



**24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)  
St John Bosco Relics**

**Homily**

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

**Sunday 17 September, 2023  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

A few years ago, I had the opportunity while in Italy to pay a visit to Assisi, the birthplace of St Francis of Assisi. There is a magnificent basilica there dedicated to him, and it is in the grotto of that basilica that Saint Francis is buried.

The basilica itself, situated in the Umbrian hills, is a place of deep prayer and quiet contemplation. The spirit of St Francis pervades, not just the basilica, but the whole town and the surrounding countryside. It is an oasis of peace.

I have also had the opportunity to visit Turin, in the north of Italy, where another basilica rises this time on the edge of one of the largest cities in the country, and in an area that was at one time, one of the roughest parts of the city. The basilica is named in honour of Mary help of Christians and is the centrepiece of a large complex which has grown up around what was once a little rundown shed where St John Bosco began his work for the young. Just as Saint Francis is buried beneath the basilica in Assisi so the final resting place of the body of St John Bosco can be found in the basilica in Turin, enclosed within a life-size wax effigy of Don Bosco which is encased in a glass casket. Here in our Cathedral today, we have a replica of that casket, similarly containing a life-size wax effigy of the body of St John Bosco, in which have been enclosed some of his relics.

If the basilica in Assisi is marked by its silence, reverence and serenity, the basilica in Turin is marked by the very opposite. Attached to the basilica is a Salesian school and a Salesian Youth Centre. Every so often, the peace of the basilica is invaded by a young person trying to find a hiding place in a game of hide and seek. At another time, a stray soccer ball might find its way inside through one of the open doors. And the noise of a busy playground provides the backdrop to the prayers being offered inside the basilica itself.

Assisi and Turin represent just two faces of the rich spirituality of the Church, and they are, of course, in perfect harmony with each other. It is good at times to sit at the feet of the Lord and listen to his voice in the silence of our hearts. It is also good at times to immerse ourselves in the hustle and bustle of life, for we can hear the voice of the Lord in the voices of the young as truly as we can hear him speaking in the depths of our heart. The Lord is waiting for us in our cathedrals



and churches, but he is equally waiting for us and can be recognised in the faces we see outside the walls of our churches and cathedrals. Both Saint Francis and Saint John Bosco knew this.

The reason for the presence of the relics of St John Bosco here today is because the Salesian order which Don Bosco founded and to which I belong is celebrating the Centenary of its arrival in Australia. The Salesians first came here to the West in response to a request from the Holy See to establish a mission for young people in the Kimberley. They landed in Fremantle, were welcomed by the Oblates of Mary immaculate, and very soon after made their way to the Northwest. Expecting to find large numbers of indigenous young people with no one to care for them, these first Salesians was surprised to discover that the Pallotine Fathers were already there and doing a very fine job. After a few rather tense years, the Salesians decided to withdraw, and were ready to return to their home countries in Europe when Archbishop Mannix, the archbishop of Melbourne at that time, invited them to establish a presence in his archdiocese.

The connection with the West is still important for the Salesians and the fact that at the moment the Archbishop of Perth is a Salesian, the provincial of the Salesians migrated from Burma to Perth with his family, who still live here, and we now have a college dedicated to St John Bosco, seemed to suggest that it was appropriate for the relics of this great saint to come across the Nullarbor and be with us as part of the Centenary celebrations.

It is very characteristic of our Catholic tradition that we honour the saints, look to their lives and witness for inspiration and example, and rely on their prayers in times of need and distress. Each canonised saint brings something special to the Church. Their lives shed light on a particular dimension of the great mystery of Christ and remind us of some aspect of our faith which we might otherwise neglect. They become the source of the new spiritual energy in the Church, enabling us all to be more fully what we are called to be.

In the case of St John Bosco, it was his realisation of the special role young people are called to play in the Church, and his recognition of their capacity for greatness, which represent his particular gift to the Church. Jesus often encounters young people in the gospel story. On one occasion, when he was surrounded by young people who were clamoring to be close to him, and the disciples were trying to shoo them away, he said to those disciples, *“Let the children come to me. Do not try to stop them. The kingdom of God belongs to them and those who are like them.”* Jesus welcomed the young. He was not afraid of their energy or boisterousness. He wanted them around him, and most of all he wanted them to know that he loved them.

It is this, perhaps, which is the unique gift, that Don Bosco offers to the whole Church. On one occasion he was away in Rome, attending to business for the pope. One night he had a dream in which he found himself back in the playground in Turin, and he noticed that there was something missing. The energy, enthusiasm, and joy which he usually discovered in the playground



somehow seemed to be missing. He turned to the guides who were present with him in the dream and asked them what was wrong. “The problem, Don Bosco,” they said, “is that the Salesians no longer love the boys as they used to”. Don Bosco was surprised and upset by this remark. “How can you say that the Salesians don’t love the boys?” he said. “They have given their whole life to the boys and sacrificed everything for them”. The guides then gave Don Bosco an answer which, at least for me has become the key to Salesian spirituality. *“It is not enough that young people should be loved,”* Don Bosco was told. *“They have to know that they are loved.”*

With these simple words Don Bosco captures the very essence of Christ himself. He once said that we must love the Lord, our God, with all our hearts, and all our minds and all our strength, and that we must love our neighbour as ourselves. But it is not in the words alone, but rather in the way Jesus acts, and in the way he relates to and reacts to people, that we discover what kind of love he is talking about. It is a love which is real and concrete and shown in a way that makes sense to the person whom Jesus is encountering. To the dishonest tax collector, Zacchaeus, who is despised and rejected by everybody because he works for the hated Romans, Jesus shows his love clearly and unmistakably by greeting Zacchaeus with dignity and respect and offering to come home with Zacchaeus and have a meal with him. The woman caught in adultery, who is criticised and condemned by everybody, comes to know that Jesus loves her because the first thing he says to her, even before he encourages her not to sin again, is this: I do not condemn you. And Simon Peter, whose heart is broken because he denied Jesus three times, knows that he is forgiven and loved by Jesus because Jesus gives him three opportunities to cancel out his three denials: do you love me? Do you really love me? Do you love me more than the others do?

Perhaps this morning, here in the presence of the relics of St John Bosco, we might ask him to pray for us that God might give us the same grace: the grace of knowing how to love as Jesus loved and the grace of knowing how to welcome young people as Jesus welcomed them.