

Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB  
Homily at St John Lateran | June 28, 2019

When I was first appointed as an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne one of the many things I had to contend with, though by no means the most important, was the need to come up with an episcopal crest and motto. Not having given any thought to this kind of thing before it took me some time but, as regards the motto, I settled on some words from the first letter of Saint John: *qui manet in caritate in Deo manet - the one who lives in love lives in God* (1John 4:16)

Five years later, when I was appointed to Perth, the Bishops Conference had already decided to celebrate the Year of Grace, and we were just a few months into that experience. It occurred to me that, as we were all being invited to “contemplate the face of Christ” in the Year of Grace, perhaps I should take the opportunity to choose another motto which might help me, and everyone in the archdiocese, to do just that: to contemplate the face of Christ - to return again to him and start afresh from him. After what I hope was some prayerful, Spirit-led reflection I chose some words which are found on the lips of Jesus in John’s gospel: *Via, Veritas, Vita - I am the Way, the Truth and the Life* (John 14:6).

There is a providence at work in all our lives and I have always taken it as a gift from the Lord that he called me to serve him in his people in Perth as the Year of Grace was unfolding. To put Christ at the centre of everything we are trying to do and be as the Lord’s Church in our particular part of the world seemed to me eight years ago, and still seems to me now, to be the particular mission that I at least have been given. Because of this, at the installation Mass which marked the beginning of my ministry in Perth I borrowed and adapted some words from a previous Superior General of the Salesians, Fr Pascual Chavez. He had spoken of the great challenge facing religious life in our contemporary situation, but what he said of religious life, challenging and confronting as it was, is equally true for the whole Church: the greatest challenge facing us today is to return the Church to Christ and return Christ to His Church.

It has always been true, of course, that Christ is the beating heart of His Church, the Sacred Heart of His Church as today’s feast reminds us so powerfully, but what is true theologically does not always seem to be manifested clearly and powerfully in the day-to-day experience of so many people who encounter the Church in all kinds of ways. We all know that for many the Church is a source of life and of hope, a source of renewal and of new beginnings. We should rejoice in all this, giving thanks to God. But for some this true and beautiful face of the Church has been disfigured or obscured by what the then Cardinal Ratzinger once shockingly described as the filth in the Church. This is certainly the case for those who have lived through the terrible experience of sexual abuse within the Church, but it is also the case for those who have experienced rejection or condemnation, arrogance or lack of compassion, or any other form of infidelity to the gospel. That this has been and still is the case for so many must be a source of shame for all members of the Church and therefore also, and in a sense especially, for those who are called to a ministry of servant leadership. How, then, could any of us be complacent or self-satisfied when, as Pope Francis once reminded us so tellingly, we are called by God to be not inflictors but healers of people’s wounds; not destroyers but warmers of people’s hearts, for

this is exactly what Jesus was and still seeks to be in and through His Church. To say, therefore, that we are called to return Christ to His Church and to return the Church to Christ is really to invite us, to paraphrase some words of Saint Augustine, to become in practice what we are in Sacrament and in theology: the living body of Christ, the living Sacrament of his healing, renewing and saving presence in the world.

If you stand at the main entrance to this Basilica and look out over the piazza you see in the distance the statue of Saint Francis of Assisi gathered with some of his friars. Francis had come to Rome to seek approval from Pope Innocent 111 for his new community and their simple and radical way of gospel living. According to some versions of the story Francis's first efforts to meet with the Pope were rebuffed by the Pope's over-zealous minders. However, some time later the Pope had a dream in which he saw the pillars of St John Lateran, the mother of all the churches, beginning to crumble. Suddenly, in the dream, a small man dressed in simple, ragged clothing ran into the Basilica, put his shoulder against the crumbling pillar, and the church was saved from collapsing. This dream convinced the Pope to receive Francis and give his formal approval for the evangelical way of life Francis had initiated. Who knows - but perhaps it was only then that Francis began to understand the words he had heard some years before kneeling in the half-ruined chapel of San Damiano: *go and rebuild my Church for it is falling into ruin.*

Today, as we find ourselves here in the same place where Pope Innocent was helped by the Lord to recognise what was needed in his time to renew the Church, we might pray for this: that we be given the courage - the open hearts and minds - which will enable us to understand what the Lord is asking of us so that the Church in our land, so far away from Rome but yet united in the bond of communion with the Church of Rome and all the Catholic Churches around the world, might not fall into ruin but might be renewed in fidelity to all that God is asking of us at this time. May we be given the wisdom to recognise, as Pope Innocent did, the power of God's Spirit at work sometimes in the most unlikely of places and in the most unlikely of people. May we play our part in the rebuilding of the Church in Australia, remembering, as Pope Benedict once reminded us, that it was, in Francis's time, not the pope who renewed the Church but a small, insignificant brother. In our own time, too, it may not be the powerful, the affluent or the most educated who will lead the renewal of the Church but the simple men and women of trusting and courageous faith who will show us the way.

Like Francis of Assisi, like Mary MacKillop, and like all the great heroes of our faith, we are being called to walk the path of fidelity, the path laid out for us by our Good Shepherd who says to us today as he does to all disciples in every age: *I am the Way - follow me; I am the Truth - entrust yourself to me; I am the Life - live in me and let me live in you.*

On this great feast of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus may his love inflame our hearts so that the Lord's own words can come true in Australia: *I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already.*