



## ***Saint John Bosco and Saint John Paul II***

### **Presentation**

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In one of his writings Pope John Paul II talks about what he calls “the lived theology of the saints”.

I have always been struck by this phrase. I have spent a large part of my life either studying or teaching theology. I am a big fan of theology and I believe that a knowledge of theology is a very helpful tool to have as we try to live as disciples.

However, when I reflect on this phrase from Pope John Paul II, I am reminded that some of the greatest saints in the story of the Church were not skilled or well-trained theologians and, indeed, some were rather suspicious of theology. Perhaps the best example of this is the saint whose name our present pope chose when he was elected as the pope. When he began his movement Saint Francis actively discouraged his brothers from studying theology, partly because he feared that it might make them proud and partly because he feared that if they knew too much theology they might forget how to preach the faith to people in a way that was simple and easy to understand. In fact, it was only really when Saint Anthony of Padua became a Franciscan that Saint Francis changed his mind. Anthony was a brilliant theologian and a wonderful preacher and because of this Francis came to understand that as long as you studied theology with humility and with reliance on God’s grace then it wasn’t such a dangerous thing to do.

When Pope John Paul II speaks of the lived theology of the saints, he is really reminding us that it is not so much what we know but how we live that really matters. The saints are those people who throughout the course of their life, whether that life was long or short, lived the values of the gospel and lived out their commitment to the Lord and his Church with great courage and great fidelity. In other words, they became great saints because they were great disciples. After all Christianity is, first and foremost, a way of discipleship, a pathway to holiness, a journey in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd.

Pope John Paul II is now of course a canonised saint himself. He certainly was a great theologian but, much more than this, he was a true disciple. There was a harmony in his life between what he said, and what he wrote, and what he did. He didn’t just preach about Jesus with his words, he also preached about him, that is he witnessed to him, in his actions.

The very same thing can be said about all the saints including the man whom I have also been asked to talk about a little, that is Saint John Bosco or Don Bosco as he is often known. “Don” was the title of respect given to priests in Italy during don Bosco’s time, and it still is today. As many of you know, Saint John Bosco is the founder of the religious order to which I belong - the Salesians. And interestingly, Saint John Bosco named his followers after another great Saint, Saint Francis De Sales.



Even though Saint John Bosco and Saint John Paul II were born in different centuries, in different countries, and in different cultural settings, they have a lot in common. Apart from anything else Saint John Paul II was a great admirer of Saint John Bosco and in 1988, 100 years after the death of Saint John Bosco, John Paul II named him officially as the Father and Teacher of the Young. Concern and love for the young was one of the major themes of the life of Saint John Paul II - he was the one, after all, who initiated the World Youth Days - and Saint John Bosco, of course, dedicated the whole of his life to the care and the education of young people. Both men lived out in practice something that emerges very clearly from the Gospels - that Jesus was himself very committed to the care and protection and the importance of young people.

One of the great insights of Saint John Bosco was his recognition of the importance of what we today might call Peer Group Ministry. One of Don Bosco's main techniques, if we can call it a technique, was to encourage and prepare and equip his young people to minister to each other, to be apostles to each other. Don Bosco was an expert in identifying leadership qualities among the boys in his school and then working with them to help them become enthusiastic and committed Christian leaders among their friends. This, of course, was also one of the motivations behind Pope John Paul's decision to inaugurate World Youth Day because he wanted to find a way to help young people support each other in their living of the faith so that they could then become credible and powerful witnesses to the beauty of the faith, and the way faith enriches our lives. Neither St John Bosco nor Saint John Paul II were afraid to hold out very high ideals to young people and we should not be afraid to do the same. But if we do hold out these high ideals, we then take on the responsibility of helping these young people to live up to those ideals. Any youth leader in a Catholic setting will want to do exactly that: encourage people to strive for the high ideals of the gospel and be there to help them reach those high ideals.

Both Saint John Bosco and Saint John Paul II were, of course, men of deep, profound, committed Catholic faith. They both knew that without a strong faith you cannot be a disciple and an example of faith to others. Both men looked in the same places to find the strength that young people need in order to be apostles to each other. Firstly, of course, they looked to Jesus himself. We are disciples of Jesus and unless we know him, we will not feel the call to love him, and if we do not love him, we will not feel any urgency or desire to serve him. For Saint John Paul II and for Saint John Bosco the best place to encounter Jesus, to get to know him and to grow in our love for him, is in the Eucharist. Celebrating Mass together, drawing strength from each other's faith and presence, listening to and learning from the Word of God and uniting ourselves with the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion: all of this represents what we might call the Golden Road to a deeper knowledge of and love for Jesus. And for both men, after the central place of the Mass itself, they would point to the ongoing presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament waiting, in a sense, for us to come before him regularly in prayer. If you want to grow in Christian leadership and faithful discipleship the place to start is in the presence of Jesus himself.

Another thing which both great saints had in common and, indeed, which nearly every saint in the story of the Church has shared with them was a deep appreciation for and love for Mary, the mother of Jesus. When John Bosco was a little boy of 9, he had a dream in which Jesus directed him to Mary and told him that she would be his mother and his guide. From that moment on John, who grew up to be a strong and determined man, always regarded Mary as his companion along the journey of his life. In the dream he had as a little boy Mary assured him that although he did not then understand everything that the dream meant. in the end he would understand. In the last months of his life, while celebrating a Mass at the altar of Our Lady in the church he had built in



the centre of Rome, Don Bosco broke down and cried often and at the end of Mass, when his Salesians asked him why he was so emotional, he said, “Now, at long last, I understand what Mary meant when she spoke to me as a little boy”.

At one stage during his life in Poland Saint John Paul II lived in a Salesian parish and it was there that he learnt to have great devotion to Mary Help of Christians. This was Don Bosco’s favourite title for Mary and the basilica he built in Turin in Italy, the place where he lived most of his adult life, is dedicated to her under that title. And as we know Pope John Paul II also had a very deep devotion to Mary. The motto that is found on his papal coat of arms, *Totus Tuus*, means, “I am all yours” and it refers to John Paul’s entrustment of himself to Mary.

Both men understood that the Gospels present Mary to us as the first and best disciple of Jesus. She is the one who, from the very first moment when the angel Gabriel appeared to her, lived her life in total commitment to whatever God asked of her. This commitment brought her great joy but also great suffering, and if we accept the challenge to become Christian leaders among young people this, too, will bring us great joy and great suffering. Mary remained faithful because she had come to understand that ultimately, she did not need to rely on herself, on her talents and on her gifts, but rather on the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling within her. Saint John Bosco and Saint John Paul II, both faithful disciples of Mary, understood the same thing. Both were gifted and talented men and they put their gifts and their talents at the service of the Lord and his Church, but in the end they knew that it was only God’s grace that enabled them to do what they were doing, and it was only God’s grace that enabled them to remain faithful. We, too, if we want to be disciples and Christian leaders, will need to remember all of this, and perhaps the best way to do that is to keep Mary close to us so that by her presence, and with the support of her prayers, she might help us as she helped Don Bosco and Pope John Paul II, to be all that God is inviting us to be.

Say “yes” to God as Mary did; say “yes” to God as St John Bosco did; say “yes” to God as Saint John Paul II did. It will be our “yes”, repeated day after day, which can lead us to holiness and, through God’s grace, help others to walk with us along the pathways traced out for us by the Good Shepherd.