



**2019 Australian Catholic Youth Festival
Opening Address**

Speech

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

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Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre**

A long time ago, in a country a long way from Australia, a young man, possibly in his early twenties or even younger, came home from fighting in a local war against a neighbouring kingdom, after being released having spent time as a captive. That experience changed him. Before he went to war he was a typical, fun-loving young person who seemed to live primarily for parties, reckless adventure, and generally a good time. After the war he closed in on himself, became moody and withdrawn, and spent long hours on his own.

Living in a religious culture, he was surrounded by the symbols of the Catholic Faith. The countryside around him was peppered with road-side shrines and many little country churches, some of them slowly falling into disrepair.

One day, this young man entered one of these tumble-down church buildings and discovered that there was a red lamp burning in front of a crucifix hanging on the back wall of the Church. The young man knelt down to say a prayer, and it seemed to him that the figure of Christ hanging on the cross spoke to him. And this is what that young man heard: *go and rebuild my Church for it is falling into ruin*. The young man looked around him at the crumbling walls and half-ruined roof and he realised that here, in this humble little place, he could find a reason to live again, and to love again, and to hope again. He decided that he would do just what the voice had told him to do: he would rebuild this humble little church and restore it to its simple beauty.

The young man's name was, of course, Francis - Francis of Assisi- and the Church the Lord was calling him to rebuild was not so much that tiny church building dedicated to Saint Damien in the countryside outside Assisi, but rather the Catholic Church, the Lord's Church, which in many respects seemed to have lost its way, lost its heart, and needed to rediscover it.

As we all gather here in Perth for this adventure of the Australian Catholic Youth Festival, we know that our Church, or rather the Lord's Church, seems to be in trouble. The terrible scourge of sexual abuse of the young has caused so much suffering to so many people, and has called into question in the minds of many the very legitimacy of the Church, and especially the credibility



and trustworthiness of its leaders. The number of people identifying as Catholics who regularly attend Mass or make use of the sacraments continues to decline. Across the country, values which we as Catholics have always held close to our hearts are being challenged by a society which no longer seems to want to retain its links to its Judaea-Christian foundations. And while our material prosperity, at least at this stage, continues to increase for many of us, so does the level of violence in our cities and towns, so does the rate of suicide, so does the experience of mental health challenges, so does the prevalence of drug abuse.

It all sounds a bit bleak and we could easily give in to a sense of hopelessness and even despair. Like that young man coming back from war, Francis of Assisi, we could close in on ourselves, become moody and withdrawn, isolate ourselves - or we could, like the earlier version of that young man, throw ourselves into a hectic life of endless parties, constant distractions, a kind of deliberate turning-away from the challenges all around us.

But if, like that young man, Francis, we give ourselves a chance to tune in to another wave-length, we too might hear a mysterious, unexpected, possibly quiet and hard-to-catch, but nonetheless persistent, voice calling to us, holding out to us a chance, and a challenge, not to sink into a sense of hopelessness, or a life of frivolous distraction. We might hear a voice saying to us, much as Pope Francis said to young people at World Youth Day in Poland a few years ago, *“Get off the couch and set out on new and uncharted paths.”* This was, I think, the modern Francis putting into contemporary language the words the other Francis heard so long ago. We could put them together and ask if in doing so we are hearing the words of the Lord who hung on the cross addressed to us: *Get up off your couches, go and help rebuild my Church, help it to set out on new and uncharted paths. Help stop the Church from falling into ruins.*

In that address the Pope gave in Poland, he went on to say this - and again maybe the Lord is calling to us here at the Youth Festival through the words of Pope Francis: *today’s world demands that you be a protagonist of history. The Lord wants to work one of the greatest miracles we can experience: he wants to turn your hands, my hands, our hands, into signs of reconciliation, of communion, of creation So, young people, have the courage to teach the rest of us that it is easier to build bridges than walls!*

Francis of Assisi knew that the Lord was calling him to rebuild the Church, not to tear it down and create a new one, and the Lord will be asking us, asking you, to do the same. Francis did it by letting go of the things that didn’t really matter so that he could be free, with the help of the Lord’s grace, to concentrate on the things that did matter. And it will be the same for us. In the next few days you might hear quite a bit about the Plenary Council which is being held by the Church at the moment and which will culminate in two important gatherings of the Church, one in October next year and the other in the middle of 2021. If you do tune in to the Lord over these days, and share what you are hearing from him with us, you will play a key part in this rebuilding of the Lord’s Church here in Australia, which is what the Plenary Council is really all about. So, again to use some words of Pope Francis, *don’t be afraid to make some noise, don’t be afraid of causing a bit*



of mess, don't be afraid of sharing what is in your hearts with the rest of the Church. But remember, Francis of Assisi made more noise by what he did than by what he said and Pope Francis, though he speaks often, also makes more noise, makes a greater impact, by what he does than by what he says.

"Go and rebuild my Church" the Lord is saying to you over these days together. Some in the Church have lost their way, lost their heart, lost their hope. So be people, young people, of the Way, the Way of Jesus. Be young people of heart and of hope in the Church.

You are all, every single one of you, welcome here in Perth, welcome here at the Australian Catholic Youth Festival, welcome here with your questions, with your hopes and dreams, with your doubts and fears, with your hesitations and enthusiasms. God is real, Christ is alive, the Church of which you are a part is yearning to help you and hear you, to teach you and to learn from you, to challenge you and be challenged by you.

I hope you have a wonderful time, an exciting time, an enriching time - but most of all I hope that in whatever ways God intends, you meet Christ and let yourself be captured by him.

May the Lord bless you all.

Thank you.