



"The Year of Youth and Don Bosco"

Legion of Mary WA Annual Retreat

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

**St Bernadette Catholic Church, Glendalough Parish
49 Jugan Street, Mount Hawthorn**

Saturday 26 May 2018

People often say when they invite me and I come that they are very grateful that I found time in my busy schedule, and it is a busy schedule, but I am doing my very best to get around as often as I can to say "yes" as often as I can to all the different groups in the archdiocese who ask me to be with them.

When I was Auxiliary Bishop in Melbourne, a couple of times I spoke at the summer school for the Legion of Mary there; and as a Parish Priest in Victoria Park, I was involved in the local group of the Legion of Mary in that parish.

The Legion of Mary is a wonderful organisation and I'm very happy to be able to be here to share something with you about Saint John Bosco. But also simply by my presence and by my words to assure you of my gratitude to you all for what you do in the archdiocese, gratitude to you for your prayerful support. I certainly need people's prayers, I don't think I'd still be going if I wasn't carried by the prayers of so many people in the archdiocese.

I'm not here to talk about the Plenary Council, but I'll just say that this is probably one of the most important things that the Church has done perhaps in the past 100 years. The last Plenary Council we had was in 1937; so they're very rare, they're very significant in the life of a local church. And when I say "local church", I mean our Church here in Australia. We certainly need the prayers of everybody. We're asking people to reflect on a fundamental question, and I think people like yourselves, I would really want to encourage to be involved in this. Don't just sit back and leave it for the others, because there's a danger, you know the saying: "the squeaky wheel makes the most noise", we need to hear everybody.

The question we're asking, and it's not a question that we're doing like a survey to find out the majority opinion, it's a question that we're asking people to think deeply about and reflect and talk to each other about and pray about so that when the bishops come together – which is what a Plenary Council really is designed to do – we'll be able to have heard everybody, and hopefully through listening to everybody, hear the voice of the spirit of God speaking through so many voices. The question that you'll hear over and over again over the next many years is: "What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?", and by "us" we mean "the Church".

Every single one of us has a right to share what we have discerned is necessary for us to be the Church, more than we are already, that the Lord wants us to be. So please keep it in your prayers, and please support all of us who are involved in it. I was chosen by the Australian Bishops to be the President of the Plenary Council, and that was approved by the Holy Father some months



ago – and I’ve also been elected by the bishops to be the Chair of the Commission of Bishops which will oversee the Plenary Council.

I’ve been asked to say a few words about the Year of Youth and Saint John Bosco. He is a saint, of course, and he was canonised in 1937, one of the very few saints in the history of the Church to be canonised on Easter Sunday. Easter Sunday is the most important event in the Church’s calendar. But Salesians, because we feel so close to him, find the title “Saint John Bosco” just a bit formal. Ever since the first Salesians lived with him, everyone has just called him “Don Bosco”. So I’m not being disrespectful, but I feel more comfortable because I’m a Salesian talking about him as Don Bosco. I do need to point out that that doesn’t mean his name was Donald, his name was John; “Don” is the title in Italy that is given to priests.

I’m not going to focus directly on the Year of Youth, but rather on the spirit of Don Bosco, the story of Don Bosco, and what this might help us to see in terms of how we as a Church can welcome the young people of our Church into the life of the Church more fully. That’s really what I want to talk about this morning.

To do that, I want to begin by telling you a little bit about his childhood. Don Bosco grew up in what today we would probably call a “dysfunctional family”, he certainly grew up in a family with difficulties. His father died when he was just 2 years old. One of Don Bosco’s earliest memories was of his mother taking him to see the body of his father and saying to him: “You now have no father”. As we think about the life of Don Bosco as it unfolds, I think that we see just how significant in a sense, the loss of his father was. Because it made him do two things in particular: one was to turn to God as his Father, which is what his mother encouraged him to do; but the other thing he did, which is really interesting and says a lot about him, is that he also turned to the clergy – to the priests – looking for some “fathering” from them, because he didn’t have his own father.

Unfortunately, with a couple of very significant exceptions, he didn’t find that in the priests of his time. He would go up to them and he would greet them and he would try to engage them in conversation and be friendly with them, but in those days priests were very aloof and thought perhaps they were “too important” to be dealing with children. And so they would just nod at him and walk on. That didn’t turn him off God or the Church or priesthood, what it made him do was say to himself: “I’m going to be a priest, and when I become a priest I’m going to be the first to talk to young people; I’m not even going to wait for them to come to me, I’ll go and reach out to them”.

So see how something that was a great tragedy in his life, the loss of his father, was used by God to lead him into a deep sense of what the priesthood is all about – it’s why we call priests “Father” – and what God was asking him to do. Today we don’t experience – at least not many of our priests – we don’t experience them as so aloof. But in Don Bosco’s time it was very unusual to find priests who were friendly and open and welcoming to young people. Don Bosco was lucky, he did find one or two, and they played a key role in his life. Generally speaking, the loss of his father led him to this deep conviction: “When I grow up, I’m going to be a priest and I’ll be the first to reach out to young people”.

He already tried to start doing that as a little boy. Many of you will know the stories of Don Bosco who spent hours and hours teaching himself how to walk on a tightrope, how to do magic tricks, and how to be a juggler. He had a fantastic memory as well. So what he would do was go to Mass



with his mother, he'd hear the sermon, and he could remember it – he had an extraordinary memory – he would come home and gather all the other young people in the village around him, and he would put on a show for them, but it was on one condition, they could come to the show but they also had to listen to him repeat the sermon and then go to Church. It sort of captures the essence of Don Bosco's approach all through his life to religion, he never wanted to see religion as separate from the rest of life or as something that had to be gloomy or oppressive, he wanted religion to be what it's supposed to be... which is life-giving. Making life better rather than worse, happier rather than more miserable, freer rather than more constricted. So this was very important to Don Bosco.

That little bit of background might help you understand the importance of this dream that Don Bosco had when he was 9 years old. The dream is a very beautiful dream, and was really the first of a series of dreams that were part of Don Bosco's life and story right up until his death. One of the Popes once said: "Never in the history of the Church had there been someone whose life had been so invaded by the supernatural as Don Bosco". One of the things about the dream – which I think is of interest to all of us – is the role that Mary assumes in that dream. Jesus appears first, tells Don Bosco what his mission is to be; and when Don Bosco is unsure and confused and doesn't know what to do next... what does the Lord do? He gives Mary to Don Bosco as Mother and teacher. The image you'll often see of Mary as the Help of Christians, the original of it can be found in the Basilica in Turin in northern Italy where Don Bosco had his work and he was responsible for the building of that Basilica and for that image. He didn't paint it himself, but he told the painter what he wanted.

Mary, right from the beginning, played an important role in Don Bosco's life. On a number of occasions throughout his life, he used to say: "Mary has done everything". For Don Bosco, Mary was very much the mother of his religious family, and she remains that way to this day. I still get all of the Salesian international news which comes through on my email – Salesians are a very big presence all around the world – so I've been reading, over the past week or so, all of these stories about how Mary Help of Christians was celebrated right across the world in the Salesian places. So Mary, as the Help of Christians in particular, is very important in the Salesian story – and of course very important in our Australia story – because the bishops, very early on in the history of Australia, made the decision to place us as a Church under the patronage of Mary Help of Christians. I think the Salesians were very surprised when arrived in Australia in the 1920s to find that the country was already dedicated to her.

Don Bosco, I won't go through the whole details of his life, had many difficulties in his journey towards the priesthood – his family was very poor; and in those days to become a diocesan priest, the family had to pay to for him to be sent to the seminary, his mother just couldn't. So at one stage he thought he had better join a religious order himself, he was going to join the Franciscans. He had another dream, however, and in his dream he saw a group of Franciscan friars running around madly, so distracted by things that they couldn't stop to pray. He worked out that God didn't want him to be a Franciscan. He eventually, through the great sacrifices of his mother, was able to go to the diocesan seminary and eventually was ordained a priest.

He started working in Turin. At first he started working at a boarding school for wealthy girls, because that was the way he could earn some money to make a living, and in his spare time he would visit the prisons where so many young people – particularly boys and young men – were imprisoned. This was a time in Italy where the industrial revolution was just getting underway,



everyone was moving out of the country, into the city, many young people being exploited by their employer, getting themselves into trouble, and ending up in prison. Don Bosco used to go and visit them to try and help them.

How did he actually begin this work that he then became famous for? There's a little church in Turin – that in one sense has got nothing to do with the Salesians, we don't run the church of St Francis of Assisi – but Don Bosco was there one day to celebrate Mass, the priest must have called him for help. It happened to be December the 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. Don Bosco went into the sacristy to get ready for Mass, there was a young boy named Bartholomew Garelli who was very poor and had no family to look after him, he had taken refuge in the sacristy because December in Italy is the middle of winter. So this little boys in rags had taken refuge in the sacristy and the sacristan was a pretty tough sort of guy and he was using a broomstick to beat Bartholomew over the head and drive him out of the church, because what was a ragamuffin like that be doing in a sacristy when a priest was about to celebrate Mass? So Don Bosco saw this and he said to the sacristan: "Why are you treating one of my best friends so badly?"... he had never met the boy of course. The sacristan was all embarrassed, so he left them alone. Don Bosco asked the boy for his name and address. Bartholomew told Don Bosco that he had nowhere to live and had no family. Don Bosco asked him: "Can you read and write? Do you know how to say any prayers?" – to which Bartholomew answered "no" to both questions. The boy is getting more and more downcast because the more Don Bosco asks him something, he had to say "no". So then Don Bosco said: "Can you whistle?" and the boy said: "Oh yes, I can whistle". Don Bosco replied: "You can serve my Mass for me". The boy said: "I've never served Mass before". He said: "Don't worry, I'll help you, you can serve my Mass for me". And then at the end of Mass, Don Bosco got Bartholomew to kneel down before him in front of an image of Our Lady and taught him the Hail Mary, and that was the beginning of Don Bosco's work for boys who had no-one else to care for them.

So you can see how, for Don Bosco, his whole work was placed under the protection of Mary; and that remained the case for the rest of his life. For example: when he built the big Basilica in Turin, which is at the heart of his work still today, he dedicated it to Mary Help of Christians.

You may wonder, why are followers of Don Bosco called "Salesians"? Why aren't they called "Boscodians" or something like that? Well the answer is, when Don Bosco was getting his work up and running, he was looking for a saintly patron to whom he could entrust the congregation and who could sort of offer a spirituality as a way of approaching our Christian faith. He chose Saint Francis de Sales. So you can see where "Salesians" come from, it comes from the name of Francis de Sales. Why did he choose St Francis de Sales? Because St Francis de Sales, who had lived 200 to 300 years before, became famous for many things but especially for his gentleness and his kindness. St Francis de Sales was the Bishop of Geneva at the time of the reformation. Geneva was a centre of the Protestant reformation, and so Francis in fact couldn't actually live in Geneva. He lived in northern Italy, which is why he was so popular in the area where Don Bosco grew up. But he was famous because unlike so many others, he didn't approach the Protestants with anger or anything like that, he approached them with great gentleness and great loving kindness; and won many of them back to the Catholic faith.

Don Bosco, I think, must have remembered the words of Jesus in his dream at 9 years old: "It's not by blows, but by gentleness and kindness that you will win these young people for me". So



Don Bosco thought: “What better example to give my Salesians, the young men who are going to help me, than Saint Francis de Sales?”.

I’m trying to help you see how important Mary was in the story of Don Bosco. One of the many things that makes Don Bosco quite remarkable is the number of very holy, young people that he formed in his school. The outstanding one, of course, is Dominic Savio. Dominic Savio was a little boy who died just short of his 16th birthday, and he was, until the children from Fatima were canonised, the youngest person ever to be canonised who hadn’t died as a martyr. But it’s a remarkable thing to think that these young people – whether we’re talking about Jacinta and Francisco or Dominic Savio – could be so strong in their faith, so deeply committed to their faith and so holy that they would be recognised as saints by the Church.

Dominic Savio, amongst the many things he did at the school, was the leader of a special group of boys called the Saledities of the Immaculate Conception. Don Bosco, at first in his devotion to Our Lady, focused on the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Which links in of course to our archdiocese, because our archdiocese’s Cathedral is dedicated to Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception. But gradually Don Bosco moved, not away from that, but decided to highlight as the Help of Christians.

Don Bosco wrote a number of his books and biographies about his famous pupils. One of those was about Dominic Savio, and that’s why we know about him, but there are many others as well. And that’s why Don Bosco – towards the end of Dominic Savio’s life – makes two points. One of them is: “Dominic was not the only holy young man in the school, in fact there were others who were even holier”. That’s quite remarkable, because if you have time to read his story, you will probably think of your own children or grandchildren at the age of 15 and think “well they were a bit different from Dominic Savio when they were growing up”. The other thing Don Bosco used to say to his boys was: “If Dominic could do it, why can’t you? If him, why not me?”.

As I have grown up in the Salesian world, as I get older, I think we need these great people like Saint Dominic Savio, who is a wonderful example to the young. We need these people to remind us that holiness is possible. One of the things that changed the life of Dominic Savio was a little talk Don Bosco gave to his boys. He once said to them: “God wants everyone to be a saint”. The second thing was: “If you do become a saint, there’s a great reward awaiting you in Heaven”. The third thing he used to say to them was a bit more surprising: “It’s easy to be a saint”. That’s the part that we might find a little bit more surprising.

Once Dominic Savio as a little boy heard all that Don Bosco said about sainthood, he started fasting and not having enough blankets on his bed at night and all of those penances. He got very sick, and Don Bosco had to sit him down and told him: “No, no, no; you’ve misunderstood. It’s easy to be a saint. To be a saint, all you have to do is do your best at whatever you’re supposed to be doing at any given time”. Now we know that’s not easy to do, but the idea is simple. So for Dominic Savio it meant: when you’re in the Church, give your heart and soul to your prayers; when you’re in the classroom, do your best with your studies; when you’re in the playground, throw yourself into all the games and have as much fun as you can. It was Don Bosco’s recipe for holiness, and it produced someone like Dominic Savio.

I’ve been fortunate because of the role that I have, and the way that things have worked out in my life, to travel a little bit and I was fortunate enough as a young priest to spend two years living



in Rome doing some studies. So I got to visit places like Assisi and other famous places. Many of you will have been to Basilica of St Francis of Assisi, it a beautiful place, a very spiritual place. One of the things I remember though, every time I've been there, it's a popular place – when you walk through there's a recorded voice coming over the loudspeaker saying "Silencio". Silence! No-one is allowed to talk, and that's fair enough in the Church.

You would never find that in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. Not to say one's better than the other, simply that the spirituality is different. If you go to the Basilica in Turin – where Don Bosco is buried, where Dominic Savio is buried, where the foundresses of the Salesian Sisters is buried – if you go there, it's very prayerful inside the Basilica, but you step out the door and there are young people running around everywhere kicking soccer balls and yelling and screaming, having a great time because that's the life of young people.

Don Bosco wanted young people to be young people, and for us to give them the freedom to be young people and enjoy the gift of the life that God had given them. So if you're looking for a very holy, prayerful place in the traditional sense of the word – then probably Don Bosco's place in Turin might not be your best option. But if you want to see what spirituality for young people is all about, I don't think you can do better than to go there. It's still a thriving school, a thriving youth centre, there's young people everywhere, Salesians all over the place, Salesian Sisters everywhere – it's a wonderful place to see. This kind of spirituality that grew out of that grief that I spoke to you about in action.

Don Bosco lived at a time in Italy where there was a lot of tension between the government and the Church. The Papal States had been lost, there was a lot of anti-clericalism in many parts of Italy particularly in the north where Don Bosco lived, and the Pope used to rely heavily on Don Bosco as a mediator between the Church and the state. So Don Bosco was in Rome for meetings with the Pope about all of these sorts of issues. One night, he had a dream. He decided after the dream to write a letter to the Salesians, and we actually have the whole dream written down at the end of our Rule of Life that the Salesians follow, because it's so important for us.

I think if you want to understand Salesians and the way they go about things, all you need to remember is this phrase: "It's not enough that the boys be loved, they have to know that they are loved". Like many great sayings, it's very simple but it's very profound. For Don Bosco, it was so important that the boys knew that they were loved.

When it came time for Don Bosco's canonisation, a number of the boys were by then old men, would give evidence at the inquiry as to whether Don Bosco should be canonised – and they all said the same thing: "When I was at his school, I believed that I was his favourite". Everyone thought that they were Don Bosco's favourite, everybody. And what that means was that Don Bosco knew each of his boys so well that he knew how to make that boy feel special and cared for and loved, without neglecting any of the others. Salesians used to think that was Don Bosco's educational method – that was what Don Bosco left to us so that we would know how to educate boys properly. Over the past few decades, we've come to understand that it's more than that, it's actually Don Bosco's spirituality.

If you think of the Gospels, and so many of the stories of the Gospels, what they show us is that Jesus knew how to let different people know that they were loved in a way that would make sense to them. I could speak for hours on this, I won't. But let me just put into your mind a couple of



ideas you can pray over during the day. If you think of The Woman Caught in Adultery in St John's Gospel, whatever had been the story of this woman, the way that John's Gospel tells this story, she is being treated abominably by the religious leaders. They drag her in front of a whole crowd, they throw her down on the ground in front of Jesus, and they demand that she be stoned to death because that's what the Law of Moses says. But of course they don't care about the woman at all, they're trying to undermine Jesus.

The key question for us to reflect on, is: "How did Jesus react in this situation?". What did he do? He bent down, scribbled something on the ground, and it's almost as if He wanted to give these men a chance to come to their senses and realise what they were doing. It didn't work, they were still demanding that Jesus ordered this woman to be stoned to death. Jesus said to them: "Let the one who has no sin throw the first stone". But then He didn't point at each one and made them feel guilty, He knelt down again drawing on the ground. This time it worked, they all walked away one-by-one. And then He stands up, looks around, says to the woman: "Where have they gone, hasn't anyone condemned you?". The woman says to Him: "No, no-one has condemned me". And then what does He say? "I don't condemn you either. Now go and sin no more."

What possibly could have been more eloquent for this woman in her situation that's been condemned by everybody and mistreated by everybody, than to hear Jesus say to her at that moment: "I don't condemn you". Do you think she could have possibly gone away from that encounter not knowing that she was loved? Jesus also said to her: "Now go and don't sin any more". It wasn't as if He was making excuses for her or saying that what she did didn't matter, but what Jesus knew is that the only way she would actually be able to hear and take into her heart the words "don't sin anymore", was if He had first said to her out of the truth of His own heart: "I don't condemn you". It wasn't enough that Jesus loved that woman, she had to know in a way that would speak to her that she was loved by Him and she did.

I could give you so many examples of this from the Gospel, but I think even that one example might help you to see what I'm trying to say. That Don Bosco's approach isn't just how to work well with young people, how to be a good educator, Don Bosco's approach was about how to love as Jesus loved. That's not just a heritage that Don Bosco gives to Salesians, that's a heritage that Don Bosco family gives to the whole world – certainly to the whole Church.

Just as the Franciscans have left the Church a wonderful insight into the importance of poverty in the life of Christians, just as the Benedictines have left to the whole Church the importance of prayer, so Salesians through Don Bosco left to the whole Church the importance of "loving as Jesus loved". I personally think that this is something that could speak to the heart of every parent as they think about their children, or of every teacher as they think about their pupils, or of every priest as he thinks about the people in his parish. It's for all of us. It's not enough that we love people – we have to do that, it's Jesus' commandment – but notice what Jesus' commandment actually says: "Love one another as I have loved you".

This I think is the great gift of Don Bosco, it's the precious gift for the whole Church during this Year of Youth. I think it's a precious gift for the whole Church at any time. So this morning as we think about this and as we reflect to on how Don Bosco was accompanied every step of the way by the presence of Mary as his mother and as his helper, we might pray that each of us can love those who the Lord puts in our lives in ways that make it clear to them that they are loved. Not



condemned, not judged, not criticised, but loved. And when people are loved, then they learn how to love.

Don Bosco used to say to the Salesians to encourage them to be with the young people: “If you learn to love what they love, then they will gradually learn to love like you love”. And, of course, what we love, or what we try to love, is the Lord and His Church.

Transcribed by the Archdiocese of Perth Communications Office.