students, and indeed each other as well, with gentle loving kindness. As one of our Salesians used to say to me, it is better to be a loving shepherd than a shoving leopard! Let us try hard to avoid becoming shoving leopards in 2017.

The second point is a simple one but it is, I believe, the particular genius of Don Bosco that he recognised it to be at the heart of the Gospel. He used to say that it is not enough to love young people: they have to know that you love them. You sometimes hear people say that it was only when they became adults that they realised how much their parents had loved them and done so much for them. It is good to be able to look back, when you are thirty or forty, and recognise that your parents loved you: how much better would it be if you had realised it when you were ten, or fifteen or eighteen. For Don Bosco, the key to an effective education, which might also be the key to effective parenting, is to know each young person so well that you develop an instinct about what you need to say or do to help each young person, individually, feel loved, respected, valued and honoured. This is the way Jesus loved, as a careful reading of the gospel will quickly reveal, and it is Don Bosco's gift to the Church that he clarified, by his life, what this means in relation to young people.

It is this insight, this gift, which I want to offer to you this evening as my gift to you at the start of the new school year: it is not enough that you love your students - they have to know that you love them. It is only as you come to know the young people in your care this year that you will know what this will mean for you, and ask of you, as you accompany them on this next stage of their journey.

May the prayers of Saint John Bosco accompany us all, as we set out on the adventure of another year in the service of the young.