



Catholic Education Mass

HOMILY

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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One of the many phrases which stays in my mind from the writings and addresses of Saint John Paul II, is the one which speaks about what the Pope called *"the lived theology of the saints"*. Writing at the beginning of the new millennium eighteen years ago the Pope, commenting on the depths of the mystery of Christ, spoke about the importance of our theological tradition but also what he called the great heritage of the witness of our saints. They offer us, he said, *"precious insights which enable us to understand more easily the intuition of faith, thanks to the special enlightenment which some of them have received from the Holy Spirit"*.

All of us I am sure would have our favourite saints, as would many of the children and young people we serve. These saints all have something to offer us both in their teachings and, more importantly, in their way of life which was a reflection of what they taught. They are saints, we might say, because they practiced what they preached. As we gather this afternoon for this annual Mass we do so on the eve of the Feast of one of these great saints of our Church, Saint John Bosco.

As educators and support staff in our Catholic Education System here in the archdiocese, it is providential that we start a new school year celebrating this saint, who is regarded as one of the great educators in our Catholic tradition. Tonight I want to share with you just one or two of the precious insights which his life and work might offer us. They are insights into what a truly Christian educator looks like and, even more fundamentally, what a true Christian looks like. Catholic education needs Christian and Catholic educators if it is to be true to itself. Indeed it is difficult to make sense of a decision a person makes to work in an explicitly Catholic environment if that person is fundamentally at odds with the Christian way of life, and with the Catholic World View which underpins not just the religion classes or the school liturgies but everything which happens in a Catholic school community.

One of the things remembered about Saint John Bosco is his unshakeable conviction that to be involved in the care of the young means to put the young person at the heart of all that you say and do. Two of his sayings which his followers cherish help us to understand this. On one occasion, speaking directly to the young people he was caring for he said, *"For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life."* Another, directed this time to his Salesians, the men and women who followed in his footsteps, expressed the same idea in a slightly different way: *"I promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor young people."* These of course are nice-sounding words but if we reflect on them we will see that they are a call to level of commitment which is in fact heroic. They are also a challenge to all of us who are caught up in the delicate, demanding and privileged task of educating the young



people entrusted to us by their parents. How much are we prepared to do? How much are we prepared to give? What will it mean for me, in my particular situation, to put the young people always at the centre of my professional life, which is also my Christian vocation? How much of myself am I prepared to sacrifice in order to put the well-being of the young people first?

Men and women, and also young people and even children, are recognized by the Church as saints because they follow Jesus in a consistent, generous and self-sacrificing way, not only when it is easy but also when it is difficult. Saint John Bosco was no different. He was before anything else a disciple of Jesus. How important, then, must today's Gospel have been for him! Jesus understood the centrality of young people in God's plan for his people and as a disciple of Jesus Don Bosco came to understand the same thing. *"I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth", says Jesus, "for hiding (these) things (these mysteries of your love) from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do".*

Saint John Bosco used to assure his Salesians that in going out to the young, and encountering them with respect and affection, the Salesians would in fact be encountering Jesus himself who was waiting in and with the young to meet them. And so, as educators in Catholic schools, we must not only teach and form the young, but allow them to teach and form us, for the secrets of God's kingdom have been given to them. Saint Benedict used to call his monasteries, of which of course New Norcia is one, "schools in the Lord's service". As educators we might call our classrooms, and our playgrounds, which are much noisier and more lively than contemplative monasteries, the same thing: schools in the Lord's service where the young people learn from us what it means to live their lives immersed in the beauty and mystery of God's love for them, and where we learn from our young people all that the Lord wishes to reveal to us through them.

In 1988, one hundred years after the death of Saint John Bosco, Saint John Paul II solemnly proclaimed him as "the Father and Teacher of the young". As we celebrate his feast day at the beginning of a new school year may we discover in ourselves the desire to be, in our own time and place, loving and gentle guides and teachers of our young people, leading them to live the fullness of life and truth revealed to us in Jesus and nourished and strengthened by our lives within the community of the Church. For this is our task and our commitment as members of our Catholic Education System here in this Archdiocese and in Western Australia.