



Holy Thursday 2020

Homily

**By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
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**Thursday 9 April 2020
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As some of you may have heard the bishops of Australia have reluctantly decided to postpone the First Assembly of the Plenary Council, due to be held in October, to a date yet to be decided. The reason for the decision, of course, is the uncertainty which surrounds us as we continue to battle the COVID-19 Coronavirus which is affecting our lives in so many ways.

Although the postponement of the October Assembly of the Council was necessary it has not affected the absolute commitment of the bishops, and hopefully of all Australian Catholics, to the Plenary Council. The bishops are convinced that the decision to convene the Council was made under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps, in God's strange providence, we are all being given the opportunity to reflect even more deeply than we have done so far on the fundamental question of the Council: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?*

There are many ways in which we might prayerfully reflect on this question. One of those ways, and perhaps the most important of all, is to read what is going on around us in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus. The Second Vatican Council, that extraordinary moment of renewal in the life of the Church, puts it this way: *The Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel* (GS4).

All of this is what we really pray about whenever we pray the prayer the Lord taught us: *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

Sometimes, when we think about God's will, we do so in what I might call "big" terms, looking into the future to work out what we are called to do. This is important, of course. For a disciple of Jesus, as we are all trying to be, any important decision will always involve trying to work out just what God might be asking of us. In many ways this is what the Plenary Council is all about. But just as importantly, and perhaps even more so, is this question: *What is God asking of me now?*

There is a little-known story about Saint Francis de Sales, a bishop who lived in the sixteenth century in France, which might help us. Francis de Sales had a reputation for being a very holy man and many people used to come to him for advice. One such person was a wealthy widow with a number of young children. Her name was Jane Frances de Chantal. She was constantly seeking the help of Francis de Sales because she was experiencing within her a deep sense of call to live as a religious sister. Francis de Sales tried to help her but he found



it difficult to decide just how genuine this sense of vocation was. Eventually he gave her this advice. *"It may well be that God is calling you to the religious life at some time in the future, but if you want to know what God is asking of you today, look around you."* What he meant, of course, was that Jane Frances had a number of small children who were dependent on her and what God was very clearly asking of her at that time was to commit herself wholeheartedly to the care of her family. She eventually understood this, gave herself completely to the care of her children, and only many years later, when they had become adults, did she become a nun. In fact, she and Francis de Sales together founded a religious order of sisters which still exists today. And Jane herself is now known as Saint Jane Frances de Chantal.

If we were to ask St Francis de Sales about what God is asking of us I suspect he would give us the same advice he gave to the young Jane Frances. Whatever about the big decisions for the future look around you and see what this day puts before you. It is there you will find the will of God. This is always true, but it takes on a special resonance at the moment because we all find ourselves caught up in the drama of the Covid-19 pandemic. What is God asking of us in the midst of this moment of confusion, uncertainty and fear?

The answer lies in what we are celebrating tonight. It lies in the Last Supper and what follows it. It lies in the Eucharist we celebrate every day in our Catholic tradition. We are disciples of Jesus. At the Last Supper He gave to His first disciples some very clear instructions and every time we celebrate Mass He gives the same instructions to us. At the heart of the Last Supper, and therefore at the heart of every Mass, the key instructions are these: *take and eat, this is my body; take and drink, this is my blood; do this in memory of me.*

We are faithful to these words of the Lord Jesus during our celebration of each Mass. We do take and eat, we do take and drink, and in doing this we are acting in memory of Jesus. But sometimes we forget to ask why. Why did Jesus leave us this memorial of His passion and death? Of course it was so that we could be drawn deeply into communion with Him. We eat his flesh and drink his blood, as St John's Gospel puts it so starkly, and we become one with Him. But again we can ask why. And the answer, at least partly, is this: we become one with Him so that, in and through us, He can enter into the lives of his people and continue to be the face of God for them. He breaks his body on the cross; He spills his blood on the cross; He gives all that He has and all that He is for His people. And in the Eucharist we receive His broken body and spilt blood – we receive all that He has and all that He is – so that we will be able to do the very same in memory of Him – give all that we have and all that we are for God's people. We will do it in the reality of our daily lives, just as Jane Frances de Chantal did in the reality of her daily life. We will do it as wives or as husbands each for the other, as mothers or as fathers for our children, as children for our parents in the love, companionship, and tolerance we show them. We will do it for those with whom we live, for those with whom we work. And in times of crisis in particular, such as we are facing now, we will do it for those who are isolated, or frightened, or sick. We will break our bodies and spill our blood – we will, perhaps metaphorically and sometimes even literally, wash the feet of our brother and sisters in humble service. We will, in other words, put others first instead of ourselves – because this is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and this is who we want to be.



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What is God asking of us in Australia at this time? What is He asking of you – or me? If we look around us, we will know; if we look to Jesus he will show us how.