



## **President's Opening Address Second General Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council**

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Good morning everybody,

Many words of welcome have already been offered this morning and I'm not going to repeat them all now, but it does fall to me as the President of the Plenary Council to officially welcome our special observers this morning. On behalf of us all I welcome His Excellency, Archbishop Charles Balvo, Apostolic Nuncio to Australia, His Eminence, Cardinal Charles Bo SDB, Archbishop of Yangon and President of the Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops' Conferences, His Eminence, Cardinal John Dew, Archbishop of Wellington and President of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, Rev John Gilmore, President of the National Council of Churches in Australia, and Mr Ross Castle, Executive Investor Relations from Catholic Church Insurances. We are both grateful for and honoured by your presence with us. Welcome, too, to all those joining us on-line for this extraordinary moment in the life of the Catholic Church in Australia.

We are deeply conscious that as we gather here this morning we do so in the name of, and in communion with, all our brothers and sisters who are part of the Catholic community here in our land. We are all sisters and brothers in the one faith, with the one hope, and bound together in the one love of Christ which, as Saint Paul says, urges us onwards (cf. 2 Cor 5:14).

Precisely because we are the people of God in this land, Australia, and at this time, in the second decade of the 21st century, it is important that we carry with us a deep consciousness of who we are. The First Letter of St Peter can help us here. There we read that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, called to proclaim the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9). By our baptism into the death and resurrection of the Lord, by our confirmation as people upon whom the Spirit of the Lord

has been poured out, and as people who, through our sharing in the Eucharist, are the body of Christ and the living sign and instrument, the sacrament, of his presence and action in the world, we are being called to recognise and affirm once again that we must turn to Christ, contemplate his face, and begin everything afresh from him (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 15, 16). Over and over again, as we have travelled the long journey of the Plenary Council together, we have been reminded that we are called to be a Christ-centred Church. It is he whose disciples we are. It is his Way which we must follow, his Truth which we must proclaim, and his Life which we must embrace and live to the full. We know that we have not always been the faithful disciples the Lord is calling us to be. This week we will acknowledge again, in sorrow and in shame, the damage our failures have caused in the lives of many people. We will commit ourselves to the urgent task of supporting and caring for those who have suffered, and the equally important task of doing what must be done to ensure that when people engage with the Church they experience healing, hope and safety: that they experience the compassion and mercy of God.

This challenge of discipleship, and the discernment for which it calls, is not a task, and a burden, and a privilege which we begin to exercise only today. It has been the heart of everything we have done together in the journey which has brought us to this crucial week.

When we did begin this journey, as we've been reminded already this morning, we were presented with, indeed I might say confronted with, a radically challenging question. What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time? That you, of course, was not simply each of us as an individual person, although it certainly was that. Nor was this you addressed solely to individual groups which are a part of the life of the Church. The you is both individuals and communities within the life of the Church, but in the end the you is the Church, the holy, pilgrim people of God, formed by the Lord, as Vatican 11 reminds us, into a people "brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*Lumen Gentium* 4). And this is why, of course, that although each of us belongs to one or more communities of faith and mission, we are not here as representatives or spokespersons of any particular community, tasked with advocating for a particular interest group. Rather we are here to prayerfully consider the various proposals before us, bringing with us our own experience of the Church, and offering it as a contribution to the discernment which is the common task of us all. It is as the Church, as this Church, that we are trying to understand, together, what God is asking of us at this time. And it is as the Church

that we are being called to courageous and, at the same time, humble discernment. It would be so easy to presume that what I as an individual, or what we as members of a particular community, passionately desire for the Church is without doubt what God desires for the Church. This may well, of course, be the case, but then again it may not be. It is this discomfiting truth which explains why the Plenary Council prayer which we have prayed so often calls us both to speak and to listen: to speak boldly and to listen humbly.

These simple words express very well something which is a part of the charism of synodality to which Pope Francis is constantly calling us. “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 ...” (Address of Pope Francis celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops). If our bold speaking is not accompanied by our humble and open listening to other voices, bold or timid, which may not agree with us, then we run the very real risk of missing the voice of the Spirit who does, indeed, sometimes emerge within the life of the Church as flames of fire and rushing wind (cf. Acts 2:1-3) but who also speaks to the Church in and through the gentle breeze and the still silent voice (cf. 1 Kings 19:12) which Elijah recognised as the true manifestation of God on the holy mountain .

And this is the point, surely: that in our voices, and through our voices, and under our voices, and above our voices, we must be listening attentively in order to catch the voice of the Spirit and recognise the leadings of the Spirit who may, indeed, sometimes want to take us, as was the case with Saint Peter, to places to which we would rather not go (cf. John 21:18).

This is the great challenge, and the unsettling nature, of Christian discernment. As we enter into the second and final Assembly, we may find ourselves in a place we had not expected and which may even be making us uncomfortable. Cherished hopes, dreams and projects may not have been realised, or not in the way we had hoped and presumed would be the case. For each of us as individuals, and for each of us as members of a variety of communities within the Church, who knows what the Plenary Council may be asking us to let go of or asking us to embrace? Who knows what will have to die for something new to spring to life (cf. John 12:24)?

Saint Paul offers us some very good advice about how to recognise the presence of the Holy Spirit. The fruits of the Spirit, he says, are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-24). And to the people in Galatia, and also to us, he finishes by saying, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

And so we come to this second week. The material which we will discuss and the motions which we will consider are the fruit of a long, complex and challenging process. Each of us has our own stories, our own experiences, our gifts and our talents, and each of us has our own prejudices, burdens and frailties. None of us is perfect and none of us is free from the tendency to presume that the way we see things must be right and must be God’s way and that therefore those who see things differently must be mistaken or not as wise and as full of insight as we are. It is this reality, of our giftedness and our frailty, which helps us understand why we must speak boldly, and listen humbly.

Amid all the complexity which has been and always will be part of the life of the Church what we can rely on is the good will, the sincerity, and the love for the Lord’s Church which is the common gift each one of us brings to this Assembly. We are not enemies or combatants seeking to prevail over others. We are sisters and brothers, all wanting only that the Church should renew itself according to God’s will and in the power of God’s Spirit. Even more importantly, we can rely on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit, I believe, who inspired the bishops to set in train a process which has led us to this day. It is the Spirit who has been invoked every day through our Plenary Council prayer, and surely not in vain. It is the Spirit who was at work in the extraordinary response to the initial Listening and Dialogue phase of our journey, and who was with those who brought all this together through a process which led us to the discernment of the key themes for the ongoing journey. It is the Spirit who was with us as we took the further step of forming the Writing Groups whose work invited us into further discernment. This in turn led to the composition of the Instrumentum Laboris, the working document, which took us still further along the road.

From this long process of maturation, the agenda was formed and became the framework for the extraordinary event of the First Assembly. I am sure we all remember it well. Conducted under challenging circumstances due to the Covid pandemic it was, nonetheless, a powerful experience of synodality in which, as Pope Francis calls us so often to do, we all had the opportunity to listen to each other.

And now, as we finally come to this week in which decisions will be made which will shape the future of the Lord's Church in this country, we should not fear that the Spirit has abandoned us. Nor should we think that the unfolding of this journey has been a purely human project rather than one guided by the Lord, who continues to animate his Church.

And so, we enter this week with hope and with confidence, both in ourselves and each other, yes, but more importantly in the Spirit of the Lord to whom we wish to be open and receptive as the week unfolds. We have constantly called on the Spirit to be with us and to guide us – and we have done so with faith and in sincerity, bringing to the task all that we have and trusting that the Lord Jesus, who once took the meagre offering of bread and fish and transformed them into an overflowing abundance for his people (cf. Matt 15:32; Mark 8: 1-10; Jn 6:1-14), will through the gift of his Spirit do the same for us. We should not doubt that the Spirit, in spite of our weakness and frailty, has responded to our prayer over the course of our journey so far. We know and we believe (cf. John 6:69) that the same Spirit will lead us from where we are today to a new place at the end of our week together, and into a future in which, through God's grace, we can be the signs and bearers of God's love for all people that the Lord is calling us, as his Church, to be.

Come, Holy Spirit of Pentecost.  
Come, Holy Spirit of the great South Land.