



2016 Multicultural Mass Homily

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When I was a young priest studying theology in Rome I was asked to write a thesis on the idea of Australian theology. What would theology look like if it was done from a particularly Australian point of view? What themes would emerge as being the most important or the most useful for Australians today? What should characterise the Catholic Church in Australia in our time?

The reason I was asked to do this was because many countries and many cultures were producing their own versions of theology. There was a Latin American theology, a German theology, even an African-American theology, and many others. Why not an Australian theology?

As I began to work on this task, I realised that it was not going to be as easy as it might seem. The reason was that before I could begin such a study, I had to answer some difficult questions. What does it mean to be Australian? What makes Australians, Australian? Who qualifies as an Australian? And above all, how does this influence our faith and our Church, if at all? I realised quickly that the reason this was such a difficult question, was because Australia is, has been for a long time, and is becoming more and more as each year goes by, a multicultural society.

We are a young country in terms of this multicultural reality. The Australian Aboriginal people have been in Australia for many thousands of years and in all that time, if I am not mistaken, they too were in a sense a multicultural people, with different languages, different customs, and different traditions. Since the arrival of the Europeans in any significant numbers 250 years ago, more and more people, from every part of the world, have made Australia their home. And they, we, are all Australians. There is then, in a very real sense, no such thing as an Australian culture, except in so far as the constant intermingling of people from so many different places means that we are all engaged in the process of building an Australian culture that has not yet taken a final form and may not do so for a long time to come.

As I came to realise this, I came to understand that it was precisely the multicultural nature of Australia, rather than some artificial idea of the "Australian culture", which was important for us as a Church. We are being called to show in practice what the Catholic Church, as a true community of disciples of Jesus, should look like as a multi-cultural Christian community in a multi-cultural society.

This of course, is not just the task of the bishops, or the priests or the teachers in our schools. This is the task of every single one of us who wants to claim his or her place in the community of the Church. What is this calling us to?



There are many ways in which we might reflect on such a question. I simply want to offer two ideas for our reflection as we celebrate this very important annual multi-cultural Mass.

The first idea comes from Saint Paul. In one of his letters he speaks about the variety of gifts given to the Church by the one Holy Spirit of God. For Saint Paul this refers to the different roles people play in the life of the Church. Some are prophets, some are teachers, some are evangelists, some are pastors and so on. St Paul urges the community to recognise the gifts which others bring, rejoice in those gifts, receive them with joy, and at the same time generously share their own gifts with each other.

In a multicultural Christian community like the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth, we might say the same about the many gifts of faith and spirituality which each culture and people bring. To recognise and appreciate the richness of another culture, or spirituality, or faith expression is not to call into question the beauty and worth of our own tradition. Rather it is to open ourselves to all that God might be wishing to give us through each other. A Christian community will always want to work hard at recognising the rich variety of gifts God gives his people and strive to create a depth of mutual love and acceptance that knows how to live with this creative presence of God's Spirit at work among us.

The second idea is I think more difficult to grasp and more challenging for us. Just as our experience in Australia is one of an encounter between various cultures, so we might think of the coming of Jesus himself in a similar way. At the Annunciation, when the angel told Mary that she was to become the Mother of the Messiah, something unheard of began which continues to this day. An encounter between what we might call the human culture and the divine culture took place. Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb, he was born in Bethlehem, he grew up in Nazareth and exercised his ministry among the Jewish people. We might almost say that God migrated to earth.

Humanity encountered the divine culture, the divine plan, in Jesus – and as we know the results were mixed. Many embraced all that Jesus brought and rejoiced in the discovery of the true face of God which Jesus revealed. But many others found Jesus to be very disturbing and very confronting. In the face of this new gift of God, many of the things which people had taken for granted were threatened, challenged and overturned. Out of fear and out of anger many people turned against this new gift of God and sought to destroy it. They did not succeed of course. Our presence here tonight is a testimony to that.

The human culture into which Jesus was born has many positive elements but it had many dark corners as well. It was Jesus's challenge to those dark places which so unsettled people. It is the same today. Any culture and every culture will have many positive elements, but all cultures, whether old, new or still emerging, will have many dark corners as well. The challenge Jesus presents to us is to have the courage to allow those dark corners to be lit up by the gospel so that they can be examined, and purified, abandoned if necessary, or re-shaped in the light of the person and the teaching of Jesus and his Church.

This is what I came to realise as I did that study all those years ago. There is beauty and richness and the presence of God's Holy Spirit in every culture, including all those represented here tonight and present in our archdiocese, but there is one culture against which every other human culture



must be measured. It is the Gospel culture, which is to say the divine culture.

This is our challenge: to allow the Gospel to question us about our attitudes, our practices, our presuppositions and our plans. Are we walking in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd? Are we keeping our eyes fixed on Christ? Are we doing our best to be his faithful disciples? This is the culture we need in our Church and in our society today. If we all work together, valuing and respecting each other, this dream of a truly Gospel-inspired Church here in our archdiocese, in all its multicultural beauty and diversity, will gradually become a reality. Let us make this our prayer this evening.