



## **2023 Australasian Catholic Press Association Awards Dinner**

### **Speech**

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As many of you are aware I belong to the Salesians of Don Bosco. Saint John Bosco founded his congregation in the middle of the 19th century and he died in 1888.

This year the Salesians in Australia celebrate the Centenary of their arrival in this country. They came here, initially to Western Australia, at the request of the Holy See to care for the aboriginal people, and especially the young people, in the Kimberley. Half a dozen or so Salesians, cobbled together from various parts of Europe, landed in Fremantle, where they were welcomed by the Oblate Fathers. Shortly after, they set out for the Northwest only to discover when they got there that not only were there not the hordes of young indigenous people the Holy See had assured them were waiting for them, but those who were there were already being well cared for by the Pallottines.

As you would understand, this proved to be a difficult and delicate situation, and eventually the Salesians withdrew and went to Melbourne where, at the request of the famous Archbishop Mannix, they established a foundation at Sunbury, just north of what is now Tullamarine Airport.

As a way of marking this Centenary the Salesians have brought the relics of St John Bosco to Australia and they will be welcomed here in Perth at the Cathedral on Sunday week.

I mention this because St John Bosco decided to name his Congregation after Saint Francis De Sales - hence the name, Salesian. And of course, as Pope Francis reminds us in his message for the 57th World Day of Social Communications, this year is also the Centenary of the proclamation of Saint Francis de Sales as patron of Catholic journalists.

When John Bosco was a little boy of nine years of age, he had a dream which was to exercise a significant influence over his life. In many ways, this dream catches perfectly the reason why St John Bosco chose Francis De Sales as the patron of his new religious family. In his dream, the young John found himself amongst a group of young boys who were all yelling and screaming and fighting and punching each other. In order to try and stop them from behaving so badly, he threw himself into the midst of the group, trying to separate them from each other, and getting caught up in the fight himself. Then, in the dream, a stranger appeared who told him that he would not win these boys over with fists and fighting, but with gentleness and kindness. John became



confused and upset and asked the man who he was, and what this all meant. The man then said to him that a woman would help him to understand. The man disappeared and his place was taken by a woman, Mary. She pointed to the group of boys who had now turned into a pack of wild animals, snarling and growling and fighting, and who then changed into a flock of gentle, peaceful lambs. John was even more confused and started to cry. The woman consoled him, telling him that he should make himself gentle, humble and strong, and that he would eventually understand - and then he woke up.

This dream planted a seed in the young John's mind, and eventually lead him into the seminary and then into the industrial city of Turin as a newly ordained priest where he began to take care of boys who were being exploited by their employers.

To cut a long story short, when he eventually realised that if his work for young people, especially those who were poor and mistreated, was to have any permanent future he would need to establish a religious order, and it was then that he decided to give them the name Salesians because, he said, he wanted his followers to imitate the zeal and the gentle, loving kindness of Francis De Sales. Knowing the story of Francis de Sales so well Don Bosco had already realised, through experience, that education - because he believed that providing a good education for young people was a key to their material and spiritual well-being - was ultimately a matter of the heart.

When we read this year's message from Pope Francis for the World Day of Social Communications, the importance of speaking with the heart and from the heart emerges as his key theme. He is very keen to point out that the exhortation of Saint Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians, namely, that we must *speak the truth in love*, means that in our desire to communicate the truth we must also do so from a place of love - and for us as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, that means love for God, love for Christ as the one who reveals the truth about God to us, and love for all God's people, no matter who they are, or where they are in their journey of life. It means to speak always from a position of profound respect for the other and always, I would say, with the intention and the hope that whenever people encounter the Church through us, and tonight, especially for all of you who work in the field of communications, when they read what we write or listen to what we say, they come out of that encounter with a new and deeper openness to the presence of God in their lives, and in the world around them.

It is all summed up quite beautifully, I think, in a phrase which comes from Saint Francis De Sales, and which became the motto of one of the great more contemporary saints of our tradition, St John Henry Newman: *heart speaks to heart*.

*Speak the truth in love*. These words of Saint Paul are very significant, and like many parts of the scripture they can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways. Some people even see them, or rather see the two words *truth and love*, as somehow difficult to hold together, if not opposed to each other. If we are committed to speaking the truth then, some people suggest, we must do so



plainly and clearly whether people want to hear the truth or find it palatable or not. Others would say, and this is very common today, that if the truth is challenging or confronting for some people, then out of love and concern for them, we do not put this truth before them.

Pope Francis, of course, alludes to this challenge in his message. *“We should not,”* he says, *“be afraid of proclaiming the truth, even if it is at times uncomfortable, but (we should be afraid) of doing so without charity, without heart.”*

What I would like to suggest to you this evening is this: that, in this matter of speaking the truth in love, as in fact, in every aspect of our Christian lives, it is Jesus himself who shows us the way.

There are many examples of Jesus speaking the truth in love in the pages of the Gospels, but I would like to offer you simply one this evening, and invite all of us to reflect on it when we have the opportunity. It is the story of the woman caught in adultery, which we find in John’s Gospel.

I imagine you all know the story very well, so I won’t retell it now beyond reminding you that Jesus is in the temple precinct, a large crowd has gathered, including many of the religious leaders of the time, and a woman who has been caught in the act of committing adultery is brought before Jesus. It is important to realise that in doing this those who have dragged a woman before Jesus are not interested in her at all, but rather are interested in trapping Jesus and embarrassing him. “She has been caught committing adultery,” they say. “Moses has told us that such people should be stoned to death. What do you say?” The trap is clear. If Jesus says, “Follow the law of Moses”, all his talk of compassion and forgiveness is undermined. If he says, “Don’t follow the law of Moses” then he is unmasked as a faithless Jew and betrayer of his people’s traditions. As you will remember, Jesus turns the tables on the men attacking the woman by saying to them, “Well, let the person here who has never sinned at all be the first one to throw a stone at her”. It is almost as if he is saying, “Well, the law is clear, but who here regards him or herself as authorised to implement that law? Who has the right to make the final judgment?” We know what happened next: one by one they all walked away until, the gospel tells us, Jesus was left there alone with the woman. Jesus has certainly spoken truth to the men who have dragged this woman before Jesus and humiliated her. But it is very interesting to reflect on the way in which he has brought the truth home to them: not by a direct confrontation or an angry rebuke, or a lecture on their lack of understanding of the law, but simply by posing to them a question, which is really an invitation to reflect on themselves, and on their own attitudes of mind and heart. He is looking for conversion and trying to offer this possibility to them – not aggressively but gently.

And then, of course, Jesus speaks to the woman. “Has no-one condemned you?” he asks. “No-one sir,” she replies. And then come the crucial words. “I don’t condemn you either. Now go, and don’t sin anymore.”



Jesus certainly speaks the truth to her - go, and don't sin anymore. He does not tell her she has done nothing wrong. He doesn't try to make excuses for her. He doesn't tell her it doesn't matter what she has done.

But if we want to know the mind and heart of Jesus, if we want to know what speaking the truth in love looks like in practice, then we will notice the order in which Jesus speaks to her. The first thing he does is assure her that he doesn't condemn her - only after that does he tell her not to sin again. And it seems reasonable to suggest that the woman, who has been belittled, humiliated, and condemned by everyone else, is only able to hear - really hear - the words about changing her life because she has also heard, and believes, the first thing Jesus tells her - that he, unlike the others, doesn't condemn her.

Behind all this is a question we really need always to have in the front of our minds when we seek to speak on behalf of the Lord, on behalf of the Church, on behalf of the Truth. The question is this: what do I, or what do we, want to achieve? If my aim is to be able to go home at the end of the day and pat myself on the back and congratulate myself because I stood up for the truth, I told them how it is, I gave it to them straight, then we may have spoken the truth, but there may not have been much love in evidence. But if, instead, my aim has been to create a situation where the person or people to whom I am speaking, or to whom I am addressing my written word, is or are more open to God, more ready to tune into the presence of God's Spirit, more willing to reflect a little more deeply on their life, then my judgement at the end of the day might be a little different. It won't so much be about how I performed, but rather about how much I was able to touch their hearts.

In this archdiocese I am constantly reminding myself, and everyone else, that "how we go about what we are trying to do is as important as what we are trying to do". So the question we must ask is this: what are we trying to do? What are we hoping to achieve. And in the end, as disciples of Jesus, I would hope that we are trying to be followers of the one who is both the Truth - yes, absolutely - but also the Way. We are called to proclaim the Truth which the Lord reveals to us, and to do so in the Way of Jesus. When we put the two together, we really are faithful disciples of the one who, because he is the Way and the Truth, is the giver of Life to the full.

When Don Bosco was near the end of his life, he had another dream. He was in Rome attending to some business for the Pope, and he was missing his Salesians and the boys who were all back at his school in Turin. One night in his dreams, he found himself back in Turin and was being led through the playground by two of his past pupils. Although everything seemed to be going well Don Bosco did not experience the sense of enthusiasm, of joy and youthful energy that he was expecting. When he turned to the two past pupils and asked them what was wrong, they said to him, "The problem, Don Bosco, is that the Salesians do not love the boys as much as they used to". Don Bosco was rather upset by this and said in reply, "How can you say such a thing? These Salesians have dedicated their whole life to the boys. They are up at the crack of dawn and look after them all through the day: in the playground, in the dining room, in the classroom, in the



chapel, everywhere. They are working themselves to the bone. What more could they possibly do?”

And then came the reply, which is at the heart of the Salesian approach to education, and I would suggest at the heart of the gospel itself, because it is at the heart of Christ. ***“It is not enough that the boys should be loved. They have to know that they are loved.”***

The woman who met Jesus in the temple precinct was not left in any doubt that the Lord loved and accepted and respected her. She knew it, not just because of the words Jesus said, but of the way he said them, and of the way he treated her. Jesus wanted this woman to go away from the encounter with him encouraged, renewed, filled with hope - and he chose the best way he could think of to achieve that aim, and he chose perfectly.

What is your aim as you write your article, or prepare your script, or make editorial decisions about what is being produced? How does this aim, this goal, line up not just with the Truth of the Lord but also with the Way of the Lord? Will your readers, or viewers, or correspondents be more open to the Lord’s gospel and the Lord’s Church or will they be discouraged, or scandalised, or further alienated.

As the Pope says in this year’s World Communications Day message:

Today, more than ever, speaking with the heart is essential to foster a culture of peace in places where there is war, to open paths that allow for dialogue and reconciliation in places where hatred and enmity rage. In the dramatic context of the global conflict we are experiencing it is urgent to maintain a form of communication that is not hostile. It is necessary to overcome the tendency to discredit and insult opponents from the outset, rather than to open a respectful dialogue ..... As Christians, we know that the destiny of peace is decided by conversion of hearts, since the virus of war comes from within the human heart. (But also) from the heart (can) come the right words to dispel the shadows of a closed and divided world, and to build a civilisation which is better than the one we have received. Each of us is asked to engage in this effort, but it is one that especially appeals to the sense of responsibility of those working in the field of communications, so that they may *carry out their profession as a mission*.

In the end, this is the pope’s invitation to you all: *to see your profession as a mission*. I hope that your conference this year is helping you to understand more deeply the vital role you play in making the Church an instrument of the Lord’s peace.