



## **We need a missionary Church, rather than a perfect Church**

*by Fr Noel Connolly SSC, Plenary Council Facilitation Team*

As I travel around Australia promoting the Plenary Council, I encounter both scepticism and hope. The most frequent question is “will the bishops listen?” At the same time there is a reservoir of hope in people. They love the Church and want to be a part of its future. They want to talk and they want to be listened to.

My hope is that we can build a Church in which lay men and especially women can play their rightful role in the ministry and governance of the Church, and where we can learn to trust one another - bishops and all the people of God.

But in recent weeks I have been giving more thought to the question posed for the Council: “What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?” The question refers to Australia, not to the Church. The Plenary Council is not just for our Church, but for our country. Even if we were to come up with a transformed Church, if the country does not benefit, we will have “failed”. We will have failed because we will have failed to be Church.

Pope Francis keeps reminding us to stop being preoccupied with ourselves and to go out into the streets as missionary disciples prepared to get dirty and bruised. There we will find renewal and transformation. We must remember that the goal of mission is not primarily about the expansion or perfection of the Church, but the revelation of God’s love and the realisation of God’s liberating plan for the universe. It is a plan for a “Kingdom” larger than the Church.

This revolution in understanding mission came at Vatican II, when the bishops realised that mission flows directly from the nature of God - a loving community of three persons whose love gives birth to the universe much the same as parents’ love gives birth to children. And, like parents, the Trinity continues to love creation wanting to draw it into their life. It is God’s mission.

Mission is God’s project and we are not the main actors. The Church is neither the starting point nor the end point, but rather the servant and sacrament of God’s mission.

The three persons of the Trinity are constantly creating, healing, reconciling, transforming and uniting the world. We are invited to participate in God’s life in the world.

The majority of “Kingdom good” done in the world today will not be done by Catholics or even Christians. It will be done by people of good will, including our secular brother and sister Australians.

God is present wherever men and women strive for justice, peace, freedom and reconciliation between peoples, cultures and religions. Our task is not only to strive for the Kingdom, but also to seek out, uncover, encourage, celebrate and build on the Spirit’s



activity in Australia. To recognise this good requires humility, closeness, listening and discernment - the very things Pope Francis stresses.

We have much to gain from secular Australia. We can learn a lot about transparency, accountability, participation, the involvement of women, consultation and so forth.

In going out, we may also be refreshed by what we learn of God and of the Gospel because we can be confident that God is present and working even in secular and plural Australia. We have much to give and to learn.

“We are challenged to be people of depth, attentive to what is happening around us and spiritually alert.” According to Pope Francis those things are more likely to convert and renew us than a forensic examination and reform of the Church.

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