

A Journey of Discernment **The Plenary Council**



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The decision to postpone the First Assembly of the Plenary Council until 2021 was not, in the end, a difficult one for the bishops of Australia to make. There were a number of things to consider: the uncertainty surrounding the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for large gatherings of people; the possible re-structuring of the airline industry in Australia; the preoccupation of people in relation to the impact of the pandemic on their personal, family and professional lives; and the need for the Catholic community to demonstrate its determination to support the common effort in combatting the virus. In considering these matters, it became clear that the plan for the First Assembly to be held in October 2020 needed to be revised.

There was some disappointment accompanying the recognition of the inevitability of the decision. At the same time, however, there was a widespread conviction that the postponement of the First Assembly offered the whole Church in Australia a precious, and indeed God-given, opportunity to enter more deeply into the process of discernment which has always been at the very heart of the Plenary Council project.

It is sometimes forgotten that the decision to hold a Plenary Council was taken after, and was the fruit of, the Year of Grace which Australian Catholics celebrated in 2012. At the heart of that remarkable year was a deep conviction, certainly on the part of the bishops, that what Pope John Paul II had written in 1999 in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI), the Apostolic Letter with which he led the Church into the new millennium, was absolutely true:

Is it not the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine also before the generations of the new millennium?

Our witness, however, would be hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves had not first contemplated his face. The Great Jubilee has certainly helped us to do this more deeply. At the end of the Jubilee, as we go back to our ordinary routine, storing in our hearts the treasures of this very special time, our gaze is more than ever firmly set on the face of the Lord (NMI 16).

When Pope John Paul II wrote these words he was acutely aware of the many challenges facing the Church.¹ In 2020 the Catholic community of Australia is similarly aware of the many challenges facing the Church in our own country. The extraordinary response to the first phase of the Plenary Council journey – the Listening and Dialogue

process – demonstrates this very clearly. So do the six discernment papers published on Pentecost Sunday. These documents speak the language of faith and commitment and are themselves the fruit of discernment on the six key themes which emerged from an analysis of the responses to the Listening and Dialogue process.

From a practical point of view, the next step is to use these six papers, together with other material which has been submitted to the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council and the Facilitation Team led by Lana Turvey-Collins, to form a comprehensive Working Document (called in the synodal tradition of the Church an *Instrumentum Laboris*). From this document will emerge the agenda for the Plenary Council. The agenda and the *Instrumentum Laboris*, to be finalised by the end of this year, will then become the guiding documents for the ongoing work of preparation for the First Assembly in 2021.

At the heart of the Plenary Council, in its preparation stage (presently underway), in its celebration stage (the two formal Assemblies) and its implementation stage (to be undertaken at both the national level and, more importantly, at the local level), we find the call to, and challenge of, discernment. Both the call and the challenge are captured very well in the fundamental question of the Plenary Council and in the foundational theme of the Plenary Council.

1 Throughout *Novo Millennio Ineunte* Pope John Paul II refers to a number of pressing issues which confronted the world community, and therefore the Church, at the time of writing. Many of these issues have not changed. He mentions for example, “the prospect of an ecological crisis which is making vast areas of our planet uninhabitable and hostile to humanity ... the problems of peace, so often threatened by the spectre of catastrophic wars ... (and) contempt for the fundamental human rights of so many people, especially children” (NMI 51). In the same paragraph he refers to the need to respect the life of every human being and to ensure that the latest advances of science do not disregard fundamental ethical requirements. In the face of these and other challenges Pope John Paul remarks that “we ask ourselves today the same question put to Peter in Jerusalem immediately after his Pentecost speech: ‘What must we do?’” (Acts 2:37). The Pope goes on to say that, “we put the question with trusting optimism, but without underestimating the problems we face” And he concludes by insisting that “we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!” (NMI 29).

The fundamental question is this: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* The foundational theme is this: *Listen to what the Spirit is saying.* We are all engaged in the ongoing effort, as the Catholic community in Australia, to seek to answer the **question** by engaging with what the **theme** invites us to do. The word “discernment” captures perfectly the task in which we are engaged and to which we are called to continue to commit ourselves.

Discernment is an ongoing process – the end of which we have not yet reached. The reflection, submission and eventual publication of the responses, all of which were part of the Listening and Dialogue process, did not represent the end of the process; rather, this was an important milestone along the way. The long preparation and eventual publication of the six discernment papers did not represent the end of the process, but rather another important milestone along the way. The writing of the *Instrumentum Laboris* and the formation of the agenda will similarly be not the end of the process, but yet another important milestone along the way. And certainly the two formal Assemblies, pivotal moments of decision in the Plenary Council journey, will also be a milestone, but not the end of the process. The “end” of the process will unfold in each diocese and in each local Catholic community as the fruits of the Council begin to take root and flourish. Just as the Second Vatican Council has not yet finished, for its reception and implementation are still unfolding in the life of the Church, so the Plenary Council will still continue for many years, even decades, to come. Long after the second of the two formal Assemblies is concluded we will still be trying to *listen to what the Spirit is saying* so that we can continue to delve into the depths of the question of what God is asking of us in Australia

at this time – and hopefully find some answers to which we can all commit ourselves.

The formation of the central question of the Council – *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* – was itself the fruit of discernment by the Facilitation Team, the Executive Committee and some members of the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council. As part of this group I am surprised, and a little embarrassed, that in the first formulation of the question there was no mention of God! Instead we focused on inviting people to share their own hopes or dreams and their own joys and disappointments concerning the Church. It was as if we were asking the Catholic community to tell us what they wanted the Church to look like and be like into the future. This is, of course, a reasonable question and it is, in fact, the one which many people answered in their submissions to the Listening and Dialogue stage. There should be no doubt that God speaks to each of us in the depths of our hearts and is revealed to us in the midst of our own life experience. Equally it is true that what you or I might want for the Church could well be exactly what God wants for the Church. A problem arises, however, when we simply presume that what we want and what God wants are the same thing, without really engaging in a profound process of discernment to determine whether the many voices to which we are all attentively listening are revealing or obscuring the voice of the Spirit.

This is why discernment has been, and must continue to be, the fundamental principle which guides us all in our engagement with the Plenary Council. The Facilitation Team and the Executive Committee guiding us towards the formal Assemblies are deeply aware of this and fully

committed to it. They are also conscious, as I am, that we in the Church in Australia still have a long way to go as we learn more and more about the practice of discernment – by engaging in it. The bishops, too, are conscious of this. When we travelled to Rome last year for the *Ad Limina* visit to the Holy See and Pope Francis, we spent a week together making a retreat, led by Br Ian Cribb SJ, which was focused on the call to discernment. The purpose of the retreat was to help us enter more deeply into this process, without which we risk closing ourselves off to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Within the Catholic Church, with our 2,000 years of lived experience of trying to allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, we have a rich tradition of discernment. It takes many forms and has a number of key elements, all of which we will need to bring to bear if our Plenary Council journey is to bear fruit that will last. In shaping the various elements of the preparation for the formal Assemblies, we have relied heavily, though not exclusively, on the Ignatian tradition of “discernment of spirits”. Many of you will have experienced this in your engagement with the Listening and Dialogue and Listening and Discernment processes. The Ignatian tradition offers, among other things, a guide to “spiritual conversations” which we will continue to employ as we continue our journey. Processes of discernment help us to listen carefully to what is going on within us and, as we share this with others, what is also going on within them. Many of us have had to learn the hard way that this requires honesty, humility and openness to each other. It is not easy to let go of long-cherished ideas and convictions, or to have them challenged by the obvious sincerity of people who see things

differently from us, but this is what it means to *listen to God by listening to each other*.

This “honesty, humility and openness to each other” will, of course, need to be grounded in and nourished by deep and sustained prayer, both by individuals and by communities. It will be the habit and practice of prayer which will mould our hearts and open our ears to enable us to “tune in” to the voice of God speaking to us in all kinds of ways, some of them most unexpected.²

As we move further into the journey of the Plenary Council it is becoming clearer that simply listening to each other, essential though this is, does not exhaust or complete the task and challenge of discernment. The very listening itself must be an act of discernment. The first Letter of St John reminds us of this when the author exhorts us to remember that:

*it is not every spirit, my dear people,
that you can trust; test them to see if
they come from God (1 John 4:1).*

This “testing” is essential if we are, in fact, going to succeed in *listen(ing) to what the Spirit is saying* in order to come to a deeper understanding of *what God is asking of us in Australia at this time*. Here again the Ignatian tradition can assist us with its insights into the mysterious workings of God in our lives through “consolation” and “desolation”. This involves much more than simply noticing our emotional responses to the matters we are considering: it involves a careful reading – a “discernment” – of those responses. This, it seems to me, is both an art and a “spiritual science”.

What does this “testing” of the spirits involve?

² This was the experience of the Prophet Elijah who encountered the voice of the Lord not in the mighty wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in the “sound of a gentle breeze” (cf. 1 Kings 19:11-13).

What does it look like? How do we go about it?

In my dual role as the Archbishop of Perth and as the President of the Plenary Council I am often asked how I will judge whether or not the Plenary Council has been a success. In some ways, at least in my own view, it is an easy question to answer. The Plenary Council will have been a success to the extent that from it emerges a more faithful Church. This is, I know, a “motherhood and apple pie” answer: who could argue with it? But, of course, it invites us to a deep reflection on the Church; on its nature and on its mission, which are, of course, two sides of the one coin. Equally it invites us to consider just how we will measure that fidelity for which we all hope and pray.

These reflections will require of us a deep understanding not just of the current situation in which the Church finds itself in the contemporary world, but also of the fundamental elements of the Church as it has been given to us by God.³ We often speak of the Church as “our” Church or as “my” Church, and there is a certain legitimacy and beauty in this. It demonstrates how deeply connected we are, or want to be, to the Church. But before the Church is “mine” or “ours” the Church is God’s Church. We have not created it for ourselves and nor was it created by the early Christians as a useful structure for spreading the message of Christ.⁴ Fundamentally, the Church comes to us as a gift from God.⁵ We are called to receive it with gratitude and, as full members of the Church, to do all we can to ensure that it, that we, remain faithful to what we have been given.⁶

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- 3 Any discussion on the Church inevitably involves the particular understanding of “the Church” held by those engaged in the discussion. While I would propose that the multi-faceted understanding contained in *Lumen Gentium* (see the following endnote) should guide us, a simple working definition might be that offered by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 752): “In Christian usage, the word ‘church’ designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable. ‘The Church’ is the People that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body.”
- 4 The scandal and unspeakable tragedy of the sexual abuse of the young, including the failure of so many Church leaders to deal adequately with this shocking reality, has given rise to an intense focus on the *institution* of the Church. There is no doubt that there is a need for open, honest and courageous dialogue about the causes, including the possibility of institutional causes, of this scandal. There is, however, only one Church which is at the same time institutional, charismatic and spiritual. Vatican II sets this out very comprehensively in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) which deserves to be read in its entirety as the most authoritative and comprehensive statement of the Catholic Church’s fundamental belief about its own nature, identity and mission.
- 5 It is, of course, quite possible to misunderstand the nature and purpose of a gift we have been given, or to misuse the gift, abuse the gift, or leave it languishing and forgotten in a cupboard into which we have thrown it. No one could convincingly claim that the members of the Church through the centuries, including our own, have always made good or proper use of the gift or have fully understood or appreciated its many dimensions. One of the hopes of the Plenary Council must surely be that we will all come to a deeper understanding of the richness and potential of the gift we have been given – and thus be inspired to make much better use of the gift than we have so far.
- 6 Pope John Paul II points out the implications of this characteristically “catholic” view of the Church when he remarks that “it is not therefore a matter of inventing a ‘new programme’. The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This programme for all times is our programme for the Third Millennium. But it must be translated into *pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community*” (NMI 29).

When Pope Francis' namesake, Francis of Assisi, wandered into the ruined chapel of San Damiano in the countryside beyond the walls of Assisi and knelt before the crucifix, he heard a voice saying to him "Go and rebuild my Church for it is falling into ruin". At first Francis thought he was being directed to rebuild the crumbling little chapel – and this he set out to do. He did not tear down what was left and start from scratch. Instead he sought to restore the chapel to its former beauty, and perhaps enhance that beauty, so that it was a place worthy of the Lord who dwelt within it. Gradually Francis came to realise that his vocation was about so much more. And so he decided to begin to live the gospel seriously and to model his life as closely as he could on the life and teachings of Jesus. His example soon attracted followers and a community formed around him – a community of people who, like Francis, wanted to live the gospel seriously. When the community began to experience opposition, as often happens when people try to live the gospel seriously, Francis went to Rome to seek the guidance and approval of the pope. He understood that he needed to remain within the Church if his living of the gospel was to be authentic.

Francis was not asked to tear down the Church, imperfect and unfaithful though it was in many ways, and start again. Such an approach would, in a certain sense, emerge some centuries later in the Reformation. Francis was asked to **rebuild** the Church, to **renew** the Church, so that it could walk the path of fidelity more surely.

The decision to celebrate the Plenary Council might well, then, be understood as the "San Damiano moment" in the life of the Church in Australia. We are being invited to rebuild the

Church, to restore it so that its true nature and identity, and its beauty, can be seen again. We are being called to walk together again the path of true fidelity. But if we are, together, to do this we need to understand the gift we have been given, rejoice in it, love it, and be ambitious for its future.

How do we distinguish what we can do, and perhaps must do, to contribute to the rebuilding and renewing of the Church from what we must not do because it will further weaken the Church? How can we be a constructive part of a renewed Church and not initiators of a new church which would, in the end, be our own creation rather than God's?

The key lies in a careful consideration of what fidelity to the Lord and the Lord's will for the Church really looks like.

Before I was ordained as a bishop, I taught theology both in Melbourne and at Notre Dame University in Fremantle. In one of my courses I used to speak of what I called a "three-fold fidelity" which was essential for any renewal of the Church. I would like to briefly address this question now.

I used to speak, and indeed still do, of three fundamental fidelities which need to always be in play, much like a juggler needs to keep three balls in the air and not allow one of them to fall to the ground. Those three fidelities are: **fidelity** to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, made known to us in the Scriptures, and pre-eminently in the four canonical gospels, as those Scriptures are lived and believed in within the community of faith; **fidelity** to the ongoing presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Church over the last 2,000 years in fulfilment of the promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would lead the disciples into the

fullness of the truth (cf John 16:13)⁷; and **fidelity** to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, and the world, today, speaking to us in the signs of the times (the concrete circumstances of our individual and communal experience) as they are interpreted in the light of the gospel (*Gaudium et Spes* 4).

A great deal would need to be said about each of these three fidelities and what they imply for the work of the Plenary Council. Such a discussion is beyond the scope of these reflections. However, one or two points can be raised.

Firstly, the search for fidelity to each of the three elements mentioned above is itself a work of discernment. In relation to the interpretation of Scripture we might remember the warning of Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*: “the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose”. Indeed, in the gospel accounts of the temptations of Jesus the devil does precisely this (cf *Matt* 4:6). In our Catholic tradition we know that the Scriptures and pre-eminently the New Testament are the Book of the Church. The community of faith existed before the gospels were written and it was the faith of the Church which determined which of the many gospels circulating in the early centuries of the Church’s life were to be accepted as inspired by God. The Catholic Church is a community

of common faith and worship called together by Christ, not a simple gathering of like-minded individuals. It is from within the community of faith, and from the fundamental communion we share, that a true understanding of the Scriptures emerges over time.

Because of this it is good from time to time to remind ourselves that the gospels, the word of God, are a written testimony to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, whose body the Church is, with Christ as the Head of that Body (see *Colossians* 1:18). It is impossible to separate the gospels from the Church, the Body of Christ, to which they give witness. This is why, when speaking of the Scriptures, we must always do so in terms of the way they are lived and believed in within the community of faith. It is also why *Gaudium et Spes*, in speaking of the signs of the times, indicates that they must always be interpreted in the light of the gospel.

Biblical scholars speak of the Scriptures as the *norma normans non normata*, that is, as the norm or rule of life which itself is not to be evaluated by any other external criteria or value system. This, too, is important as we consider what it means to live in fidelity to God’s self-revelation in Jesus as this revelation, expressed in the Scriptures, is lived and believed in within the community of faith. In

7 This second fidelity touches on the important concept of “Tradition” in the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in Chapter 2, Article 2, seeks to explain this concept in some detail. From a different perspective the Vatican II Document on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) captures a similar idea in these words: “Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes (DV 8).” Interestingly the document then goes on to say that “this tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see *Luke*, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.” These words express well the notion of the Development of Doctrine which is so important for a proper understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church throughout the ages and still today.

effect it means that every culture (worldview) is to be measured against the gospel culture;⁸ every moral system is to be evaluated by gospel morality; every understanding of the figure of Jesus is to be measured against the image of Jesus that emerges in the gospel pages; and every image of God is to be measured against the understanding of God presented to us by Jesus.

The Plenary Council, in its preparatory stage, its celebratory stage and its implementation stage, will be a success if we remain faithful to the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God, and to Jesus who, in those very Scriptures, proclaims himself to be our Way, and our Truth and our Life.

We turn now to the second fidelity: fidelity to the ongoing presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Church over the last 2,000 years. John’s gospel speaks of Jesus, during the course of the Last Supper, telling his disciples, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). It is in this context that he assures his disciples that he will send the

Holy Spirit to them, who will lead them into all the truth. This “leading into all the truth”, this sharing of “yet many things” which Jesus wishes to communicate to his disciples, has been unfolding in the life of the Church for the last two millennia – and it continues today. The Second Vatican Council spoke of this reality in these terms:

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the

8 The word “culture” carries a variety of meanings. I am using it here in the general sense of a fundamental set of values and subsequent structures, traditions, etc, which flow from an understanding of what it means to be a human person (created by God as believers would insist) and called into a relationship (with God as believers would insist), with other people, with the society in which we live, and with the whole of creation. It is, in other words, a “worldview”. In this sense there is a “gospel culture” which transcends any other culture, including that into which Jesus was born, grew up, lived and died. A “gospel culture” needs to be “inculturated” into every culture it encounters. It does this by affirming all that is good in the culture and by challenging all that is not. This is precisely what the Incarnation does: by becoming “one of us” Jesus as “the revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (*Gaudium et Spes* 22). In Christ we see what we are created to be and enabled to be by the gift of God’s grace through the Spirit. This “gospel culture” is presented to us in Christ: it grounds a “Christ-centred anthropology” (a “worldview” as described above) the implications of which are constantly unfolding and being deepened through the Spirit-led discernment of the Church, the People of God, which is the Body of Christ with Christ as the Head of the Body (see Col 1:18).

Chapter Two of *Gaudium et Spes* offers an extensive treatment of the question of “human culture”. While it does not speak of a “gospel culture” in the way that I am using the phrase it does point out that “the Gospel of Christ constantly renews the life and culture of fallen man, it combats and removes the errors and evils resulting from the permanent allurements of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. By riches coming from above, it makes fruitful, as it were from within, the spiritual qualities and traditions of every people of every age. It strengthens, perfects and restores them in Christ. Thus the Church, in the very fulfilment of her own function, stimulates and advances human and civic culture; by her action, also by her liturgy, she leads them toward interior liberty.

For the above reasons, the Church recalls to the mind of all that culture is to be subordinated to the integral perfection of the human person, to the good of the community and of the whole society” (*GS* 58-59).

Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her (Dei Verbum 8).

The growth in understanding to which these words refer comes to “moments of fruition” through what St John Henry Newman would name as “the development of doctrine”.⁹ The word “development” is very important here. Newman would speak about legitimate development which is really the uncovering of the hidden depths contained in what is already the faith of the Church, and illegitimate development which is really the partial or total abandonment of the faith of the Church and its replacement with something incompatible with or contrary to the faith of the Church.

Newman teaches us that true development is a sign of vitality in the Church. He also teaches that development implies change. “To live is to change,” he writes, “and to be perfect is to have changed often”.¹⁰ We should not be afraid of change in the Church for, according to Newman, the animating presence of the Holy Spirit makes change inevitable. We do, however, need to be committed to ensuring that change is true development, as Newman understands it, rather than innovation which threatens the integrity of the Church.

As I reflect on the extraordinary level of engagement with the work of the Plenary Council so far, it seems very clear to me that there is a hunger for change in the Church. If Cardinal Newman is correct, this hunger is really a desire for the Spirit to be alive and active in the Church

today. It will be the task of the Plenary Council to discern which of the changes being called for in the Church really are legitimate developments and further “uncoverings” of the depths of the faith of the Church, and which instead are not in harmony with God’s intention in bringing the Church into being. This is a delicate and sensitive task, especially given the level of hope and expectation that the work of the Plenary Council has generated among the People of God in Australia. The sincerity, the deep yearning and, yes, the pain and distress evident in so many of the contributions to the Council so far should not and must not be disregarded or minimised. The Spirit of God is undoubtedly speaking in and through these voices.

The invitation of the Plenary Council is to *listen to what the Spirit is saying*. The Council will be a success if we do indeed listen to the voice of the Spirit speaking in and to the Church over the last 2,000 years and remain faithful to our determination not to lose anything of the giftedness of the Spirit’s guidance over that time. If we fail to do so then we will not be the Church that God has created and is calling us to be. We will not be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of those who have gone before us, and which we have received from them through the work of the Holy Spirit.

These reflections lead us naturally into a consideration of the third fidelity: fidelity to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and the world today, speaking to us in the signs of the times.

As I noted above, the Listening and Dialogue stage of the Plenary Council process has uncovered

⁹ See Newman, J.H., *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* [1845] (Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1989).

¹⁰ Newman, *Development* p.40

a sincere and deep yearning for a renewed and purified Church which is able to respond to the hopes, and to the pain and distress which has been so much a part of the experience of many who responded to the invitation to engage in the discernment process. So many of these voices are captured in the theme of “a Christ-centred Church which is humble, healing and merciful”. Pope Francis, too, speaks often of this as he calls the Church to be “a healer of wounds and a warmer of hearts”.¹¹

In making this call Pope Francis is highlighting something which is, we might say, part of the DNA of the Church but which is particularly relevant in the present context in which the Church finds itself. As the Pope has noted frequently, we are living not so much in an era of change as in a change of era.¹² This means, in the mind of Pope Francis, that we are today faced with situations and challenges we have never experienced before and to which we may find it difficult to respond or fully understand.

It can be said that today we do not live in an age of change as much as a change of era. The situations we are experiencing today therefore pose new challenges that are sometimes even

difficult for us to understand. This time of ours requires us to experience problems as challenges and not as obstacles: the Lord is active and at work in the world. You, therefore, go out into the streets and go to the crossroads: all those you find, call them, no one excluded (cf. Mt 22:9). Especially accompany those who have remained at the side of the road, the "lame, crippled, blind, deaf" (Mt 15:30). Wherever you are, never build walls or borders, but rather public squares and field hospitals.¹³

I have already noted that in speaking of the urgency of interpreting the signs of the times, the Second Vatican Council points out that this must be done in the light of the gospel. The signs of the times do not offer a critique of the gospel; rather, it is the other way around. St Paul captures something of this understanding when he encourages his readers in Rome in this way:

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and

11 Pope Francis first used this expression in an interview which he gave over the course of three meetings during August 2013 in Rome. The interview was conducted in person by Antonio Spadaro SJ, editor in chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Italian Jesuit journal. The Pope has often used this striking phrase since in various messages.

12 See, for example, the Address of the Holy Father, Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, Tuesday, 10 November, 2015. The Pope reiterated this message in his Christmas address to the Roman Curia in 2019.

13 The Italian text is as follows: Si può dire che oggi non viviamo un'epoca di cambiamento quanto un cambiamento d'epoca. Le situazioni che viviamo oggi pongono dunque sfide nuove che per noi a volte sono persino difficili da comprendere. Questo nostro tempo richiede di vivere i problemi come sfide e non come ostacoli: il Signore è attivo e all'opera nel mondo. Voi, dunque, uscite per le strade e andate ai crocicchi: tutti quelli che troverete, chiamateli, nessuno escluso (cfr Mt 22,9). Soprattutto accompagnate chi è rimasto al bordo della strada, «zoppi, storpi, ciechi, sordi» (Mt 15,30). Dovunque voi siate, non costruite mai muri né frontiere, ma piazze e ospedali da campo.

acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).¹⁴

This is, of course, the great challenge of discernment in relation to this third fidelity. Among the multitude of voices calling for change in the Church, how are we to respond positively to the leading of the Holy Spirit and at the same time resist the temptation to adopt, unthinkingly and uncritically, the values and worldviews of those in society whose way is not the way of Jesus?

I mentioned earlier that our task and our challenge is, to use the juggling metaphor again, to keep the three balls of fidelity in the air all at once without allowing one or more to fall to the ground. The Church has not always managed to do this in the past and it is possible that we might struggle to do this in our own time. The temptation always exists to privilege one or other of these fidelities over the others. Sometimes we read the Scriptures and forget that there has been and will continue to be development in our understanding of our faith as the Spirit leads us forward. The danger here is that we can become fundamentalist in our approach to our faith. At other times we are tempted to identify what we consider to be the “golden era” of the Church, be it the 1970s, or the 1950s, or the 1800s or the Middle Ages. The danger here is that

we become locked in a moment in the past and find ourselves unable to proclaim the gospel to the people of our own time. At other times again we can become so focused on being able to speak in a way that is acceptable to the society in which we live that we find ourselves accommodating the gospel to the changing and transitory values which hold sway today, only to find that they have changed tomorrow.

Discernment, then, which is at the heart of our Plenary Council journey, is indeed both an art and a science. It will require of us patience, humility, honesty, courage and deep faith. It rarely happens quickly but instead unfolds over time. It is the work of a community of faithful disciples, rather than of individuals. It is, even more fundamentally, the work of the Holy Spirit to whose leadings and promptings we entrust ourselves.¹⁵ It is a work of the Church, the Pilgrim People of God (see *Lumen Gentium*, especially Chapter Two), the Body of Christ (see, for example, *Lumen Gentium* 8), and the universal sacrament of salvation (see *Lumen Gentium* 1 & 48). The one criterion against which we can measure both the journey so far and the journey that lies ahead is that of fidelity to Christ, who is himself the head of the Body which is his Church (Col 1:18). It is all captured in the phrase

14 As always biblical texts need to be interpreted in their context. For a discussion on the interpretation of this text see Brendan Byrne SJ, *Romans* (Sacra Pagina 6) Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1996, pp 362-365. Byrne insists that “these two sentences (verses 1&2) contain a spirituality and a theory of ethical discernment which is both suggestive and open-ended.” While Paul does not spell out specific answers to ethical issues which he could never have imagined he does maintain, according to Byrne, that “the abiding values of the gospel have to be discerned and lived out” in every concrete social, political and cultural context.

15 In his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* (19 March 2018) Pope Francis offers a considered reflection on the theme of discernment. He insists that it is about “more than intelligence or common sense. It is a gift which we must implore. If we ask with confidence that the Holy Spirit grant us this gift, and then seek to develop it through prayer, reflection, reading and good counsel, then surely we will grow in this spiritual endowment.” (*GE* 166). He goes on to insist that “the Lord speaks to us in a variety of ways, at work, through others and at every moment. Yet we simply cannot do without the silence of prolonged prayer, which enables us better to perceive God’s language, to interpret the real meaning of the inspirations we believe we have received, to calm our anxieties and to see the whole of our existence afresh in his own light. In this way, we allow the birth of a new synthesis that springs from a life inspired by the Spirit” (*GE* 171). The whole section on discernment (paragraphs 166-175) should be regarded as essential reading for all of us who are engaged in the journey of the Plenary Council.

which introduces each of the six thematic areas which emerged from the Listening and Dialogue process: What does it mean to be a Christ-centred Church?

There is so much more to be said about the importance and nature of discernment in the life of the Church, and in the journey of the Plenary Council, than has been considered in this reflection. We are all on this journey together and still have a long way to go. The prayer, the listening, the openness to each other, and the readiness to allow the Holy Spirit to be both the still, quiet voice heard by the prophet Elijah and the roaring wind and burning flame which set the first disciples free from their fear are essential for us all if the Plenary Council is to be the moment of renewal we are all praying for.

Let me, then, conclude in the way I began by recalling the experience of the Year of Grace:

Our witness (to Christ and to the people of our own time) will be hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves have not first contemplated his face (cf. NMI 16).

It is his Church, renewed and healed, which must emerge from the journey of the Plenary Council.

Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB

Archbishop of Perth

President, Plenary Council



Plenary Council 2020
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