



**St John of God Health Care
Thanksgiving Mass**

Homily

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

**Thursday 23 November, 2023
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

For people involved in any way in the ministry of health care in the Church, the prayer of King Solomon to which we have listened this evening in the first reading is one that we could well make our own: *May the Lord our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors. May he never desert us or cast us off. May he turn our hearts towards him so that we may follow all his ways.* It is a prayer that King Solomon could make with confidence because, as he also says in tonight's reading, *"Blessed be the Lord who keeps all his promises; of all the promises of good that he made through Moses, not one has failed."*

This conviction of the fidelity of God is one of the foundation stones of our Christian faith, just as it was, and still remains, one of the foundations of the Jewish faith from which Christianity springs. Our faith sees in Jesus the fulfilment of all God's promises, and Jesus, in gathering a group of disciples around him and forming them into a community, laid the foundations of the Church as his way of ensuring that he would continue to be, for all time, the fulfilment of God's promises. This is exactly what the Church is, when it is at its best. And it is often at its best when religious life flourishes. As we look back over the long story of the presence of the Sisters of St John of God in Australia, we can see in their remarkable fidelity a living witness to the fidelity of God, who called them, who has sustained them in their journey of faith, and who continues to walk with them as they watch with trust and hope the flowering of the gift they so generously passed on to Saint John of God Health Care.

If the Church is at its best when religious life flourishes, I want to say tonight that the Church will also be at its best when institutions like Saint John of God Health Care also flourish. As we look around us tonight, we can see the same fidelity of God revealed in the commitment of so many people who work together to ensure that the gift given so generously by the sisters continues to be honoured and developed in new and creative ways to meet the needs of people in a world which is constantly changing.

Talk of the flourishing of religious life, and more particularly for us tonight of the flourishing of Saint John of God Health Care, invites us to ask what this flourishing looks like. This is a challenging



question but not one we should try to avoid. To help us reflect on it a little I want to ask you to look around you. I imagine that this room in which we find ourselves has hosted many end-of-year celebrations, many thanksgiving celebrations, and will see many more over the next month. I would be surprised if many of them begin so deliberately with a religious ceremony or even a simple prayer. But in doing this, in itself, does not make us better than any other organisation – but it does make us different. It is a signal to us, and to everyone else, that we have a foundational story which grounds and colours everything we are seeking to do and to be. And that means that our understanding of “flourishing” may well be rather different to that which grounds other organisations.

The Church is an institution. If it were not, it would not still be in existence two thousand years after its beginnings. But the Church, as an institution, exists to be the living memory of a person, and that person is Jesus Christ. The Church has its structures and its customs and its traditions, but they exist in order to give shape and texture to a particular way of understanding what it means to be a human being – in relation to God, in relation to each other, in relation to the world around us, and in relation to our own unique identity. And if this is true of the Church as an institution it is also true of Saint John of God Health Care which is an institution within the larger institution of the Church. The institution of Saint John of God Health Care will be flourishing, first and foremost, if it remains true to its founding story and its founding inspiration – and that story and that inspiration, before they take their origins from the founding of the sisters, take their origins from the Gospel.

This, of course, is where we have to be so careful. Jesus reminds us of this in tonight’s gospel. *“I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth”* he says, *“for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children”*. Ultimately, it will not be the wisdom of the world - the wisdom of high finance, or ruthless efficiency, or an uncritical embracing of every new development in medical technology – which will be the measure of our flourishing but the wisdom of the child who remains in touch with the deeper impulses of his or her humanity, who knows that it is people who matter most, and who understands that it is compassion, and sympathy and large-heartedness which are the best gifts we can give to those who are suffering in any way.

None of this, of course, implies that Saint John of God Health Care should not be striving to be a leader in health care here in Australia and in other places. None of this suggests that we should be satisfied with anything but the highest standards of excellence and professionalism. But it does imply that as an institution which proudly claims to be part of the Catholic Church, we know, to use a gospel image, where our true treasure lies. It lies in our fidelity to Jesus Christ who is all God’s promises fulfilled and who has called us play our part in making sure that this fulfilment becomes a lived experience in the lives of every person who encounters us, be they colleagues, clients, patients or friends.