



World Heritage Day
Catholicism on the Margins

Speech

By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth

Thursday 18 April, 2019
St Mary's Cathedral Parish Centre

Good morning everyone and welcome to St Mary's Cathedral. It is a great honour to have you all here together for this day dedicated to the theme of "Catholicism on the Margins". Thank you for the invitation to officially open the day and share a few thoughts with you as a way of dipping our toes into today's theme.

When Odhran first contacted me about opening proceedings he suggested that I might share some thoughts on my experience of leading the Catholic community of Western Australia. I am happy to do so, although you will need to listen carefully to pick up on just what being the archbishop of Perth really means to me, but I must acknowledge that the bishops of Broome, Geraldton and Bunbury might well bristle at the thought that I was somehow the leader of the Catholic community in their part of the world. However that is a more theological question I think and probably best left to another occasion, when they are here to defend their own turf.

As the theme of the day is "Catholicism on the Margins", I will try to couch my words in that context. After all, as the Archbishop of Perth, I am the Archbishop of what is often said to be the most geographically isolated major cities in the world. You can't get much more marginal than that!

However I don't want to focus my opening remarks here in the south-western corner of the Australian continent but rather in the heart of medieval Italy.

Roughly 815 years ago a young man from a fairly wealthy merchant family found himself wandering through the Umbrian countryside when he came across a small chapel which was in a very bad state of disrepair. He walked into the half-ruined church and found that there was a small oil lamp burning in front of a crucifix. Kneeling before the crucifix this young man – Francesco di Bernadone was his name – thought that he heard a voice speaking to him from the figure on the cross. The voice said to him, "*Francesco, go and rebuild my church, because it is falling into ruins*". Being a somewhat literal-minded young man Francesco looked around him and came to the conclusion that the mysterious voice was instructing him to rebuild the ruined chapel so that it could again become a place of prayer for the people of the area.



Young Francesco was not only literal-minded: he was also impetuous, so he immediately went home to his father's cloth-business premises and sold some of the cloth to raise money for the material to rebuild the Church. Needless to say Francesco's father was not impressed by this behaviour and appealed to the bishop who instructed Francesco to return the money to his father, which Francesco did. And then, in another act of impetuosity, Francesco stripped himself naked, handed his clothes to his father, and announced to everyone in the Church square that "*Pietro Bernadone is no longer my father. I now have only one Father, who is in heaven*".

In a very real sense this was the moment when one of the most enduring movements in Christian history was born, for the young man was, of course, Francis of Assisi, and still today his followers, the Franciscans, not to mention his admirers, number in the tens and maybe even the hundreds of thousands.

As Francis gathered his original followers around him, he gradually came to realise that the voice which had spoken to him in that ruined chapel in the countryside was not speaking of a church building made out of bricks and mortar but rather of the Church itself, or, as we would say in our Catholic tradition, the Church herself. It wasn't the physical structure which was crumbling: rather it was the spiritual foundations of the Church which seemed to be giving way – and it was Francis's mission to restore and strengthen those foundations with his call to a radical return to the poverty and the simplicity of the Gospel.

I thought of all this as I was watching the news reports of the raging fire which has caused so much damage to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. While I don't want to compare this tragedy to my own experience I did feel some affinity with those watching the Cathedral burn. In 2007, the church of which I was parish priest in Melbourne, St Joseph's in Collingwood, was burnt almost to the ground on the Monday of Holy Week, just as the fire at Notre Dame ravaged the Cathedral on Monday of Holy Week this year. The sense of horror, of powerlessness and of loss as you watch a sacred place go up in flames before your eyes is very familiar to me.

What connected my experience in 2007 and the experience in Notre Dame just four days ago with the story of Saint Francis was a comment made by a nun who together with a couple of her religious sisters was standing on the bank of the River Seine watching the fire burn. She was distressed by what she was witnessing but her mind immediately turned to the truth that the Church of God is not made up of stones and wood but of people. "We are a living Church," she said, "and even if it seems that we are facing destruction we will rise again because Christ is at the heart of the Church and he has risen from the dead, just as we will rise from our present sufferings." This sister was not speaking of the Cathedral, of course, but of the Church herself, which many people, both within the Catholic community of faith and outside it, believe might be dying before their eyes.

I was fascinated by this comment, partly because this sister, if I am correct, was wearing the simple religious habit of the Little Sisters of Jesus. This is a religious family founded by Charles



de Foucauld who all through his life had a dream of founding a religious family of brothers and another of sisters who would imitate the hidden life of Jesus as he grew up in Nazareth, living simply and being at the service of the poor and the marginalised. He died a martyr's death without seeing his dream realised. But nearly twenty years after his death the congregation he always dreamed of came into being as some young men, studying to be priests, were inspired by his life and by his dream and decided to bring it to fruition.

It is hard to imagine someone more on the margins than Francis of Assisi who, though he began life as the son of a wealthy family, chose extreme poverty, and the ridicule and perplexity which came with such a choice. Similarly it is hard to imagine someone more on the margins than Charles de Foucauld, who began life as the Viscount of Foucauld and ended his life, after a career as a cavalry officer, an explorer and a geographer, as a hermit living in a remote part of the Saharan desert.

The thing which Francis and Charles and that religious sister standing looking at the burning Cathedral this week have in common is that they all made radical decisions with their lives because they had encountered Christ. And that is what ties them to the Cathedral in which we find ourselves this morning, to Notre Dame in Paris, and to the Church spread throughout the world. For the Church exists in order to be a place of encounter with Christ. Whether that encounter happens in a beautiful Cathedral, as it does for many, or in a run-down church, as it did for Francis, or in a remote hermitage, as it did for Charles, doesn't really matter – and it is in the end God's decision and God's work anyway. But that the encounter happens is the important thing – and our task is to do our best, using all the skills and creativity we have, to create the spaces, physical, emotional, or spiritual, for God to enter into and speak to people's hearts.

Creating those spaces is perhaps harder now than it has been for a long time. You are reflecting today on the theme of "Catholicism on the Margins". I am not sure exactly where that theme will take you today but it seems to me that the choice to be Catholic – a choice which interestingly many adults will make in this Cathedral and across the archdiocese of Perth on Saturday night when they freely enter into our Catholic community – is a choice to move to the margins, a choice even to allow people to marginalise them.

The Church no longer has the political or social influence it once did, and there is no sign that this previously held position of influence will be easily recovered. Perhaps people like Francis of Assisi and Charles de Foucauld remind us that being on the margins is exactly where we are supposed to be. It was after all where Jesus found himself when he was crucified outside the city walls, abandoned by his people and ridiculed by all who passed by. But it was from the disaster of the crucifixion that the new life of resurrection sprang, just as we are being reassured that from the disaster of the fire in Paris Notre Dame too will rise again, and just as I was able, last year, to return to Collingwood to ordain a young man as a deacon in the church which had arisen from the ashes of the one destroyed in 2007. Perhaps it will be from the lowly place of shame, and



disdain, and marginalisation in which we as the Church presently find ourselves that God's Church will rise, purified and renewed, to the new life which God has in mind for us.

I wish you well today and hope that you enjoy being here in this beautiful Cathedral precinct dedicated as it is to the very same woman to whom Notre Dame in Paris is also dedicated.