



## **Hopes for the future of the Church in Australia following the Fifth Plenary Council**

### **Catholic Health Australia National Conference 2022 *Facing the Future Together***

#### **Speech**

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Tuesday 23 August, 2022  
Hilton Hotel, Brisbane

Good morning everyone and thank you for the opportunity to share some reflections with you on my hopes, which I trust are not unique to me, for the future of the Church in Australia as we move into a future which will be shaped, to a significant degree, by the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia. As you know it concluded just six weeks ago. Given the significant place which the ministry of health care, in all its various forms, holds in the life of the Church in Australia, this is a matter which is of vital importance to you. No doubt all of you also have hopes and dreams for the future of the Church, and of the way in which the Plenary Council might offer possibilities for a renewal, and even a re-imagining, of our Catholic presence in a ministry which makes you the first face of the Church encountered by so many people in Australia, many of whom, and indeed quite possibly most of whom, have little or no connection with the Christian faith, and its Catholic expression, in their day-to-day lives.

Six weeks is not a long time in terms of processing all that has been a part of the Plenary Council journey. The hopes that I might express today, and the hopes that you might carry within you, may themselves develop, mature and even change as time goes by and we reflect more deeply on the four-plus years of the formal journey, and the even longer years of planning and preparation which led up to the decision to entrust the Plenary Council to the Facilitation Team, which was led so passionately by Lana Turvey-Collins and her team, and more recently by Sr Marion Gambon, who assumed the role of leadership when Lana stepped aside to begin her family.

I might just add in passing that the decision of the bishops to approach Lana about this role, which came as the result of an unexpected offer from Catholic Mission to animate the preparation for the Council after the bishops had sought expressions of interest, was a sign



that there was already a growing, and in fact long-standing, appreciation of the importance of lay-leadership in the Church. We should not miss the significance of this important decision.

I mentioned a moment ago that the Plenary Council concluded about six weeks ago. This is certainly true in terms of its formal structures.

However, from the very beginning we have understood that, in fact, there are three phases to the Plenary Council: the preparatory phase, the celebratory phase and the implementation phase. The preparatory phase began, in a formal sense, with the establishment of the Executive Committee, a body of about twenty people, including two bishops, Lana, one or two canon lawyers, and people drawn from across the Church in Australia. Most of them were not clerics but all were actively involved in the life of their local Church, either at the level of the local parish or the local diocese.

It was this group which devised and implemented the initial listening and dialogue process. It was also this group which received the results of that widespread consultation and discerned, prayerfully and collaboratively over three days, the key questions for ongoing discernment. I mention this, not to look back but to look forward. There was something very significant, and even precious, about the way this journey unfolded. It was, I believe, an experience of that synodality to which Pope Francis is calling us. At the heart of it was a commitment to deep, patient, open-hearted and open-minded listening. One of my hopes for the future of the Church in Australia is that this experience of "synodality in action" will continue to be a feature of the way the Church, and by that I mean, of course, individuals and communities which make up the Church, live together, work together and discern the will of God, as far as that is possible, together.

I, and perhaps many of you, too, have sometimes heard people say something like this: *I don't really care too much about the concrete decisions that may or may not have been made during the Plenary Council - the most important thing for me is that we have discovered a new way of being the Lord's Church here in Australia. It is the way of listening, of dialogue and of decision-making.*

I do care about the concrete decisions which emerged from the two assemblies of the Plenary Council, but I also agree that one of the most promising developments of the whole journey has been this discovery, or perhaps re-discovery, of this "way of being the Church" - which is, in essence, the way of discernment.

As a community of disciples of Christ - for that is what the Church is called to be, no matter where it finds itself in time and in space - I would judge, and you may or may not agree with me, that we are at the very beginnings of this journey of discovery. One of the most deeply held hopes I have for the Church moving forward is that we can continue along this journey,



faithful to the vision of Pope Francis about a synodal Church, and ready to be open to all that this might be calling us to.

For this to happen I believe that we all need to reflect deeply on our own situations and local settings and ask ourselves, honestly and openly, how well we are doing in being an expression of a synodal Church, and what more we might be able to do to deepen this reality.

This morning, then, I would want to put this challenge before you and invite you to reflect on it, both in terms of how CHA operates and, even more importantly and perhaps more challengingly, on how synodality is being practiced, and experienced, in the concrete setting of the local hospital, or aged-care facility, or other institution which is part of your ministry. I have two suggestions to offer, and in offering them to you I am also offering them to myself.

The first suggestion is scriptural. It is that each of us, individually and collectively, might allow ourselves to be challenged by these words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel: *Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye' while the log is in your own eye?"* (Matt 7:3-4). It would be easy, I think, and indeed in some ways understandable, if we were to become critical of and scandalised by those whom we judge not to be operating in this synodal way, but in reality, we will only understand the complexity and challenge of synodality, and the treasures it holds for the Church, if we are living it ourselves and understand it from the inside.

The second challenge comes from Pope Francis. You will all be aware that the pope links synodality closely to his conviction about the Church as missionary. When the agenda for the two assemblies was finally settled, there was a strong conviction that we needed to preface the agenda with some words of Pope Francis with which you will all be familiar. They come from *Evangelii Gaudium*:

'I dream 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' (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 27).

My challenge to us all is that, with all due deference to Pope Francis, we take these words and, in a complementary rather than contradictory way, apply them to the practice of synodality:

'I dream of a "synodal option", that is, a **synodal impulse capable of transforming everything**, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things,



times and schedules, language and structures are all **cast within a synodal framework and thus** suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.'

We do not have the time this morning for me to expand on these two challenges, and indeed I think they need to be considered in the light of the particular circumstances of your own local settings, but I would like to offer them to you for your reflection. I am convinced that they represent a fruitful way for the spirit of the Plenary Council to begin to enliven the Church.

I mentioned earlier that once the initial listening and dialogue phase of the Plenary Council journey had concluded the Executive Committee gathered to receive the results of that dialogue and begin to discern the central themes which were emerging. It was these themes which became the basis for the ongoing discernment which then began to take place. Six themes were eventually formulated. They spoke of the yearning of the People of God in Australia for a Church which was: *missionary and evangelising; inclusive, participatory and synodal; prayerful and eucharistic; humble, healing and merciful; a joyful, hope-filled and servant community; and a Church open to conversion, renewal and reform.* The discernment of these themes was a crucial, and I am convinced Spirit-filled moment, and I believe it would be a tragedy if we somehow lost sight of these themes as we look towards the eventual promulgation of the decrees which were determined at the second Assembly. Another of my hopes for the future, then, is that at every level of the Church in Australia we might allow ourselves to be constantly challenged by these ideals, using them, perhaps, as the basis for a regular review of our situation - a new way, perhaps, of conducting a performance review.

You may have heard this before, but when the Executive Committee discerned the themes emerging from the listening and dialogue process, there were in fact not six but seven themes identified. The seventh, which in one sense didn't "make the cut" was *Christ-centred*. The reason for not including this as one of the themes was not because we had decided that being Christ-centred wasn't all that important. Rather it was because, in what I experienced as another Spirit-filled moment, we realised that the only way we could be the Church which reflected the other six themes was if everything about the Church was centred on Christ. And so, in the end, the six themes were expressed as questions for deeper reflection: *how is **God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church** which is ..... humble, healing and merciful, inclusive, participatory and synodal, and so on?*

This captures one of my most cherished hopes for the Church moving forward: that we all begin to ask ourselves, explicitly, courageously, and humbly, to what extent our mission, and the day-to-day reality of all that we do and all that we are trying to be, is very intentionally centred on Christ.



When I became the Archbishop of Perth over ten years ago, this is the goal I set for myself and the challenge I presented to the Catholic community there. I put it this way: **the greatest challenge facing the Church today is to return the Church to Christ and return Christ to the Church.** That Christ is at the heart of the Church, theologically speaking, is absolutely clear. But whether or not he holds pride of place in the day-to-day experience of those who work in our various ministries, and is the inspiration for all that we do and all that we are seeking to be: this is another, and much more challenging issue to ponder.

Again, we don't have time this morning to consider, and in any event it is not for me to determine, the concrete ways this will be realised and deepened in a particular hospital, aged-care setting or special medical service. But that we should all be asking the question, and committing ourselves to acting on it, seems very obvious to me. The theme of the centrality of Christ was one that emerged very strongly along the journey of the Plenary Council. Responding to this imperative is not as simple and as easy as it might be, for example, to begin the process of revising the missal (not that that will necessarily be easy) but nor is it to be dismissed as some pious notion upon which we all agree with and then quietly put to one side.

It is important, I think, to say that here I am not really speaking about Christian values or gospel values. I am speaking of the one who embodies in the reality of his life, death and resurrection what those values look like when they are put into practice. There is always the temptation to presume that because I am acting in good faith, or can provide a good justification for the decisions I make, I must be acting in harmony with the gospel. But the way to judge whether or not I as an individual, we as a community of disciples, or we as the leaders of a Church-sponsored institution, are really acting in harmony with the gospels is to look to the practical ways in which Jesus, in the pages of the gospel and in the wider reflections of the New Testament, deals with each of the encounters he has with people and with groups. In this sense, perhaps rather than asking the very often posed question - *what would Jesus do?* - we could ask the more challenging question - *what did Jesus in fact do?*

I just want to leave that question with you: my own experience teaches me that it is not a question which is answered quickly or easily, and in the end it can only be answered by those who are deeply immersed in the gospels.

This leads me to a third profound hope I hold for the Church as we begin to embrace the challenge of implementing, to use a phrase often mentioned in conjunction with the Second Vatican Council, *"both the letter and the spirit"* of the Plenary Council.

One of the Vatican II documents, *Lumen Gentium*, is often quoted in describing the Church as *"a kind of sacrament, a sign and instrument that is, of communion with God and unity among all people"* (LG 1). This is a beautiful and powerful image of the Church, but when



*Lumen Gentium* is quoted two key words are often omitted; **in Christ**. It is *in Christ* that the Church is a sacrament of communion and unity.

Similarly, another Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*, is often quoted in terms of the responsibility Christians have to "*read the signs of the times*", but again some key words are often omitted. We must read the signs of the times, the document tells us, "*in the light of the gospel*".

While both of these ideas might be seen to reinforce the point I have made about the centrality of Christ, and they certainly do, I think they also point to something closely connected to this; the importance of the Word of God as central to the life of the Church and therefore to the life of every Christian and every Christian community.

In saying this I am reminded that when Francis of Assisi wanted to have his group of followers recognised he had to come up with a Rule of Life. Certainly members of religious congregations here this morning will know all about "the Rule" or the Constitutions and Regulations of their own Congregation. Francis was puzzled by all of this. His original intention was to have a document which simply stated that the rule of what was to eventually become the Franciscan Order was the gospel - nothing more and nothing less. While that was not acceptable to Rome, and was probably impractical at a concrete level, it does point to something very significant. The Scriptures hold a place in the life of the Church which is absolutely essential and indispensable. And because we believe the Scriptures to be the inspired word of God it follows, as yet another Vatican II document, *Dei Verbum*, puts it, that "since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that *the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation*" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No 11).

I do want to be clear here. I am not in any way proposing that we in the Catholic Church adopt some sort of uncritical fundamentalist approach to the Scriptures. Our tradition sees the Scriptures as sitting very much in the heart of the Church as a gift entrusted to the Church by the Lord. It is the Scriptures, as lived and believed in by the Church of Christ over the last two thousand years, which we accept as God's gift, given to guide us into the fulness of the truth for the sake of our salvation. But having said that there is another idea which we should consider: it comes to us from the reformed tradition and would need to be situated within our own Catholic approach. It is, in Latin, as follows: *norma normans non normata* which in English can perhaps be best expressed as saying that the scriptures, as the inspired word of God, are the norm against which everything else must be judged. This relates very closely to the quote from *Gaudium et spes* to which I referred earlier. We are called to discern the signs of the times in the light of the gospel - not to judge or evaluate the value of the gospel in the light of the contemporary trends of our society. This is not so say, of course, that the contemporary trends of society are always or necessarily in



opposition to the wisdom and truth of the scriptures. But we do have to be on our guard. The Scriptures, and in a special way the gospels, shed light on the issues of our own time - but the issues of our own time must never act as a corrective for what some would judge to be the inadequacies or even errors of the gospels.

In referring to all of this I am expressing a hope, which has been echoed by some of the eminent scripture scholars among us in the Catholic community here in Australia, that the Plenary Council might provide, and even provoke, a renewal in our appreciation of the centrality of the Scriptures in any authentic renewal of the Church. It is true that this did not emerge as explicitly as some would have hoped, either in the consultation phase of the Plenary Council or in the two assemblies, but in light of what I have said above about the centrality of Christ I do believe that the spirit of the Plenary Council is very much open to this kind of development.

In many ways these, then, are the three deeply held hopes I have for the Church in Australia as we look to the implementation phase of the Plenary Council: a deep and sustained commitment to the practice of synodality at every level of the Church; a recognition of the centrality of Christ, without which we can never be the Church we were brought into being by the Lord to be for the sake of his people; and a renewing and deepening of the understanding of the scriptures, the Word of God, as the privileged place of our encounter with Christ and of our growth, as individuals and communities of faith, in knowing him, loving him and serving him as he would have us do.

In the little time left to me I would like to make just a few comments on where we go from here. Last week we had what will be one of the last meetings of the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council. The Commission will be dissolved at the November meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. During the meeting Fr David Ranson, the secretary of the Plenary Council, gave us an update on the process of preparing the formal Acts of the Plenary Council. This is a massive task because the Acts will need to incorporate all the documentation from the two formal assemblies, as well as the key documents which emerged from the long journey of preparation. Once the Acts are completed, they will be formally presented to the bishops at their meeting in November.

Following their reception by the bishops they will be forwarded to Rome for consideration by Pope Francis. The Pope, presumably with the assistance of the various dicasteries who have experience in the different areas affected by the Council's decisions, will finalise his response to the decrees. This response might simply be to give his confirmation of all the matters we seek to put before him. It might be that he seeks further information concerning some of the decrees. And it might be that he decides that some of the things we are wanting to do are not, at the moment, opportune.

Once we receive the formal "go-ahead" from Pope Francis the bishops will officially promulgate the decrees of the Plenary Council and they will then become either the local



law of the Church in Australia (if they are of a legal nature) or the formally approved and mandated principles and directions the Church is being called to implement as we move into the future. We will have to wait patiently, though hopefully not for too long, for the Pope's response.

At a very practical level, one of my hopes for the Church as we move forward is that the process of synodality we have employed in our Plenary Council experience will be seen and embraced as being intimately, and appropriately, connected with the collegiality of the bishops with each other as the shepherd leaders of their dioceses, and with the Pope as the chief shepherd of the Universal Church. This is indeed how the Pope presents the idea of synodality:

"A synodal church is a listening church, aware that listening is more than hearing. It is a reciprocal listening in which each one 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, the Spirit of truth (John 14:17), in order to know what he says to the Churches (Rev 2:7).

It seems to me, in reflecting on this, that a question sometimes put to the bishops, and quite rightly, sometimes by the rest of the clergy and often by many of the laity- *are you really listening to us?* - is, in fact, a question that each of the groups and individuals mentioned by the Pope

- the faithful people of God, the college of bishops, the bishop of Rome
- should be prepared to have put to them. The Pope must be asked, or at least ask himself, if he is listening to the college of bishops and to the laity; the laity must be asked if they are listening to each other, to the college of bishops and to the Pope; the college of bishops must be asked if they are listening to the laity, to each other, and to the Pope.

And the reason why this must be the way for the Church is because it is only in this mutual listening, this respectful and open listening, that the voice of the Holy Spirit will be heard. This is a journey we all undertake together and it will require courage and humility. One of the features of the two assemblies, which in this sense mirrored the experience of the initial consultation phase, is the realisation that a passionate and sincerely held commitment to a particular point of view can be met with an equally passionate and sincerely held commitment to what, at least on the surface, might appear to be a totally contradictory point of view. This can be confronting, if we are able to engage with it honestly, because it calls us to pause, listen and accept that perhaps there is something I just might be missing. It is easier, I suspect, to adopt the idea that the other must simply be wrong, or ill-informed, or even operating out of unworthy motives. But this is not the way the New Testament invites us to deal with our brothers and sisters in the faith.



This is one of those examples where the importance of familiarity with, and an embracing of, the words of the Scriptures becomes both our challenge and our hope. A revisiting of the many places in Paul's writings where he gives us very practical guidelines on how to conduct ourselves within our Christian communities, can be very sobering and confronting - but, as I said earlier, one of my hopes is that we can, as we move forward, reflect much more fully the scriptural ideal of Christian community, at least as the ideal toward which we strive, even if it is not yet, or not always, the reality.

We do not yet know what response we will receive from the Holy Father. I certainly cannot pre-empt anything, but I will say that there seem to me to be very few things in the decrees we adopted at the Final Assembly of the Council with which the pope might have difficulty. However, if there are, then we will be challenged to embrace the full meaning of synodality as Pope Francis puts it before us. He will have listened to us, and we in turn will now need to listen to him.

My last hope is this: that the journey we have been on together as the Church in Australia, as we reflect on it more deeply as time goes by, might help to dispel some of the division, and I would even say rancour, which sometimes creeps into our life together. We all know how badly the standing of the Church, and the reputation of the Church, have been damaged, especially though not only by the terrible abuse of the young and the vulnerable in our communities, and by the failures of some of our leaders to deal adequately with these horrors. We must never minimise this or convince ourselves that we no longer have to care for those who have suffered, or remain vigilant to ensure that this never happens again. Those who have offended and those who have failed in leadership must be called to account. But in everything, including this, we must be guided by the words and example of Christ - and I will leave it to you to reflect on what this might mean in practice. The gospels are full of concrete examples of how to conduct ourselves in all kinds of different encounters and with all kinds of different people.

As I said at the start of this reflection, six weeks is not a long time to have formed solid and final conclusions about the Plenary Council. If I were to be asked to give a similar talk in six months' time it might be very different. But this is where I am at the moment. It has been a privilege to be so intimately involved in the Plenary Council from the very beginning and I am convinced that, even if it did not end up exactly where I had imagined it might, or where I had hoped it would, I am quite prepared to accept that, as I have said so often to others, it might just be that what I was wanting and hoping for has not turned out to be exactly what God wants for us and from us at this moment in our journey.

Without wanting to be too simplistic or fatalistic, or too presumptuous, I am confident that the Holy Spirit was at work in the decision to convene the Plenary Council, that the Holy Spirit was with us along the journey, that the Holy Spirit was present and active during the two assemblies, and that the Holy Spirit will continue to animate the life of the Church in



Australia as we move forward. Our job will be what it has been from the beginning - to continue to seek and to discern what it is that God is asking of us, offering to us, and inviting us into in Australia at this time.

Thank you.