

Homily for January 31 2017

Memorial of St. John Bosco

Today the Church remembers the 19th century Italian priest and educator, St. John Bosco. He was the youngest son to Piedmontese peasants. He studied theology at Turin. After ordination, he served the dislocated people who came from the countryside and found themselves adrift in a setting of heavy urbanization and industrialization. In 1854, in a very anti-clerical setting, he founded the Salesian Order, named after St. Francis de Sales. It focused on creating solutions for displaced youth. He developed vocational training programs with evening classes and apprenticeships. Eventually, these grew to include schools. To help staff them, he collaborated in the founding of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and organized an active group of lay “co-operators.” St. John Bosco was canonized in 1934

St John showed patience, kindness and practical care for the youth whom he loved and served. These qualities of patience and kindness are clearly expressed in an extant letter that is one of today’s readings from the Breviary.

In talking about the children this community was to serve, he counselled his teachers:

My sons, in my long experience very often I had to be convinced of this great truth. It is easier to become angry than to restrain oneself, and to threaten a boy than to persuade him. Yes, indeed, it is more fitting to be persistent in punishing our own impatience and pride than to correct the boys. We must be firm but kind, and be patient with them.

Then referring to the example of St. Paul he writes:

I give you as a model the charity of Paul which he showed to his new converts. They often reduced him to tears and entreaties when he found them lacking docility and even opposing his loving efforts.

Patience coupled with an attitude of kindness:

Let us regard those boys over whom we have some authority as our own sons. Let us place ourselves in their service. Let us be ashamed to assume an attitude of superiority. Let us not rule over them except for the purpose of serving them better.

If previously he referred to the example of St. Paul, now St. John refers to the example of our Lord:

This was the method that Jesus used with the apostles. He put up with their ignorance and roughness and even their infidelity. He treated sinners with a kindness and affection that caused some to be shocked, others to be scandalized, and still others to hope for God’s mercy. And so he bade us to be gentle and humble of heart.

The pedagogue St. John then brings everything together in the conclusion of this letter where he counsels:

There must be no hostility in our minds, no contempt in our eyes, no insult on our lips. We must use mercy for the present and have hope for the future, as is fitting for true fathers who are eager for real correction and improvement

Have mercy for the present and hope for the future. These are the very qualities we see on display in today's Gospel reading. Both Jairus and the woman with the unrelenting hemorrhages experienced the Lord's mercy and so have hope.

“My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live”

“If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well”

Two people, one a pillar of the community, a synagogue leader; the other, an outcast – this 12 year flow of blood would have made her unclean and undesirable. Both needing from Jesus the same thing, mercy and hope.

How timely are these virtues today in light of the horror of Sunday's cold blooded murders at the Islamic Centre in St. Foy Quebec. In the wake of such horror where barbarism and xenophobic irrationalism resulted in the suspected mass murder, Alexandre Bissonnette, acting in such an unconscionable way; it has been heartening to see examples of mercy and hope expressed by the words of elected leaders and embodied by thousands gathering for vigils across the country, especially the gathering in St. Foy.

On this day when we are aware of the effects of xenophobic hate, we are called to be inspired by the example of St. John Bosco's patience and kindness. People and communities who embody these virtues will be places of mercy and hope, attributes so needed in a world where there is growing suspicion, fear and rejection of those who, like the boys John Bosco ministered to, experience displacement and rejection.

St. John Bosco, pray for us.