



Commissioning of Catholic School Staff

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Friday 1 February, 2019
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

When I meet groups of young people, whether in schools or in other places, they often ask me why I wanted to be a bishop. It is a good question and one which is easily answered: I didn't want to be a bishop. In fact it had never crossed my mind that such a thing could happen until I received a phone call in 2007 from the Apostolic Nuncio in Canberra, informing me that Pope Benedict had appointed me as an Auxiliary Bishop in Melbourne. I go on to explain to my young questioners though that I did want to be a priest and that, as far as I can remember, it first came to me as a serious thought when I was in grade six, although my sister-in-law, with whom I went through primary school, maintains that everyone in my class had already worked this out when I was in grade one. My sister-in-law is prone to exaggeration!

As I explain to those who ask me I was an altar server in my local parish and was very friendly with the local assistant priest. I couldn't have expressed it so clearly then, but looking back now I realise that I probably idolised him to some extent and wanted to be like him when I grew up. This was of course just the beginning of something that had to grow, develop and mature, and be tested, before definite decisions could be made. Still I look back to that time, and that particular priest, as a key influence in terms of the direction my life would take.

Priests are not the only ones who are influential in the lives of young people. So of course and often even more so, especially today, are teachers. The chance that you, as people who work in Catholic schools, will have a significant and even determining influence on the future of the young people with whom and for whom you work is very real. Young people spend a lot of time at school: often a few years in pre-primary, normally six years in Primary and for many a further six years in Secondary. During those many years it is you who are entrusted not just with their intellectual formation, but with their physical well-being and development, their social and emotional growth and, in our Catholic schools, their spiritual and religious formation as well. The decision to entrust these children and young people to you is made first and foremost by their parents and for that reason you know that you share with the parents, and are cooperators with the parents, in the task of forming and shaping the young minds, hearts and bodies of their children. This is a daunting responsibility, but also of course an enormous privilege. It is one that I would hope people do not take on without careful thought, and one which explains why we so often speak of teaching, especially though not only in our Catholic context, not only as a noble profession but as a true vocation.

I don't think we should underestimate the extent of the influence we have on the young people in our schools, nor the significance of committing our time and energy to them. Jesus certainly didn't. He spoke of children as the ones to whom God reveals the mystery of his kingdom. He



praised them as having an openness to faith which we as adults should be trying to develop in our own lives. He welcomed them and was glad to have them around him, scolding those who would stop the children from coming to him. And he warned that it would be better for someone to have a millstone tied around his or her neck and be thrown into the sea than to become a source of scandal for a child or cause a child to lose faith in God.

What all this means, of course, is that anyone who works in a Catholic school must be prepared to put the well-being of the children and young people in the school first. Our schools exist for our young people. We are there for our young people. We have an obligation to them to consider and then do what is best for them, rather than to make our own comfort or our own wishes our first consideration.

I presume that every person working in any school, Catholic, government or independent, would subscribe to this ideal. And I would be confident that those of you here today who are parents, would much prefer to entrust your own children to these kinds of people rather than to those whose commitment was more focused on themselves than on their young charges. But I would also suggest from my own experience, not as a parent certainly but as a teacher, that there is and always will be a gap between this wonderful ideal and the reality we face within our schools, and also within ourselves. I do not say this in any critical or condemnatory way. I simply recognise it as the reality, if you like, of our human condition.

This is where our Catholic identity becomes so important, not just for the young people but also for ourselves. A truly Catholic school will be concerned to provide a nurturing, supportive, faith-filled environment both for our students and also for our school leadership teams, and our teaching and support staff, because this will enrich your lives and in turn better equip you to enrich the lives of our young people. In the gospels Jesus proclaims himself to be, for everyone, the Way, and the Truth and the Life. Because by definition a Catholic school community takes Jesus at his word, and because we are truly committed to our young people, we will want to grow in our understanding of this faith which is the essential foundation of every Catholic school. To do any less would be to deprive our young people of an encounter with the one whom the school exists to proclaim as **the** way to follow, **the** truth to which we can confidently commit ourselves, and **the** life, the way of life, which will enable us to be the people God created us to be.

The high ideals of Christianity, as they are taught and lived in our Catholic tradition, certainly demand a great deal from us. The recognition of our mutual responsibility for each other, which is such a characteristic of our Catholic world view, does not really leave much room for those who want to put themselves rather than the young people first. And the words of Jesus - *do not stop the little ones from coming to me* - provide a context for understanding why the religious and Catholic identity of our schools is so vital.

As we set out together on the journey of a new school year may the words of Jesus, lived out in his life, be lived out in our lives and in our schools: *I did not come to be served, but to serve.*