



Pastoral Letter

Pastoral Theological Reflections of the Australian Plenary Council (2020/2021)

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1. PILGRIMS' ENCOUNTER OF BEAUTY

Whatever we might state as the challenges facing the Church in Australia today, our reflections are to be seen from the panorama of our deepest need: **conversion afresh to the centrality of Jesus.**

PILGRIMS

Written on her tomb in North Sydney, St Mary of the Cross MacKillop offers us an essential wisdom. She said, "Remember we are but pilgrims here." Christians are never nomads, or wanderers. We are pilgrims. We know what our ultimate destiny is: happiness with God in the Father's House. We are led to this destiny by Jesus, "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14/6). Like the disciples on the Emmaus story (Luke 24/13-35), we walk together alongside the Lord. From this image the word "SYNOD" is derived.

ENCOUNTER

Christianity is an encounter religion. Our way forward on pilgrimage is by encountering Jesus continually in mercy and humility. It is the path of conversion that we choose. There is no room for egoism, gossiping or narrow ideologies.

Pope Benedict expresses it wonderfully:

"Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction". (Deus Caritas Est, 2005, n.1)

The Kingdom of God is already upon us in the Grace of the Lord's Death and Resurrection but not yet fully realised. In Faith we allow Jesus to lead us, just like Mary, St Joseph and all the Saints, into

the fullness of the Kingdom of God along with the entire cosmos.

BEAUTY

This saving encounter as pilgrims is the opposite of the predominating context in which Australians live today.

All that draws us to see life in terms of power and competition, of egotistical individualism and gratification must be avoided. Although we need to deal with this societal context every day, succumbing to such forces is not worthy of our human dignity. This is why our journey ahead is crafted as a path of conversion.

It is not simply "conversion from" all this chaos but a "conversion to" all that is of beauty. This leads us to all that is good and true.

All that is beautiful truly moves the human heart and brings us into the presence of God – the author of all beauty and present in the Holy Trinity.

The saints are beautiful. Icons are beautiful. The scriptures are beautiful. The Sacraments are beautiful. Prayer is beautiful. The fragrant rose is beautiful. The sunrise and sunset are beautiful. True love and forgiveness are beautiful. Selflessly working to alleviate poverty and misery is beautiful. A community/diocese trying to live in the truth and goodness of Jesus in the middle of our grave challenges in Australia is beautiful.

God is all beauty – the purest light "in whom there is no darkness". (1John 1/5). Let us let God lead us forward!



2. MAKING THE CHURCH THE HOME AND THE SCHOOL OF COMMUNION

Having established that the journey to the Plenary Council of 2020/2021 is marked by a pilgrimage of conversion, we need to then remind ourselves that we do this as Catholics.

St John Paul II, in one of his wonderful documents at the turn of our new millennium, reflected that the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning is precisely this: “to make the Church the home and the school of communion.” (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 2001, n.43)

Reflecting on this key term of promoting a spirituality of communion, Pope Francis comments:

“The pastoral journey of the local community has as an essential reference point the pastoral plan of the diocese, which is to be placed before the programmes of the associations, movements and any particular group. This pastoral unity, of everyone around the bishop, will create unity in the Church.”

Catholics have a particular theological understanding of this term “pastoral plan”.

For example, the documents of the Vatican II Council make it quite clear that our Church has both a hierarchical and a collegial structure. It is this living experience of communion – of all of the baptised working in the service of the Kingdom of God among us – that is essential.

Following from this is the understanding that we all have equal dignity but we serve in different tasks. The Lay Faithful direct the entire world towards the Kingdom of God. The Clergy specifically serve in the governance, teaching and sanctification of the Church. Even in this they are assisted by the Lay Faithful. The Bishops, as successors of the Apostles, serve under the leadership of the Pope, and become signs of unity and communion of their entire diocese. We are all part of this school of communion.

This is different from viewing the Church purely from the prism of a parliamentary democracy. The

principle in a democracy rests on the understanding that all power comes from the people. In the Church, however, all power comes from Christ. It is the power of the Holy Spirit to serve.

There are many wonderful examples in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn over the years of the practical living out of this ecclesial vision of communion and service, especially in the areas of education, health and social justice.

For example, there have been several attempts in the Archdiocese to articulate a pastoral plan for herself. In more recent years, diocesan-wide and regional deanery assemblies have moved towards a vision of encouraging our people in the crucial areas of married and family life. So many of our diocesan agencies give incredible service in this area. This pastoral plan needs further development.

Diocesan Pastoral Councils have also been created to flesh out pastoral plans over the years. These have lapsed over the years. They need to be re-freshed in a manner that involves as many as possible. Similar observations could be said too about a possible new Diocesan Commission or equivalent for women.

In this **Year of Youth**, our common vision too must be focussed on the place of youth in the Archdiocese. Surprising to some, this is a very dynamic pastoral area in the Archdiocese at present. Let us encourage it together.

These and other possible examples, especially responding to the incredible thirst for prayer among so many, the pastoral care and dynamic contribution of our migrants and refugees, care for the poor and marginalised, and the welcome of new Catholics via the RCIA, ought be areas of our communion in listening and practical charity to ensure that all find a “home” in our Archdiocese.

Our pilgrimage to the national Plenary Council in 2020/21 offers us increased Gospel urgency to focus on these vital pastoral areas.



3. MISSION OF DIALOGUE AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY

CO-RESPONSIBILITY

“Co-responsibility” was a key word that the Fathers of the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) used immediately on returning to their dioceses in 1965. It seemed to them a pastoral key to unlock all that had been discussed and promulgated over the years of intense listening to the Holy Spirit. It is a key term for us all as we make the journey to the Plenary Council. The understanding of co-responsibility is that every baptised Catholic is called to take up their identity as “missionary disciples”, as Pope Francis would describe it. All have a missionary role to live out in some way and at some level. We exercise this role in communion with the whole Church. It means taking seriously the Sacrament of Baptism as the gateway into the missionary life of the Church in the modern world.

Even today the words “missionary” and “evangelisation” are so misunderstood by many Australian Catholics. For many it implies some form of proselytism – a type of forcing people to convert into the Catholic Church. In fact, Catholic teaching for several generations now has insisted that true missionary activity is the opposite of such an aggressive pastoral strategy. Several more recent Popes have used a lovely expression: that Catholics are to “propose” and never “impose” the Faith on others.

DOUBLE MISSION

A double mission is involved here.

First, we are to propose Jesus to the world and preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God. This can be done verbally when appropriate and asked for. Moreso, it can be a non-verbal proclamation. As St Francis of Assisi is reported to have said: “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” Secondly, there is a social mission involved here. Pope Francis stresses this aspect so much. He talks of the mission to the “peripheries” and famously uses the image of the Church as “a field hospital in the battle field of life.”

It is a pastoral mission of co-responsibility to reach out the healing and helping arm of us all to the marginalised. It is the poor Jesus who we serve in the poor.

We must never underestimate the incredible pastoral efforts of generations of devoted Catholics in Australia in the areas, for example, of education, health and social services. Here the social mission of the Church continues to shine brightly. It is hard to imagine the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn without their heroic efforts in living out their Baptisms in past and present times. What can be said of our future social mission in Australia and in our Archdiocese?

DIALOGUE

Catholics choose the path of dialogue in living out their missionary vocations. Often applied to the way we relate to other religions, but illuminating for all types of evangelisation, dialogue is based on three fundamental and simple foundations.

First, there is **the duty to respect our identity and the identity of the other**. When we dialogue with others there is mutual respect. There is no future in demanding that others respect me without a mutual willingness to respect the sincere opinions of others. This requires a deep listening to each other and not simply a hearing of the other.

Secondly, **there must be the courage to accept differences**. Just because someone has a different opinion to me does not mean they are to be treated as enemies. In the Australian context of rampant ideological clashes in all public debates, this is sadly eclipsed in vigorous discussion. May this never be the case in our diocesan and national discussions leading towards the Plenary Council.

Thirdly, **sincere intentions** are needed so that we do not harbour specific end goals to our discussions before they even start. No doubt from the Plenary Council and our own local discussions specific proposals will emerge for pastoral action. Yet the journey to these pastoral plans and our accompanying each other is just as important as any arising definite plans themselves. They must be the fruit of our deep listening in humility to each other and not “the hidden agenda” of particular groups. This latter approach is manipulative and unworthy of missionary disciples. We are to trust that co-responsibility will ultimately give rise to the grace of the fruits and the gifts of the Holy Spirit needed for the pastoral way forward.



4. ON THE JOURNEY TO THE PLENARY COUNCIL 2020/21

May I encourage you to access the Plenary Council website (plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au) to access resources and vital information on this exciting journey of faith for all of us.

We are to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in these challenging times. The Plenary Council official prayer asks the Holy Spirit to:

“Give us the courage to tell our stories and to speak boldly of your truth. Give us ears to listen humbly to each other and a discerning heart to hear what you are saying”.

These petitions ***“to speak boldly...to listen humbly”*** are close to the pastoral heart of Pope Francis in his wisdom for the Catholic Church in this “change of era.” Both responses are necessary simultaneously. “To speak boldly” (“apostolic courage”) without listening humbly is unworthy of mature Christians. Yet, “to listen humbly” without speaking out boldly your observation is a missed opportunity to contribute on our journey of faith together. Let us reflect on these responses carefully in the years up until 2021.

As we gather in the times ahead in all different types of coming together, we are to reflect deeply on this seminal question: **“WHAT DO YOU THINK GOD IS ASKING OF US IN AUSTRALIA AT**

THIS TIME?” It is what “God is asking of us” not what “we are asking of God.” This is crucial. It enables the whole journey to be a time of deep conversion leading to pastoral action.

My desire is that each of our six Deaneries (Canberra dividing into two) are to become **LISTENING POSTS** to what the Holy Spirit is truly saying to us in these times.

We need to follow carefully the 4 step template given to the entire Catholic Church of Australia on how to engage and respond as we gather in small or larger groups on several occasions in the times ahead. (<http://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/>)

The reflections of each gathering are submitted online to the National Plenary Council team (plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au). These will be examined and will develop the agenda for the Plenary Council in 2020/21.

May the Lord Jesus bless and protect us all in the great faith adventure of the Plenary Council of Australia 2020/2021.

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