



***The Fruits of the Recent Plenary Council as it impacts on Catholic Education***

**Knights of the Southern Cross Education Foundation 30th Anniversary**

**Speech**

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Many of you present here this evening would be aware of the recent Plenary Council. Its second and final assembly took place in July of this year. To the extent that this Assembly brought to a close the Plenary Council, it marked the end of a long journey which reaches back at least five years and in fact even longer. I want to speak briefly about this journey because the real significance of the Council for Catholic Education lies in the nature of the journey as much as in the nature of the Council's final decrees. At the same time, I do want to say a few words about the decrees themselves because they capture and represent to the whole Church in Australia the essence of the Council's determinations. And I also want to say, using a phrase which sounds a little like a cliché, that the Final Assembly of the Council and the decrees which emerged from it are an ending but also a beginning. The challenge which lies ahead of us now is to ensure that the Council's decrees do not remain simply words on a page but become a lived reality in the life of the Church as a whole and, in terms of tonight's gathering, especially in the world of Catholic Education here in WA.

I became a bishop in 2007 and attended my first meeting of the Bishops Conference in May of that year. Already at that time the bishops were beginning to talk of what they were vaguely calling an "ecclesial event" for the Church in Australia which might become a catalyst for a genuine renewal of the Church in our country. Archbishop Phillip Wilson, at that time the Archbishop of Adelaide, was the President of the ACBC and was a major driver of this discussion. As a canon lawyer he was quick to propose that the bishops convene a Plenary Council. As the discussion continued the bishops quickly agreed that something was needed but there was not consensus around the idea of a Plenary Council. I suspect this was because there was no real understanding at that time as to just what a Plenary Council would look like. After all, there had not been one in Australia since 1937!



Eventually, over a period of a couple of years, the thinking of the bishops crystallised around the idea of convening a “Year of Grace”. This was conceived as an invitation to the whole Church in Australia to, in a sense, go on an extended retreat. The concept was based on two key principles which I am convinced remain central to the ongoing work of implementing the decrees of the Plenary Council. The first was that the challenges, difficulties and opportunities facing the Church in Australia were so many and so complex that, in order to begin to address them properly as disciples of Jesus, we needed to pause, reflect, and rediscover the basics of our Christian faith as we live it and believe it within the Catholic Community. In a sense it was an invitation to do what the Second Vatican Council had taught: to come to grips with what Vatican II called the *hierarchy of truths* – to rediscover, in other words, what is most central to our identity as Catholics and to re-evaluate everything in the light of that.

The second key principle flows from the first, and it is even more important. It is the recognition that the most central aspect of our identity as Catholics is that we are disciples of Jesus Christ. The bishops saw in the letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, which Pope Saint John Paul II wrote to guide the Church as it entered the third millennium, the key to this. It can be found in paragraph 16 of that letter. Pope John Paul is speaking of the fundamental task of the Church. He asks a very important question and then makes a very bold statement. The question, a rhetorical one, is this: *Is it not the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine also before the generations of the third millennium?* The bold and even confronting assertion which follows is this: *Our witness, however, would be hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves had not first contemplated his face.*

This was the basis of the Year of Grace. It was an invitation to the whole Church in Australia to acknowledge our need to return Christ his rightful place in our lives as individual Catholics, and to our lives as Catholic communities of faith. And already here, given that this basic impulse was also at the heart of the Plenary Council which emerged as a result of the Year of Grace, we discover one of the major directions for Catholic Education to attend to – or, more accurately, to continue to attend to: to return Christ to his rightful place in every dimension of Catholic Education. The Year of Grace took place in 2012. It was the year I was appointed as Archbishop of Perth and it was the year when the Federal Government made the momentous decision to establish a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The dreadful history of the Church's involvement in this terrible reality, which has engulfed not only the Catholic Church but other religious and non-religious groups as well, led the bishops to eventually decide to postpone their plans for a Plenary Council until 2020, in order to ensure that the outcomes of the Royal Commission could be incorporated into the Church's formal process of reflection, renewal



and reform. The first assembly was further delayed because of Covid. It was held online in October of 2021, with the Second and Final Assembly being held in Sydney in July of this year.

In thinking about the implications of the decrees which emerged at the end of the Second Assembly it is important to understand just what those decrees are: they are the end result of, and intimately connected to, the long four-and-a-half-year process of consultation and discernment which preceded the second assembly. Put simply, the decrees do not stand apart from and nor can they be understood, and therefore faithfully implemented, apart from all that led up to them. The Plenary Council was a process of discernment and eventual decision, rather than a one-or two-week event which stands isolated or separated from its wider context.

What does this mean? Depending on the final decisions of Pope Francis, and I will say more about this in a moment, it means that the decrees of the Council become the formal policy of the Church in Australia. They are, in that sense, binding on us all and we are invited to recognise in them the call of the Holy Spirit to the Church in Australia as it moves into the future. Catholic Education, at every level, will be called upon to examine them carefully, not to decide **whether or not** to implement them but rather **how** to implement them in the particular context(s) which Catholic Education faces.

We must also recognise that, precisely because of the nature of the Plenary Council as an instrument of discernment and communion in the Church - an instrument, in other words, of what Pope Francis calls synodality - particular issues which emerged during the consultation and discernment process, but which did not receive a formal endorsement from the Council through its decision-making processes, cannot be regarded as settled issues in the Church, but rather as matters for further discussion and reflection.

There are ten formal decrees issued by the Plenary Council. The last two are, in a sense, administrative decrees. Decree Nine sets out some of the processes through which the implementation of the Council will take place and Decree Ten address the question of which decrees from previous Plenary Councils are still in force and which are now abrogated.

It is the first eight which are the substantive decrees. Each one deals with a particular theme or topic and each contains an introductory statement which sets out what might be best described as a vision concerning the Church's response to the particular theme. Each decree then contains articles which specify how the vision will be enacted.

Perhaps a specific example might make all this clearer.



The theme of the third decree is this: “Called by Christ – Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples”. The vision statement which introduces this theme has three sub-headings: *Shaping Communities Centred on Christ and Sent by the Spirit*; *Building Relationships of Respect and Compassion*; and *Seeking Communion*. The vision statement concludes with a setting out of the implications for the Church if it is to implement this vision. And following the vision statement come the formal decisions which are to be enacted. In many ways, especially if you look only at the formal decisions for enactment, things may seem quite simple and straight-forward. For example, in this third decree, the NCEC is instructed to establish a national forum, representing key stake-holders in Catholic Education, which is to address five specific issues: the wide diversity of contexts in which Catholic Education operates; build partnerships with other groups and agencies in the Church (and beyond) which can deepen Catholic Education’s understanding of itself as an instrument of evangelisation; develop a process of critical reflection on engagement in Catholic Education as a vocation (and not just a profession); further support formation for the faith dimension of Catholic Education and of educators in Catholic settings; and develop ways of supporting parish engagement with schools and young people.

It will now be the responsibility of the NCEC to act on this decree, establish the forum, specify the five key areas for its work and then monitor its progress.

The point, of course, is that this specific requirement placed on the NCEC is a practical outcome of the more fundamental recognition, captured in the vision statement, that Catholic identity is not an optional extra, or an unwelcome burden placed on the shoulders of over-worked teachers, or an optional extra for Catholic Education: it is a *sine qua non* for every Catholic school.

Let me just list for you the themes of the decrees and leave you to imagine what the implications for Catholic Education might be, and for the knights of the Southern Cross as well, given that these themes represent what the Plenary Council, the highest and most authoritative gathering of the Catholic Church in any country, has determined to be the clear priorities and fundamental direction in which God is asking the Church in Australia to move.

The themes are:

1. Reconciliation – Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts (Our indigenous people)
2. Choosing Repentance – Seeking Healing (Victims and survivors of sexual abuse)
3. Called by Christ - Sent Forth as Mission Disciples
4. Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men
5. Communion in Grace – Sacrament to the World
6. Formation and Leadership for Mission and Ministry



7. At the Service of Communion, Participation and Mission – Governance
8. Integral Ecology and Conversion for the Sake of our Common Home
9. The Implementation Phase of the Fifth Plenary Council
10. The Decrees of the Fourth Plenary Council of Australia

Where do we go from here?

At the recent meeting of the Bishops Conference I was, in my capacity as President of the Plenary Council, formally presented with the Official Acts and Decrees of the Plenary Council (five volumes) after I had recommended them to the body of bishops for their solemn and authoritative acceptance.

I have now sent them to Rome for the attention of the Holy Father. Because we opted to have a Plenary Council, precisely because it is the most authoritative gathering of the Church in any particular place, we offer our work, and our decisions, to the Holy Father for what is called his “*recognitio*”. The Catholic Church, as you would all know, is a communion of local Churches in communion with each other and in communion with the bishop of Rome. In terms of the Catholic Church’s fidelity to its identity as the community of Christ’s disciples called into being by Christ through the gift of his Spirit, there is a mutual relationship of interdependence between each local Catholic Church, and between all local Churches with the Church of Rome, led by the Pope, whose most significant title is Bishop of Rome. It is this value of communion which is preserved by our acceptance of the Pope’s final decisions regarding the proposals we have put before him. Until we receive his *recognitio*, and depending on any qualifications regarding that *recognitio*, the bishops will formally enact and promulgate the decrees of the Council and they will become the officially determined way forward for the Church here in our land.

I hope you have found this presentation helpful, not only in terms of what the Plenary Council means for Catholic Education but what it means for all of us. I want to finish with a recommendation that you now access the decrees of the Council yourselves – they are available on the ACBC website – and deepen your own reflection on just what it is God is asking of us in Australia at this time.

Thank you.