



## **Catholic Education Commissioning Mass**

### **Homily**

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

**Monday 29 January, 2024  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As many of you would be aware the annual Commissioning Mass for Catholic Education always occurs on or close to the feast of Saint John Bosco, the founder of the religious order to which I belong and the man to whom Pope St. John Paul II gave the special title *Father and Teacher of the Young*. Although his Feast Day is not until this coming Wednesday, the readings for today's Mass are taken from the liturgy for that Feast Day.

Like all great saints who have dedicated their lives to the care of the young, and there are many of them, Saint John Bosco has something to offer us as we set out on another year of opportunity and challenge for Catholic Education here in WA. This afternoon then, while recognising that I am a little biased, I want to offer you a few thoughts which I hope you will find helpful as you contemplate and commit yourselves to all that lies ahead in 2024.

This year, the Salesian community celebrates the bicentenary of a famous incident in the early life of Saint John Bosco. We are commemorating the 200th anniversary of a famous dream little John Bosco had at the age of nine. In our terms, he would probably have been in grade four.

It was a dream which in many ways determined the rest of his life. We have the account of this dream in John Bosco's own words found in his autobiography. He tells us that in his dream he found himself close to a group of boys, some of whom were laughing, some of whom were playing games, and many of whom were swearing. Offended by this bad language, John threw himself into the crowd and tried to stop them, not just by telling them to stop but by using his fists to convince them to stop. At that moment a man appeared who called John by name and said these words to him: *you will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love*. John tells us that he was confused and frightened by all this and asked the man who he was and why he was telling John do something that seemed to be impossible. The man replied that he would give John a teacher who would help him. In the dream John then saw a woman who took him by the hand and showed him that the boys had disappeared and were replaced by a big herd of wild animals. The woman then told him that it would be his task do for her children what was



about to happen to the wild animals. They then all turned into gentle lambs who were gathering around the woman and the man. John was so overwhelmed by all this that he started to cry and said that he just didn't understand what was happening. The woman placed her hand on his head and told him that in good time he would come to understand what this all meant. He heard a loud noise and woke up. The dream was over.

Over sixty years later, close to the end of his life which had been totally dedicated to the Christian education of the young, and while celebrating Mass in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, the construction of which Don Bosco had overseen at the request of the Pope, Don Bosco was overcome by emotion. When people asked him why he was so emotional he reminded them of this dream and said to them, *“Now, as the lady promised, I do understand”*.

If we were to ask ourselves what it is that Don Bosco had come to understand I believe that the answer is found in the words, *“You will win these boys over, not by blows but by gentleness and love”* - and it is really this simple message that I want to offer you this afternoon. You will be a positive force for good in the lives of each of the young people you encounter throughout the course of this year if your interactions with them are characterised by gentleness and by love. This means, of course, that we will fail in our responsibility to the young people entrusted to us by their families if, instead, our engagement with them is characterised by severity, by aloofness, by disdain or by lack of commitment.

It is important, of course, to remember who it was in John Bosco's dream who spoke these words to him: it was the Lord Jesus. Dreams are interesting enough, but they can be interpreted in all kinds of different ways. When John told his family about his dream, his brother commented that it probably meant he was to become a robber or a gangster. His mother suggested that perhaps it meant he would become a priest. And his grandmother, whom John said was the wisest of them all, told him not to take too much notice of dreams.

As John grew up, it emerged that what was really important about John's dream was that it pointed him first and foremost to Jesus Himself, and then to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a heavenly friend, guide and supporter. In telling John that His way was to be the way of gentleness and love, the Jesus of John's dream corresponded with the Jesus of the gospel, who describes Himself as gentle and humble of heart, and who constantly asks, encourages and inspires His disciples to make love the heart of everything.

This afternoon, then, I do not offer you John Bosco as a model except insofar as he modelled his way of relating with others on Jesus's way of relating with others. Rather, I offer you Jesus as your model. This was the genius of Don Bosco, as it is of all the saints: that it is the way of Jesus that we are called to follow; that it is the truth of Jesus to which we are called to commit ourselves



unconditionally; and that it is the life of Jesus into which we are invited through the life, ministry and teaching of the Church that we are called to embrace. People become saints because they point us to Jesus rather than to themselves.

To consciously take Jesus as your model in all your encounters with the young people who will be a part of your life and mission in 2024: this is what the Lord is asking of all of you who, in God's Providence, have find yourselves involved in the work of Catholic Education here in WA. It is the challenge which I put before you and ask you to accept with enthusiasm, with integrity, and with joy.