



**2016 World Youth Day Reunion
Ignite Live**

Speech

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

Chisholm Catholic College, Bedford
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Twenty eight years ago, Pope John Paul II paid a visit to a small village not far from the city of Turin in Northern Italy, to beatify a young Chilean girl who died at the age of 12, after being abused and beaten by her mother's live-in partner. The little village was called Colle Don Bosco because it is the village where Saint John Bosco was born in 1815. Laura Vicuna never visited there, but she was educated by the order of nuns founded by Saint John Bosco and the Pope thought that because Don Bosco was brought up there, it was a good place to celebrate the beatification of a young girl who was taught by the nuns Don Bosco started.

The Pope chose Colle Don Bosco for another reason. The word "colle" in Italian means hill and of course the village is built on one of those rolling hills you find in that part of Italy. Because it is the place where the man whom Pope John Paul II called the "Father and teacher of young people" grew up, the hill has become known as the "Hill of the youthful beatitudes". It is a place where young people from all around the world get together to celebrate their faith and reflect on what the beatitudes, the "blessed are's" of Jesus' famous sermon preached on another hill in the Holy Land two thousand years before, might mean for young people today.

Those beatitudes – or be-attitudes – are where the idea for this year's Ignite Live theme comes from. The task I have been given tonight is simply to share with you a few ideas about what these beatitudes are all about and how they might be relevant for us today.

It is not an easy job, because at first glance Jesus seems to be encouraging us to be exactly the opposite of what most of us want to be. Just have a look at them for a moment up on the screen How many of us really want to be poor? And what does being poor in spirit really mean anyway? How many of us really want to be mourning, crying, sad and miserable? Do we really want to be meek and gentle – or would we rather be feisty, ready to stand up for ourselves, determined not to let anyone push us around? Do we really want to be hungry and thirsty, even for something as good as righteousness or justice? Wouldn't we rather be contented, comfortable, untroubled by things around us? And what about merciful? We probably do want, most of the time, to be like this, but there still might be times, and maybe a lot of them, when we want to get back at people who have let us down, make them pay for things that have upset us, not let them get away with anything. Certainly most of us don't want to be persecuted, even if it is in a good cause, and even the idea of being pure in heart, while it might be a beautiful idea might be something that just seems too hard, or perhaps even something we don't really understand.



Maybe being a peace-maker might be the only one of these beatitudes which we would be ready to put some real effort into on a regular basis, but even this one can be hard going when it is easier, or seems more satisfying, to let fly and strike back at people who are having a go at us.

How then does any of this fit in with the idea that a blessed life, or as another translation of the beatitudes would put it a truly happy life, is only possible if we adopt the attitudes Jesus is speaking about?

These are really basic, difficult and challenging questions but they are questions that I really believe young people, in particular, need to be thinking about. In the end, they all come down to one fundamental question: what kind of person do I want to be?

This is a big question and it would be foolish to think that anyone can offer a quick or easy answer. My idea tonight is not so much to help you answer the question as simply to encourage you to ask it. But to do that we have to make sure we really understand what we are asking. And a way to do that is to work out what the question isn't asking.

So – the question isn't "What kind of person **should** I want to be?" Nor is it "What kind of person do **other people** want me to be?" It is "What kind of person do **I** want to be?" But you know even that doesn't seem quite right to me. Because the answer I give today might be very different from the answer I would have given yesterday – or from the answer I will give tomorrow after attending Ignite Live tonight. So I want to suggest that the question needs to be altered just a little bit. It is not so much "What kind of person do I want to be?" as it is "What kind of person do I want to **become**?"

This is where the beatitudes come in because they are really all about life-qualities or life-attitudes which, according to Jesus, are the basis for a life fully and deeply lived.

Tonight we certainly don't have the time to go through all of them but perhaps if I say a few words about one or two of them, it might get you thinking about how you can understand some of the others as well.

Before I do that though I just want to make a point that I think is really very important. Sometimes people seem to think that being a Christian and especially being a Catholic Christian is all about having your freedom curtailed by all kinds of Church laws. Not everyone feels this way, of course, for many people, including many of you here, faith is experienced as a really freeing thing. A deep faith, and a genuine and solid faith, isn't something that limits their freedom. Instead it is something that actually sets them free from all the negative things which are stopping them from living their life as richly, and as enthusiastically and joyfully as they can.

I think, for example, that this is what Jesus is getting at when he says "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs". Being poor in spirit doesn't mean being poverty-stricken or destitute or lacking the basics for a decent life. It doesn't mean having to worry every day where the money is going to come from to buy your next meal or, for parents, to look after their children. Rather it means that nothing has so much power over us that it can stop us from grasping hold of the opportunities life, or God, offers us. There is a great example of this in the gospels.



As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” The young man said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, the young man was shocked and walked away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

This story I think contains one of the saddest lines in all four gospels: The young man was shocked and he walked away sad because he was a man of great wealth. The problem for this young man wasn't that he was so rich: his problem was that he was so attached to his wealth that he couldn't even begin to imagine a life without it. His wealth was like a chain wrapped around him, anchoring to a place from which he couldn't escape. When the opportunity of a lifetime came along – to join with Jesus in the adventure of travelling around the countryside, helping Jesus to set people free, to lift them out of their misery, to give them a sense of hope – the young man didn't have the freedom to say “yes” – and so he went away sad ... and his riches, no matter how great they were, would never be able to fill the hole his inability to follow Jesus would have left in his life. The man was rich in material things, yes, but he wasn't poor in spirit. He had made **things** the centre of his life – a certain recipe for misery.

Of course there can be other things in our lives which are so important to us that we can't even imagine letting them go. Resentment about what people have done to us in the past for example can be held on to just as passionately as our possessions can, and if we don't try to find the poverty of spirit that will enable us to let go, then we will never really be free. The need to be always right, and to never acknowledge weakness, can also become the riches, the treasure, of our life that we are simply unwilling to let go of, and this too can become a chain wrapped so tight around us that we can hardly breathe and are always struggling to find any real joy in life.

It is no coincidence, I think, that this word from Jesus about poverty of spirit is the first of the beatitudes, because this poverty of spirit is like the key that will open us to all the other beatitudes as well. It's only when you manage to avoid putting your trust and your hope in things that ultimately can never really satisfy you, and this is what poverty of spirit means, that you can be the kind of person Jesus is talking about. You will only really be able, for example, to mourn for the loss of things that really matter when your mind and heart are free of worry about things that don't really matter. If you are too fixated on yourself the only things you will be sorry to lose are things that meet your own selfish needs. But real poverty of spirit sets you free from selfish preoccupation and creates a space in your life, and in your heart, for generosity and kindness to grow.

You will find that you are becoming more meek, more gentle with and understanding of others, because you are no longer just thinking of yourself. You will find that you are really becoming passionate, hungry and thirsty for, the good and the welfare of others. You will gradually become more merciful, more forgiving, less judgmental and condemnatory of others. You'll become pure in heart, more interested in other words in making sure that the needs of others are being met, rather than selfishly using others to meet your own needs or wants. Being a peacemaker rather than a destroyer of peace will become more important to you because you will want the best for



others rather than simply what suits you at any given time. And, believe it or not, you will actually be able to put up a little better with the rejection, or disdain, or the cruelty of others, not because you enjoy it or are looking for it but because you know it is a sign that you are on the right track, you are becoming a better human being, you are living your life with integrity and honesty and courage because if history shows us anything it is that these kinds of qualities always provoke resentment and opposition in those who haven't got the courage to live that way themselves.

Tonight, in an environment in which these really important and challenging ideas can be really thought about with courage and with freedom because it is an environment in which we are all open to God's presence and the power of God's Spirit, this is the question I want to throw over to you: what kind of person do you really want to become? And don't forget: God is as vitally interested in your answer to this question as you are. God stands ready to journey with you, and support you, and help you. You only have to ask – and trust that he will answer.