



Youth Leaders Commissioning

Homily

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**Saturday, 23 February 2019
Pastoral Centre, Highgate**

Some of you may know that before I was ordained as a Bishop in Melbourne, I was a lecturer of Theology at the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne. In order to become a lecturer in Theology I had to spend a lot of time studying. I had to go for teacher's training for several years, then as a Salesian, I did seven or eight years of studies and for two years, I was sent to Rome to do my License which is equivalent to a masters in Theology. In Australia, I taught both in Melbourne and Perth, and seven of those years were spent doing a Doctorate.

I'm not saying this to brag or anything, I'm just trying to say that the study of theology has been an important part of my life for a very long time. I'm a big fan of theology, and good theology. I have a conviction that unless we understand our faith well and deeply, we won't know how to live it. The living of our faith, depends largely on what we believe in the first place – and theology opens that up for us, particularly faithful theology within the context of our Catholic community. Having said that, I am aware that not everybody here would have either the inclination or the opportunity to spend many years studying theology. But that does not mean that you can't have a deep appreciation of the Church's theology, because there is another pathway, not an alternative but certainly a pathway for those who study theology to understand better what it means.

It is what St John Paul II called the 'Lived Theology of the Saints'. By that he meant that even if you didn't have many years to devote to the form of study of the academic theology, you could gain a profound understanding of what it is to be a Catholic and to be called by the Lord, to live faithfully in His Church, by getting to know the stories of the Saints.

I mention that, because today happens to be the feast day of St Polycarp, and I imagine he might not be at the top of your list of favourite Saints – These days, we can hop onto the internet and learn more about him. He was a Bishop and a martyr at the very early stages of the Church's life, probably a disciple, a companion of St John the evangelist; So, right there at the very beginnings of the story of the Church. Because of his fidelity (he died in his 80s) he was martyred at the early persecutions of the Church.

I do think it is worth reflecting on who is on the top of my list or your list of favourite saints, and if you don't have a list yet, I would really encourage you to start developing one – because the saints tell us what theology looks like when it's lived.



We are here this morning to commission Youth Leaders for the Archdiocese of Perth and you will need to be able to live the theology of the Church that the truth about who God is and who we are and what God's asking of us, if you're going to be effective leaders in the Lord's Church here in this Archdiocese.

So you might spend a little bit of time today if you get the opportunity, reflecting on who your favourite Saints are. We happen to be in a chapel dedicated to St Therese of Lisieux. She does happen to be one of my favourite Saints, and in the more traditional Churches around Perth and Australia, you will always find a statue of St Therese because she was one of the patronesses of the mission, and Australia was a mission territory when it was first established as a European settlement.

So St Therese has a great deal to teach us, but one of the things that stands out about her, which stands out about most of the saints, is that she had an instinctive understanding, that at the heart of the Church, stands the person of Jesus. That means that at the heart of your life, your ministry, your presence as a member of the Church, must stand the person of Jesus. There is not more profoundly true theologically that the importance of Jesus as the way that we follow, the truth which we believe, and the life which we live out in our own lives. It is the motto of my episcopal – Jesus the way, the truth and the life.

I often reflect on who my favourite saints are and I've got quite a long list so I'm not going to tell you about all of them this morning. But I wanted to say a couple of things, and it is not an attempt to my way of thinking so that my favourite saints become yours. It's more about inviting you to enter into the very exciting lives of saints. We have 2000 plus years of stories of great saints in our Catholic Church, and it would be a great pity if we didn't know a little bit about them.

I mentioned St Therese – most traditional Catholic Churches would have also had a statue of St Anthony of Padua, a Franciscan. I'm not quite sure why he was such a popular Saint in Australia but he was and still is. When I was around eight or nine years old, there was a statue of St Anthony in the porch of the Church. I used to stand there and stare at this statue, it fascinated me and the older I got I realised why. Most of the traditional images of St Anthony showed him either with a book in his hand on which the infant Jesus is standing on, or he is holding infant Jesus in his arms. In most representations of this, they are staring into each other's eyes. I think this was the beginning of my understanding that at the heart of the richness of our Catholic is all directing us towards a relationship with the Lord.

I am now 65 years old, so I've got about 55 years of a failure to really live that way as I would have liked to, but I've never lost the sense that, that is what the Church is about.

Another favourite saint is Don Bosco, but even more appealing to me was one of the boys who went to his school, is Saint Dominic Savio who became a saint even though he was very young when he died. He wasn't a martyr, he died of a disease that was very common in the 19th century, tuberculosis, just short of his 16th birthday. He became a Saint in an interesting way. One stage, he was talking to people in his school and he said, 'God wants everybody to become a saint, and it's easy to become a saint.' 'All you have to do basically, is do your best at whatever you're trying to do, or find yourself in at any time.' He was talking to a group of rough boys at that many of them.



“When you’re in a classroom, you do your best to study as hard as you can, when you’re in the chapel you do your best to pray as sincerely and as deeply as you can. When you’re in the playground, you throw yourself into the games and have as much fun as you possibly can. And if you do those things, you will become a saint,” he added.

For me, as a young boy who went to a Salesian school, then became a Salesian. This struck me very strongly, certainly in the Salesian tradition sanctity is meant to be the normal experience of everybody, not some extraordinary thing that only very rare people can achieve.

These are just two examples of people who have emerged in my life’s journey as significant people who have led me to understand what the Christian vocation is all about.

There’s another phrase that we can put in place of saints, and it would be faithful Christian leader.

So when I speak to you now, and when towards the end of Mass when we have the commissioning of new leaders, my hope is that we’re commissioning Saints and that might sound ridiculous, but it’s not at all.

Because sanctity is just living the life God has given us to the full – Making the most of everything God has given us, and living it out in fidelity to what God is asking of us. That is what sanctity is, that is what holiness is. So in hearing the call to Christian leadership, and accepting the call to Christian leadership, you are committing yourself to doing your best to be Saints. But don’t be frightened by the word, understand what it really means. It’s just an invitation from God with the promise of the grace, to accompany the invitation to be the very best person you can be.

Being a Christian leader means walking in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd, and leading others to walk in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. It means, taking seriously the words of the Father which we heard in the Gospel today.

“This is my beloved son, listen to Him.”

As you think about what it means to be a leader in your community, and what it means to be Catholic in the Archdiocese of Perth, and as you think about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in this very difficult world, in which to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, the one person to listen to is Jesus. “Listen to Him.”

It’s exactly what Mary said to the stewards at the wedding feast in Cana, “Do whatever He tells you.” If we put those two ideas together, “Listen to Jesus, and do whatever He tells you,” then you will be the leader that the Lord is calling you to be, you will be on that path to sanctity. You might not be canonised as a saint, but you will be on that path to sanctity, which means that you will be on the path to the fullness of life, which is God’s promise to us all.