



**Plenary Council Closing Mass  
Saturday of Week 14 of Ordinary Time**

**Homily**

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Saturday 9 July, 2022  
St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney**

Last Sunday evening when the Members of the Plenary Council came together to enter into the extraordinary and very challenging week which is now coming to an end, we found ourselves gathering around the tomb of Saint Mary of the Cross McKillop, our first and so far only homegrown Australian saint. We began with the now traditional and very important acknowledgement of country. The spirituality of the first inhabitants of this land has taught us a great deal about the importance and the sacredness of place, and as the smoke from the smoking ceremony spread through the chapel it was as if we were moving into something new and something special. And, of course, we were. The place where Mary McKillop is buried is indeed a sacred space for us as Christians, and especially for us as Catholics.

Most of us would have been in the chapel before but for those who had not it might have been surprising that Mary's tomb is off to one side, almost tucked away in a corner of the chapel. I don't think Mary would be troubled by this. She, like all the great saints of the Church, knew that it was her vocation to point away from herself and to the Lord. Perhaps she had learnt this from another great saint, John the Baptist, who figured so highly in Mary's own understanding of her vocation. It was John the Baptist, after all, who had said of Jesus, "*He must grow greater, and I must grow smaller*" (Jn 3:30). As we look to the renewal of the Church and to a re-enlivening of the universal call to holiness and mission which was at the heart of the Second Vatican Council, we too must remember that he, the Lord, must grow greater and we must grow smaller. There will be no renewal of the Church if we put ourselves above Christ or in some perverse way push him to the margins.

Now, a week after that initial gathering, we have come together again for the Eucharist, this time in a different church, but one which invites us to reflect on another Mary - the mother of the Lord. This Mary also knew that it was her task to point beyond herself to another, to her son Jesus. It was this Mary who, according to John's Gospel, told the stewards in attendance at a family wedding in Cana that they should quite simply "*do whatever he, Jesus, tells you to do*" (Jn 2:5).

These two women, in different ways, are good examples of what St John Paul II once called "the lived theology of the saints". Their lives illustrate the importance of keeping our gaze fixed on



Jesus, for without this contemplative gaze our witness, as John Paul once said, will be *“hopelessly inadequate”*.

This week we have tried to reimagine the Church in Australia through a missionary lens: to dream of how we, together, can better witness to all that God has done, and continues to do, through the presence of the Lord Jesus among us as our Way, our Truth and our Life. This presence is made real and effective among us through the paschal gift of the Holy Spirit. The enlivening of the infant Church, gathered in prayer in the upper room, was not a “once-only” event. It is the daily reality of the Church and the enduring foundation of the Church’s identity. Throughout the long journey of the Plenary Council, we have relied upon this as we have prayed repeatedly, *“Come, Holy Spirit of Pentecost, come Holy Spirit of the great South land”*.

The gospel of John reveals to us the Lord’s purpose in sending his Spirit. In his farewell discourse to his disciples at the Last Supper Jesus speaks from his heart and asks for their love. *“If you love me”* he says, *“keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever, the Spirit of truth”* (Jn 14:15-16). The Spirit to whom we have prayed so constantly comes as the guarantee of our fidelity to the Lord Jesus. How much we need the Spirit to lead us into a renewed and deeper fidelity as we move into the future.

As members of the Plenary Council, we have experienced in a particular way during this week what it means to belong to God’s holy people. We have lived, perhaps as yet in a tentative and incomplete fashion, the experience of synodality which Pope Francis assures us is a constitutive element of our identity. *“A synodal Church,”* he says, *“is a Church which listens, which realises that ‘listening is more than simply hearing’. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit”*.

This listening is at the same time an urgent invitation to respond. God does not speak to us simply for our own edification or because we are somehow special or deserving of God’s privileged concern. God speaks to us because in the mystery of the divine plan God has chosen us, in Christ, to be together the signs and bearers of divine love to all people: to be, together, the sacrament of communion with God and of unity among all God’s people.

Pope Francis invites us to see this mission as the key to our common vocation. *“I dream,”* he tells us, *“of a missionary option, that is, 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 evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation”*.

How well this dream of Pope Francis is captured in today’s second reading with its urgent call for action: *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But they will not ask for his help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they get a preacher, and*



*they will never have a preacher unless one is sent*". We are learning that, in different ways, we are all sent. But it is helpful to remember that, in the words of Pope Saint Paul V1, if people listen to teachers (and we might add, preachers), it is only if they are first witnesses. If our actions do not match our words, we run the risk of being the whited sepulchres of our own time and place.

The words of both Pope Paul V1 and Pope Francis can also guide us as we consider the recent census which shows a seemingly accelerating increase in those in our country who self-identify as having no religious affiliation. While this reality might tempt us to turn inwards and seek to shore up our declining numbers, both popes are reminding us that we should not be concerned with our self-preservation but rather with the urgency of proclaiming the truth and beauty of the gospel to the world in which we live, and doing so both by what we say and by what we do. We are indeed, as God's holy people, sent out, as today's gospel reminds us, to *"Go, make disciples of all the nations"*.

Matthew's gospel tells us that, when those first disciples encountered Jesus on the mountain, *"they fell down before him, though some hesitated"*. For some that hesitation might well have been born of their continuing struggle to grasp the overwhelming mystery of the resurrection. For others it might have been the still raw pain of their own desertion of Jesus in the last hours of his life. Whatever the explanation, Matthew offers no hint that the commission to go out and make disciples was withheld from those whose faith was weak or faltering. Indeed, how could it have been otherwise? Across the gospel tradition it was only the beloved disciple who remained faithful as the horror of the passion and death of Jesus unfolded. The other disciples all deserted the Lord. What Saint Paul once said of himself seems to be the Lord's preferred way of acting: *"God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong"* (1 Cor 1:27). At times this week we, like the first disciples, have experienced what it means to struggle with the reality and the call of the gospel. As we gather together this morning we recognise that the struggle must continue, that we must continue on the path of discernment, and that there is still more to discover about where the Holy Spirit seeks to lead us.

We, the holy people of God, may well be foolish or seem so to others, but if we are genuinely committed to following the way of the Lord we will be living and effective signs of the wisdom of God, revealed in the suffering and dying Christ. We, the holy people of God, may well be weak or seem so to others, but if we are genuinely trying, even if not always successfully, to live the values of the gospel and to have in ourselves the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, we will be witnesses to the strength that comes not from ourselves but from the Christ who, we believe, lives in us.

In the end this is what the Plenary Council has been about. We know that we are called and sent as witnesses to the love and mercy of God. We know that we are called to recognise the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the gospel. We know that we are chosen and empowered by God's Spirit to be, in Christ, a living and effective sign of communion with God and of unity among all people. The Plenary Council has been an important step along the way and we



have discerned together some particular pathways along which we are called to walk at this time. We have tried, and at times struggled, and perhaps occasionally failed, to listen carefully to each other. The Lord never promised that discipleship would be without its challenges. What he did promise is that he would be with us always - and the gift of his Spirit is the enduring fulfilment of that promise. As we now prepare to return home the question remains: what was and what is the Spirit saying to us as we have lived and worked with each other, spoken and listened to each other, grappled with each other, and glimpsed each other's giftedness and frailty?

This is the work of discernment and it must continue. We have made some decisions, opened up some possibilities, and experienced the depth and complexity of some of the challenges we face. All of this is the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have much still to do if we are to be in practice what we understand ourselves to be by vocation. As we now entrust the work we have done together to the discernment of the Bishop of Rome, so that he might strengthen us in our faith (Lk 22:32), the invitation is there for us to re-commit ourselves to this task of communion and unity so that the world might believe that it was God who sent Jesus among us (cf. John 17:23), and that we are witnesses to that.

And so we end as we began, invoking the Holy Spirit in both gratitude and hope. What we have called the celebratory phase of our Plenary Council concludes with this Mass. The implementation phase will now make new demands upon us. We will have as much need of the Holy Spirit in moving forward as we have had up until now. Perhaps, in this Cathedral dedicated to Mary as the Help of Christians, we might dare to believe that the words the angel Gabriel spoke to her are words which are spoken to us today: *"the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow .... and Mary said, 'Behold I am the servant of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me'"* (Lk 1:35-36).