

FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL
MASS CELEBRATING THE OPENING OF THE FIRST ASSEMBLY
FILMED AT ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL SALE ON 30TH SEPTEMBER 2021
3 OCTOBER 2021

Homily

In recent days, I have noticed a number of people proudly wearing their blue and red – and, rightly so. No doubt for the rusted-on Melbourne supporters, it was a night of much rejoicing! After 57 years the drought of the elusive premiership AFL cup was over! We in the State of Victoria had to come to terms with the AFL Grand Final being played in Perth – not easy for Demons and Bull Dog supporters. The Western Australians were thoughtful toward we Victorians in their efforts to acknowledge the interstate rivalry which was inflicted upon us by the dreaded Coronavirus.

Today, another event is being hosted in Perth at St Mary's Cathedral. Archbishop Timothy Costelloe sdb, President of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, will celebrate the Opening Mass of the First Assembly. The Western Australians have done it again! Due to Covid 19, the shape, form and process of the First Assembly commencing today and until 10th October is no longer being hosted as a face-to-face event in Adelaide, but rather across the various Dioceses and Provinces of Australia. Perth has stolen the Opening Mass, too! Through the wonders of technology, the formal Opening Mass will be broadcast on the Plenary Council website for all to gather in prayerful unity and faith.

During half-time at last week's Grand Final, an Australian band, the Birds of Tokyo, sang. I was captured by one of their songs, ***Lanterns***:

On we march
With a midnight song
We will light our way
With our lanterns on.
On we march
'Till we meet the dawn
We light our way
With our lanterns on.

‘We will light our way with our lanterns on’. As we prepare to enter the First Assembly of the Plenary today, I am mindful that we who are members enter a time of deep listening, reflection, and engagement carrying with us all that has led to this historic moment in the history of the Catholic Church in Australia. We are being called to walk these days with our lanterns on: The lantern of faith which welcomes the presence of the light of the Risen Lord which shines forth amidst all the shadows and darkness. We will walk our way with our lanterns on!

We are mindful of the announcement of the Plenary five years ago; the process of approval by the Vatican; the extraordinary engagement in dialogue and listening sessions reflecting on the question: What is God asking of the Catholic Church in Australia at this time? This question touched people on a personal level, but also drew us into a wider conversation with our brothers and sisters in faith, with those involved in the life of the Church, those who had rich things to say about their experience of the Church its grace and woundedness, and the myriad of other voices who desired to offer their own reflections.

In the Diocese of Sale, under the leadership of Archbishop Pat O’Regan, a whole process of local meetings led to the 2019 Diocesan Assembly collated in ***Sharing Our Story – Celebrating Our Faith – Shaping Our Future***. This assembly, and the preparation for the Plenary, now converge at this moment. The Plenary formally commences. We gather to hold the “joys and hopes, the anxieties and grief of the people of our time.” We have been entrusted with a special task to honour the rich collection of challenges, opportunities and possibilities of so many people. We do so in a spirit of accompaniment of those present in the Assembly, but even more closely with the whole Church. We are enter into a period of deep listening, respectful openness to the voice of others, honest engagement and a desire to, above all else, listen to the Holy Spirit who is with us. Jesus assured his disciples that were two or three gather in his name, that he would be among them.

No-one anticipated five years ago that we would meet remotely because of Covid 19, yet because of the efforts of so many wonderful, committed and

imaginative people we shall gather. Archbishop Coleridge has noted, “the Risen Lord appeared to his followers behind locked-doors, surely he will appear among us through the wonders of technology”.

We are reminded so powerfully today in the Book Deuteronomy, that God’s presence is not beyond us, but within us, around us: ‘The Word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance’ (Deut 10:14). Sometimes, I am tempted to think that I have all the answers, that I must go in search of the God of Truth and Love. Yet, it is in the stillness, the silence, that God speaks to me and to you. We must learn the gentle art of listening deeply to God and to each other. Through the Word and the Tradition, our God is revealed. Surely, this is the lesson for the week ahead: Not to enter these days with our own agendas, or set of outcomes, but to enter this space in a spirit of deep communion with our brothers and sisters. The six areas of the agenda are:

- Conversion
- Prayer
- Formation
- Structures
- Governance
- Institutions

These have emerged as our starting point, but who knows where the voice of the Holy Spirit will lead us? This is not to deny the seriousness of the dialogue, or the heartfelt concerns of many, but simply to place our Plenary process of deep listening within the care of God. We recall the words of St Mary Mackillop: ‘do all in your power and leave the rest calmly to God.’

The promise of today’s gospel from St John is that Jesus accompanies us in our fear, worries and anxieties. He reassures us, as he did his disciples – he speaks to us. He enters the space of fear and fills it with peace, light and hope. He is no longer bound to an upper room, but he is experienced wherever we are – so much so, that through the Holy Spirit “the Advocate” he dwells within us. He speaks his words of promise to our First Assembly, “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid’, I am with you.”

As your bishop, I join with Fr Peter Slater, Vicar General, Parish Priest of Warragul-Drouin; Fr Denis O'Bryan, Episcopal Vicar for Clergy, Parish Priest of St Thomas', Clyde North; Ms Liza Privitera teacher, member of our Diocesan *Gaudium et Spes* committee, with Ms Katherine Jelavic theology student, parish leader, member of *Gaudium et Spes*; with, Sr Mary Olofu (Sisters of the Nativity) Superior, pastoral leader, Cranbourne. We will carry our experience and your hopes with us:

- We will think of our parishes – urban, regional and rural;
- we will hold the sense of communion which exists from the largest to our smallest faith communities; our schools; mission agencies; the prisoners; those who live on the margins;
- we reflect on the extraordinary woman and men who witness to the Gospel every day and whose baptismal vocation is a witness to many;
- we will remember the sick, the aged;
- we will remember those whose lives have been traumatised by sexual abuse and for the pain which they have endured;
- we will hold the 6409 Sale voices who responded to the Listening and Dialogue phase;
- and we will hold you all, the faithful of Sale, as we gather.

Pray that we will be courageous in responding to Pope Francis' call to be open to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who invites in us 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.

This is a time of great rejoicing and energy for the Church in Australia.

Let us light our way with our lanterns on; on we march 'till we meet the dawn!

Let us go out to meet the Risen Lord!

Our Lady of Perpetual Help, pray for us.

Bishop Greg Bennet