

Speech by President Michael D Higgins
Bicentenary Celebrations of the Birth of Don Bosco
Salesian Secondary College, Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick
Tuesday, 24th February 2015

Tá an-áthas orm bheith anseo in bhur measc chun páirt a ghlacadh i bhur gceiliúradh. Míle buíochas daoibh as an gcuireadh agus as an fáilte a chuir sibh romham.

It gives me great pleasure to be here this afternoon at Salesian Secondary College to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Saint Don Bosco, founder of the Salesian order. May I thank your principal, Paddy O'Neill, for the kind invitation to attend today's celebrations, and all of you for your warm welcome to Pallaskenry and to your school.

Don Bosco was born in 1815 near Turin, in Northwestern Italy, the youngest child of a modest farming family. From an early age, he resolved to study and become a priest – an unusual path, in those days, for a farmer's son. He also decided, early on, to dedicate his life to the education of street children and the many other disadvantaged youth of fast industrialising 19th century Turin. Don Bosco thus spent decades striving to turn his vision into reality – i.e. to offer shelter and education to vulnerable children. As his achievements became well-known, more priests, and some of the children he had assisted, decided to help him, so that the Salesians' educational work spread rapidly throughout the world, reaching Ireland, and more precisely Pallaskenry, in 1919.

Don Bosco elaborated an educational system of his own, which he called the "preventive system." As all of you here know very well, this approach focused on preventing children from leading lives blighted by poverty by offering them an education built on love, kindness and trust. Don Bosco saw every child as a child of god who should be treated with respect: in his view, children must not only be loved, but know that they are loved; and they must be taught through kind attention rather than punishment and humiliation.

These caring values remain at the heart of the Salesian ethos, and when I look around me this afternoon – when I see this College thriving with over six hundred students and so many committed teachers and staff – it is clear to me that the principles underpinning Salesian education are ones that are alive and well.

Pallaskenry's Salesian Secondary College has provided a solid foundation in the lives of many generations of pupils; it is a place which has seen their curiosity expand, their minds open up to new horizons of possibility and their confidence increase as knowledge was acquired, as new skills were mastered, as exams were passed and new friendships built up.

The fact that past pupils have returned to the College as teachers, including your current principal, who was a boarder here between 1972 and 1977, is testament to the high regard in which this school is held – to the spirit of community it instils in those who study here.

The tradition of excellence associated with Salesian Secondary College is manifest in both academic achievement and extra-curriculum activities – a combination which is the hallmark of its holistic approach to education. For example, I would like to congratulate the students who participated in the B.T. Young Scientist and Junior Achievement Entrepreneurship Competitions. I understand that students of the College have also featured in Junior Dragons Den on RTE. It is wonderful to see young people taking such an interest in science and innovation, an interest which encourages them to push outwards the boundaries of given knowledge and apply their innate creative energy and curiosity to a constant exploration of how things work and how they can be done better, or differently.

Another important quality nurtured by this school – one that will serve the students well in their lives as adults – is a sense of civic responsibility. The College provides many opportunities for students in this regard, from the Student Council, which fosters student participation in all aspects of the College's life, to the "Bosco summer camps", which nurture a sense of responsibility in the participants.

Its strong sporting tradition is yet another distinctive feature of Salesian Secondary College. Such an emphasis on physical activity is important, for it is true that a balance between body and mind is often the hallmark of well-rounded, accomplished personalities. Of course I cannot but mention the achievement of your hurling team in last year's Michael Cusack Cup. I have no doubt that the coming years will see many more sporting successes by students of the Pallaskenry College!

I was also delighted to learn that music plays an important part in the life of the school, including traditional Irish music, which is such a strong and rich feature of the cultural life of west Limerick. As Don Bosco himself said, "a school without music is a school without a soul."

May I, then, commend all the teachers and staff of Salesian Secondary College for upholding the profoundly humane and empowering values promoted by Don

Bosco, whose work and memory we are honouring today. Don Bosco left a most valuable legacy to the universal community of educators: I thank each and every one of you for your dedication to your pupils; for your constant willingness to go the extra mile in order to nurture and support all of the children in your care so that they may grow and flourish. I thank you for offering a vibrant academic and spiritual environment to your students and for making this institution the happy and productive learning community that it so clearly is.

Life is about possibility and the opening up of new horizons. It is about the exploration of uncharted territories through the combined powers of will and imagination. And so, if I may leave the pupils of Salesian Secondary College with one, quite personal, piece of advice, it would be the following: may all of you continue to tackle the world, and do so with joy!

Is iontach an obair atá ar siúl agaibh. Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.