



Plenary Council President's Opening Address

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

My first words to you must be words of welcome to you all. We are all sisters and brothers in the faith and all are equally welcome. I do want to acknowledge, however, Monsignor John Baptist Itamura and Monsignor Giuseppe Quirighetti from the Apostolic Nunciature in Canberra as well as a number of other observers and guests, including Cardinal John Dew, Archbishop of Wellington and President of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, Cardinal Charles Bo, Archbishop of Yangon and President of the Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops Conferences, Most Rev Peter Loy Chong, Archbishop of Suva and President of the Federation of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania, Most Rev Anton Bal, Archbishop of Madang in Papua New Guinea and President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, Most Rev Paul Donoghue, Bishop of Rarotonga in the Cook Islands and President of the Episcopal Conference of the Pacific, the Right Reverend Phillip Huggins, Anglican Bishop and President of the National Council of Churches in Australia, and Mr Roberto Scenna and Mr Ross Castle from Catholic Church Insurances.

Grace and peace to you all from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 1:1).

I greet you all this morning in this opening session of the first assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of the Church in Australia with these words of Saint Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles and in many ways the great spearhead of the infant Church's extraordinary missionary outreach to the many peoples and cultures of his own time. Perhaps it was this missionary energy which Pope Francis had in mind when he spoke of a missionary option for the Church, "*a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation*" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 27). As today

as we take this bold and crucial step forward in our own response to the call for the Church's transformation we can be inspired and encouraged by the energy, persistence, creativity and fidelity of Saint Paul and by the dream of Pope Francis whose words have helped inspire and shape the agenda which will guide us through the days ahead.

More importantly we can be confident that we are being guided by the Holy Spirit of God. How often have we prayed the Plenary Council prayer, individually and collectively, asking for the grace to see the face of God in each other and to recognise Jesus who journeys with us? How many times have we asked for the power of God's Spirit who can help us to hold together in creative tension the readiness to speak boldly and the determination to listen humbly? How many times have we prayed for a discerning heart which will enable us to hear what God is saying in, and through, and under, and beyond all the voices to which we have tried, and will continue to try, to listen so carefully?

This is the grace for which we have prayed ever since our journey towards this moment began. Do we really believe that God, who promised to give good things to those who ask him (Matt 7:11), would not give us this good gift? In praying sincerely for this gift we have, perhaps without realising it, also prayed to be open to both receiving and using this gift, and it is this prayer which must guide us throughout the coming week.

As we begin our work this morning it is important to recall that we are participants in an historic moment for the Church in Australia. A Plenary Council is a solemn and authoritative gathering of the Catholic Church in a particular time and place, and one in which the very nature of the Church finds expression. It is an instrument of synodality, of collegiality and of communion with the Church throughout the world, a communion which is expressed in the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome. It is an event governed by Canon Law and by the richness and diversity of our Catholic tradition, and its purpose, to which we will seek to be faithful this week, is to ensure that the pastoral needs of the people of God are provided for. The Statutes and Regulatory Norms which will guide us throughout this week, and which echo the Canon Law of the Church, specify the four areas which must be our concern as we seek to discern, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a way forward for the Church in our land. Those four areas are: firstly an increase of faith; then an ordering of common pastoral action; then the direction of morals; and lastly the preservation, introduction and defence of a common ecclesiastical discipline. It will be our task to discern, through the

practice of synodality, of collegiality and of communion with the world-wide Church, whatever seems opportune for us to decide, and to do, to bring to life this four-fold renewal of the Church.

We will be engaged, therefore, in the work of discernment. The voice we will most need to hear, and to be attentive to, is that of the Holy Spirit. We will listen to each other carefully and respectfully, as Pope Francis invites us to do, alert to the voice of the Spirit. We will scrutinize the signs of the times in the light of the gospel, as *Gaudium et Spes* calls us to do. We will “*test the spirits to see if they come from God*” (1 John 4:1). We will “*listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches*” (cf Rev 2:7). We will keep in mind the plea of Saint Paul “*not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect*” (cf Rom 12: 2-3). This week our speaking will be so important – but our listening will be even more important.

Many of us come with high hopes - great expectations - to this assembly, and rightly so. Many of us also come conscious of the heavy responsibility we bear, and rightly so. In the mysterious ways of God’s providence, it is **we** have been called together to undertake this historic and grace-filled task on behalf of the whole Catholic community of our nation. In an important sense, therefore, we come as representatives of the People of God in Australia. We carry with us, as a privilege and as a responsibility, the precious and sometimes fragile faith of God’s people: we carry their hopes and dreams, their pain and suffering, their joy and their optimism, their fears and their hesitations. The task we share together, therefore, is not that of being a representative voice for any one organisation, or ministry, or spirituality within the Church. We have not been called to advance any particular agenda, be it our own or someone else’s. We have been called to enter into a sacred space, as brothers and sisters in Christ, to listen deeply for the voice and to be alert to the leadings of the Holy Spirit, as these emerge through all the different elements of our week together, and as they have emerged and matured over the years of our preparation for this moment.

At times this week the Holy Spirit of God may be experienced, as happened at the first Pentecost, as burning flame and roaring wind, turning everything upside down (Acts 2:2-3). At other times the voice of God and the presence of the Spirit will be experienced not in the mighty wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in the still, small voice - the gentle breeze. (1 Kings 19:11-13). As Jesus himself reminds us, the Spirit blows where he wills (John 3:8), and this week we must be alert

and attentive to all the ways in which the Lord is speaking, both in those ways we are expecting, and in ways which perhaps, this morning, we can hardly imagine.

The Spirit will speak in the full assemblies each morning. The Spirit will speak in the reflective encounters of our spiritual conversations in the afternoons. The Spirit will speak in our formal moments of prayer, in our celebrations of the Eucharist, and when we find ourselves disconnecting from our devices in order to take a break from the pressures of our work. Originally, of course, we had hoped to be all together in Adelaide and would have been alert for the voice of the Spirit in our morning tea breaks, our meals together, and in the downtime each evening when the day was over and we could relax together. While it would be understandable to lament the loss of these opportunities, the God in whom we place our trust can work through whatever circumstances we encounter. The locked doors of the Upper Room did not prevent the risen Jesus coming to be with his disciples (John 20:19). The restrictions imposed by the pandemic will not prevent the Holy Spirit from moving our minds and our hearts if we remain open to that Spirit.

In recent decades, and still today, the Catholic community in Australia has had to face the reality of our betrayal of so many of our young people through the horror of sexual abuse. So many lives have been diminished and even destroyed because of this dreadful failure. We carry the weight of the shame with us into this assembly, and equally we also carry an unshakable conviction that our care for those who have suffered so much, and our responsibility to make our Church settings places of safety and security for our children, our young people and vulnerable adults, must remain two fundamental aspects of our life and ministry as the Church in Australia. This reality is surely one of the “*signs of the times*” which we are called to discern in the light of the gospel. There are, of course, many others which have found expression in the responses to the Listening and Dialogue, in our six discernment papers, in the working document of this Plenary Council, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, and in the agenda we have before us now. As we consider all this we can recall that Pope Francis has spoken of the mission of the Church as a call to be “*a healer of wounds and a warmer of hearts*”. In doing so he is reminding us of what it means to be a community of disciples of Jesus, who himself emerges from the pages of the gospel as the great healer of wounds and the great warmer of people’s hearts. If we are to be, together, an effective sign and instrument, that is a “sacrament”, of the ongoing presence of Christ in the world then this is at the heart of our discipleship. Many of the submissions which emerged

from the listening and dialogue phase of our Plenary Council journey indicated that many people did not and do not always experience the Church in this way. Others, of course, indicated that this is exactly the way they experience the Church. There is no need for me to enumerate all these matters here: we are aware of them all and carry them in our minds and hearts. We must be prepared for the Holy Spirit to show us the way to affirm and deepen all that is life-giving about the Church and equally to call us to conversion and renewal so as to purify the Church and equip us to take up the missionary option of which Pope Francis speaks. But we must be prepared to be surprised. We do not want the Lord to have to say to us as he said on one occasion to Simon Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan, for you are an obstacle in my path. The way you think is not God’s way but a human way”* (Matt 16:23).

As we look back over the years of preparation for this moment we can do so with gratitude, with amazement at all that has been achieved so far, and with confidence that we have set out on a path opened up for us by the Holy Spirit. Each one of us, I hope, could tell our own stories of moments along the way when we recognised or felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work. The decision of the bishops, after a long period of gestation, to convene the Plenary Council was one such moment for me. So, too, was the unexpected decision to first convene the Year of Grace, where we were all encouraged to contemplate the face of Christ and only then begin to discern what God might be asking of us. The shaping of the fundamental question which guided the listening and dialogue phase of our Plenary Council journey was experienced by me as another Spirit-filled moment, as we realised that it was God’s will for the Church, which might or might not correspond with our hopes for the Church, which must be at the heart of everything. And perhaps most strikingly was the consensus which suddenly and unexpectedly emerged that the agenda must take the words of Pope Francis about the choice of a missionary option as the central theme of the Council.

In a few moments, when I finish this address, I would ask that we all briefly pause for quiet reflection, and I would invite each of us to try and identify our own moments along the way when we, too, in one way or another, have discerned the presence of God’s Holy Spirit. We can then carry not just those moments, but the conviction and lived experience of God’s Spirit at work among us, into the week which lies ahead. We do not know quite where we will find ourselves at the end of this week. We do know that whatever emerges from this week will need to be assimilated, discerned and deepened over the coming months as we move towards the second and final assembly of the Plenary Council in

the middle of next year. At the end of this week our work will not have concluded: indeed, it will only be beginning.

As I indicated at the beginning of this address that there are many of us, and many among the people of God in the Church in Australia, who feel worried or anxious, or battered or bruised, by the situation in which the Church finds itself at this time in our history. To the extent that this is true - and it is not, of course, the whole story - but to the extent that it **is** true we are perhaps not unlike the disciples of Jesus who once found themselves in the boat battling in a heavy sea against a strong headwind. In the Gospel of Matthew's account of this experience Jesus comes towards his disciples through the storm and calls out, "*Have courage, it is I. Do not be afraid*". When Jesus invites Peter to step out from the boat and come to him across the roiling waves Peter does so. At first, with his eyes fixed on Jesus, he walks confidently through the storm. But then his faith and courage fail him, he takes his eyes off Jesus, and he begins to sink. "*Save me, Lord,*" he cries, and Jesus stretches out his hand, takes Peter by his hand, brings him safely back into the boat and stills the storm (*cf Matt 14:22-33*). This is the Lord whose disciples we are. This is the Christ in whose name we gather and who promises to be with us and stay with us. Today he says to us as surely as he said to his first disciples, and he has said to his disciples across the centuries: *Have courage, do not be afraid, I am with you.*

So let us keep our eyes fixed on him throughout this week. He is, after all, the Way, and the Truth and the Life. May we all show ourselves, this week, to be in every way his true disciples.