



**Homily for the Feast of Saint John Bosco  
CEWA Opening of the School Year**

**Homily**

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

**Friday 31 January 2020  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

In 1888, just 12 years before the Australian colonies joined together in our national Federation, Saint John Bosco, whose feast the Church celebrates today, died at the age of 73. One hundred years later, Saint John Paul II proclaimed Saint John Bosco to be the Father and Teacher of the Young. This decision by John Paul II invites all those who work with and for young people to look to Saint John Bosco, along with so many other great saints in our tradition, for inspiration and for guidance. As we begin a new school year and look forward to the arrival of so many hopefully excited and enthusiastic young people in our schools in the coming days, the story of John Bosco can help us deepen our understanding of what it means to be a teacher or a principal or in some other way a staff member of a Catholic school. So allow me to reflect a little with you this afternoon on the story of this remarkable man.

He was born in a small village outside the northern Italian city of Turin in 1815. Ordained as a priest for the Archdiocese of Turin Don Bosco, as he was known after his priestly ordination, soon became concerned for the many young people who had flocked from the countryside to the city in search of employment. These young people were often very poor, largely illiterate, and easily taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers. Don Bosco quickly realized that he could offer them two vital things which would improve their lives. He could offer them the gift of the Catholic faith in all its richness and beauty, and he could offer them the gift of education. He founded a religious order of priests and brothers, and another of religious sisters, whose members would work alongside him and in his spirit, to do just that. He began a movement which still exists in the world today, the Salesian family, which represents one of the largest groups of priests, brothers and sisters in the modern Church.

Unlike some religious families, the religious congregations founded by St John Bosco are not popularly known by the name of their founder. Those, for example, who belong to the Order of Preachers founded by Saint Dominic are commonly known as Dominicans. Members of the Order of Friars Minor founded by St Francis are generally known as Franciscans. The official name for the order founded by Saint Norbert is the Order of the Canons Regular of Premontre, but we normally refer to its members as Norbertines. People, on the other hand, who belong to one of



the religious families founded by Saint John Bosco are not known as Bosconians but as Salesians.

The name Salesian was chosen by St John Bosco himself because he wanted his followers and anyone who might look to the Salesian spirituality and educational approach for a model to emulate, to understand that the spirit of St John Bosco himself and of his followers drew its inspiration, after Jesus himself of course, from Saint Francis De Sales. This saint, whose feast day the Church celebrated just a week ago, was the Bishop of Geneva in Switzerland, but he hardly ever set foot in his diocese because Geneva, in those early days of the Reformation, was dominated by the followers of Calvin. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was a time of great religious hostility and even violence. In this context of intolerance and bitterness Francis de Sales became famous for what Don Bosco would eventually describe as his gentleness and loving kindness. In the face of hostility Francis de Sales always responded calmly and respectfully. Don Bosco became convinced that it was this approach to religion, rather than an aggressive and condemnatory approach, which provided a perfect example of how to deal with the young. He eventually described his educational approach as being a combination of religion, loving-kindness and what he called reason, but which we might best understand as simply being practical, down-to-earth common sense.

It seems to me that this is not a bad model to adopt as you prepare to throw yourselves into a new year. As a Catholic school your school will need to be a place where the Catholic faith, in all its dimensions, is not simply tolerated or paid lip-service to, but is embraced as the life-giving soul of the whole school community. The best Catholic schools, and we have many of them in Western Australia, know this instinctively and live it out in energetic, faithful and creative ways. Your school will also be a place where gentleness and loving-kindness reigns. Don Bosco, a revolutionary for his time, banned corporal punishment from his institutions and instead insisted that if the teachers really loved the young, and did so in ways that made it clear to the young people that they were loved, then the need for harsh punishments would disappear. Young people would respond to their teachers out of gratitude and love, not out of fear. Don Bosco proved in his own life with the young that this was not simply a pious hope. It is said that every boy in his school believed that he was Don Bosco's favourite because of the special way Don Bosco treated him: he treated each young person with gentleness and loving-kindness – with profound respect – and the young people responded to him because of it. In this, of course, Don Bosco was simply a faithful disciple of Jesus, who described himself as gentle and humble of heart. And lastly your school will need to be a place where structures and rules are at the service of the young rather than the other way around. This is what Don Bosco meant by "reason" – by what I have called down-to-earth common sense. Schools exist for the well-being and the flourishing of the young, not for anything else. Compassion, flexibility and a certain "lightness of touch" create space in people's lives so that they can grow and develop. As Jesus himself once said, *"The Sabbath is made for man, not*



*man for the Sabbath*". There is perhaps no better expression in the gospel for understanding Don Bosco's concept of reason than this.

In the end Don Bosco, like every other saint in our Catholic tradition, stands before us as someone who can show us what it means in practice to be a true disciple of Jesus. This, of course, is what the vocation of anyone who works in a Catholic school is all about. The young people need this from us, they deserve this from us, and they have a right to receive this from us. I pray that the example of Saint John Bosco, and that of so many other great saints who have enriched the history of Catholic education, might inspire you all as you embark on another year in the service of the young.