



Memorial of St Francis of Assisi

St Kilian's Church, Bendigo

Bishop Shane Mackinlay

4 October 2021

Introduction

Good morning. I'm Bishop Shane Mackinlay, and I'm delighted to welcome you to historic St Kilian's Church, the third church on this site, in what was the heart of the Bendigo goldfields, built in 1888 as the Pro Cathedral of the Sandhurst Diocese.

St Kilian's stands on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people. We recognise their ancient and continuing connection to land, water and community, and we honour Elders past, present and emerging.

Today we come together in person and online to celebrate the Eucharist at the beginning of the first working day of the first assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia.

As Archbishop Tim reminded us in his homily at the Council's Opening Mass yesterday, much of our work this week needs to "done on our knees," as it were. So we won't just pray at the beginning and end of the day, but we will establish a rhythm where we stop and pray regularly as part of the process of discernment throughout the day, including at critical times like before significant votes. Those regular pauses will remind us that in all we are doing, we are gathering as the Body of Christ, with Jesus at the centre, and animated by the Holy Spirit, as we seek to respond to the question: 'What is God asking of us in Australia at this time?'

One of the unplanned benefits of the delayed start to our first assembly is that today falls on the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi, who offers us a wonderful example and inspiration of someone who put himself completely in God's hands, and thus became an extraordinarily effective agent of creating a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in his own time.

As we now seek to follow his example in our own time and place, let us pause to acknowledge our weakness and sin and recall our need for God's Spirit to purify and renew us.

Homily

On this feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, I want to suggest three phrases that are central to his life and mission, and that might be helpful for us as we begin this first assembly of the Plenary Council. The first comes from Francis' own experience of conversion, and the other two are phrases from Francis' writings that have become deeply familiar to us as the titles of Pope Francis' second and third encyclicals.

Francis' father was a silk merchant in Assisi, and Francis enjoyed the wealth, opportunity and privilege bestowed on him. However, he also experienced suffering through illness, and through a year spent as a prisoner of war after joining a military expedition against Perugia. At the age of 23, he was a restless young man who found himself one day in the small and neglected church of San Damiano, where he heard Jesus on the cross tell him to "go and rebuild my church which, as you see, is falling down." Initially, he thought this was a mission to arrange repairs for San Damiano or other run-down churches near Assisi. Over time, he realised that he was being called to a much greater mission of rebuilding the Church of Christ, which was in danger of falling apart. He committed himself to following Jesus in simplicity and poverty, proclaiming God's love for everyone and for every part of creation. His example and his joy inspired others to join him and to renew their own faithfulness to the gospel and to living as Christ's Church.

During this Plenary Council, we too are seeking to rebuild Christ's Church, responding in a very concrete way to Pope Francis' repeated call for us to become a more synodal church: a Church committed to journeying together in reciprocal listening to one another, listening to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, and most importantly listening to the Holy Spirit; a Church which gives witness to the Christian vision of community, participation, solidarity and joint responsibility. Our Council agenda makes clear that this rebuilding is our central focus: "As children of God, disciples of Jesus Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Members of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia are called to develop concrete proposals to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia at this time."

Obviously, much of what we consider during this Council will relate specifically to the Church. But to ensure we don't become too focussed just on internal Church issues, I suggest that we carry with us two other phrases that Pope Francis has highlighted from Saint Francis, to remind us that Christ's vision for the Church we are seeking to rebuild is expansive and inclusive of all people, and indeed of the whole of creation.

First, *Laudato Si' (Praise be)*, the title of Pope Francis' encyclical on care for our common home, which is taken from one of Saint Francis' canticles: "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us." It is heartening to see the growing commitment in so many countries to concrete and urgent action to respond to climate change. A renewed Church is one that further promotes awareness of the broader challenges of our life together and the many ways we have

failed to care for our common home, calling us to renew the fundamental responsibility that we hold as stewards of God's creation.

Of course, those broader challenges are not limited to the precious home that we share together, but include the suffering and needs of all God's children. Reminding us of this, the second phrase that Pope Francis uses from his namesake is *Fratelli tutti* (*Sisters and Brothers all*), calling us to "acknowledge, appreciate and love each person" in a way that "transcends the barriers of geography and distance" and continues the example of Saint Francis, who "sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters."

The work of renewing our Church and being more faithful to the mission entrusted to us requires that we always bear in mind not only the needs of our Church life and structures, but also the needs and challenges being faced by all our sisters and brothers, and our responsibilities to the common home that we are entrusted with caring for.

As St Francis was called to rebuild Christ's Church, may we during this Plenary Council be inspired, encouraged and renewed by his vision and commitment, to turn again towards all our sisters and brothers, as stewards together of God's extraordinary creation. In this way, may we in this time work to "create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia."