

LED BY THE SPIRIT

A Lenten Letter to the People of God in the Archdiocese of Brisbane

Dear sisters and brothers,

“Grace be with you who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an incorruptible love”

(Eph 6:24)

The Gospels tell us that Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert where he fasts for forty days (Matt 4:1-2; Luke 4:1-2). The same Spirit now leads the Church into the forty days of Lent as we prepare for Easter when the desert becomes a garden as “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54). The Spirit can take us to some strange places, even to places we would rather not go (cf John 21:18), but always for the sake of love’s transformation.

In 2016 the same Spirit led the Church in Australia to begin a journey to a new place. This was when the Bishops Conference, after years of uncertainty, decided for a Plenary Council in order to chart a course into the future. The Council was to have not one but two assemblies, taking its cue from the two Synods on marriage and the family convened by Pope Francis in 2014-2015.

It was the Spirit who prompted the Conference’s decision, and the Spirit has accompanied us at every point since then. It has been a time of testing and a time of deep listening to the word of God rather than to other voices, not unlike Jesus in the desert.

The journey of the Plenary Council was to have three phases – preparation, celebration and implementation. The preparation phase came to an end with the first assembly in October 2021. Our plan was to have the first assembly face-to-

face in Adelaide in October 2020. But because of COVID-19 we took what we thought was a very cautious decision and postponed the assembly for twelve months. However, what seemed a cautious decision turned out to be anything but. Twelve months later – again because of COVID – we had to have the week-long assembly online. It worked well enough, but it was a very different experience from a face-to-face gathering.

Now we are in the middle of the celebration phase, between the two assemblies. This is not a vacant time when we take a breather after the first assembly and before the second. On the contrary: through this time of fermentation a huge amount of work is being done to process all the raw material from the first assembly and to prepare an agenda for the second.

At the first assembly the mornings were a time when many voices were heard in the full gathering, and the afternoons were for the work of discernment in smaller groups. This is what produced the raw material. Immediately after the first assembly we began the very complex work of collating and sifting all this.

The work is being overseen by the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council, chaired by Archbishop Tim Costelloe of Perth, and guided by the more hands-on Steering Committee chaired by Bishop Shane Mackinlay of Sandhurst. Both of these are supported by the Facilitation Team. Another key body is the Drafting Committee who draw upon the expert advisors assisting the Council and feed material to various writing groups who have to shape the material so that it's manageable at the second assembly. Through all this the nearly 300 members of the Council are being kept informed, because they are very much part of the fermentation between the assemblies. What is being done continues the process of discernment which has marked the entire journey of the Plenary Council. We are

seeking to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit who has not only inspired the journey but who speaks to us on the way.

Eventually this work will produce an agenda for the second assembly, and the agenda will, we hope, contain a number of creative, practical and affordable proposals designed to produce the kind of change we need in the Church. The plan is for the second assembly to be face-to-face in Sydney in early July. But the persistence of COVID-19 makes even that uncertain; and the mood at the moment is that if we cannot meet face-to-face we will again postpone the assembly until we can.

From the beginning the Plenary Council has looked beyond our shores to the universal Church. The Pope had to give his assent to the Council, and through the preparation phase there was ongoing dialogue between the Bishops Conference and the Holy See. That dialogue has become more intense since Pope Francis decided for a worldwide Synod process which will climax with the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome in late 2023. The Plenary Council therefore has to interweave with the wider Synod process, each enriching the other. That will mean many voices in the Church being heard. In the preparation phase of the Council there was broad consultation, and you are invited now to speak your mind as part of the global Synod process. So I ask: What would you say to Pope Francis about change in the Church not just in Australia but around the world? You might also consider the three steps proposed by Evangelisation Brisbane [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrgZ-N79Kf0>].

At the conclusion of the Council's second assembly, we will begin the implementation phase. The documents, decisions and decrees of the Council will be sent to the Holy See for confirmation, and once they are confirmed they will become binding for the Church in Australia. My hope is that here in Brisbane we

will have an Archdiocesan Synod some time after that to help embed the decisions and decrees in the life and mission of the Church here. That may well lead to the regular celebration of Synods in the Archdiocese in order to help us move to a more synodal mode of governance.

Structures like Councils and Synods are important, but they need to produce cultural change in the Church, a kind of conversion. The need for change was made clear by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; and in a different way it has been made clear by COVID-19. Nothing can be quite the same as it was after the Royal Commission; nor will it be after the pandemic which has left us all wondering what the new normal might look like in so many areas of life, including the Church.

This is no time for turning inwards and looking just to our own institutional interests. It is no time to be a judgmental Church which never notices the plank in our own eye but makes a fuss about the splinter in the eyes of others (cf Luke 6:42). We need instead to be a humble and compassionate Church that looks outwards, asking how we might be more like Jesus who “came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). That will require a practical, evangelical imagination which takes to heart the words of St Mary MacKillop: “Never see a need without doing something about it”. This is the kind of Church to which both the Plenary Council and the global Synod are looking. This is what the Spirit is now saying to the Church (cf Rev 3:13), speaking to all of us in these desert days of Lent.

+ Mark Coleridge

Ash Wednesday 2022