



**Fifth Plenary Council of Australia
Opening Mass**

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 3 October 2021
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

On 21 November 1964, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, known to most of us as *Lumen Gentium*, was officially promulgated as one of only two dogmatic constitutions which were the fruit of the Second Vatican Council. Fifty-seven years later the Council, as Pope Francis reminds us often, remains a fundamental touchstone for our understanding of the life and mission of the Church in our contemporary world. It represents, indeed, a particularly eloquent sign of the Lord's ongoing fidelity to his promise that the Holy Spirit, who is sent to us by the Father, will as today's gospel puts it, be with us teaching us everything, and reminding us of all that Jesus has said to us.

We can be confident that the Lord remains faithful to this promise. And so, as we now seek to discern just what it is that *God is asking of us in Australia at this time*, our hearts do not need to be troubled or afraid. The Lord is always faithful.

The Second Vatican Council was the Church's response to a fundamental question which both the world in which we live, and the Church herself, posed to her: "*Church of Christ, what do you say of yourself? Who do you understand yourself to be?*"

We put the same question to ourselves today as we solemnly inaugurate the Fifth Plenary Council of the Church in Australia. We do so with courage, with humility and with hope as the words of Jesus ring out today: *Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you* (Jn 14:27). In the midst of the raging winds and crashing waves which sometimes threaten to overwhelm us we hear again the words of Jesus to His first disciples: "*Take courage, I am with you. There is no need to be afraid*" (Matt 14:27).

The nature and mission of the Lord's Church is at the centre of the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*. The document draws powerfully on the Scriptures, on the rich tradition of the early theological and pastoral giants of the Church, and on the guidance of the Holy Spirit across the many centuries of the Church's journey. We are, the Council tells us, the People of God on pilgrimage towards our heavenly homeland (LG Ch 2), called to walk together in faith, with courage and hope.



Our response to this call will determine the extent to which we become in practice what *Lumen Gentium* tells us we are in principle: “a kind of sacrament, that is a sign and instrument, of communion with God and unity amongst all people” (LG 1). This is the challenge which lies ahead of us, for surely God is asking us in Australia at this time to rediscover and live more faithfully our vocation to be a Pilgrim People, brothers and sisters in a community of disciples. We are on the way – but we are not there yet.

We must, of course, do all we can to live in fidelity to this extraordinary vocation, but ultimately it will only be possible with the grace of God. *Lumen Gentium* reminds us that it is only *in Christ* that the Church is and can be a sacrament of communion and unity (LG 1). It is only with our eyes fixed on Christ that we can hope to be heading in the right direction. It is only when we are walking faithfully in his footsteps as our Good Shepherd that we can be confident we will not go astray.

As disciples we know that we must follow the Master. But we do not do so from a distance. The Lord is closer to us than we are to ourselves. How often does Saint Paul remind us that we are the Body of Christ? That He is the head of the body which is His Church? That the communion between Christ and His Church is as intimate as the relationship between a husband and wife? That the bread we break and the cup we bless are a sharing in the body and blood of Christ? That because there is one bread we are one body because we all partake of this one bread?

This, then, is who we are: the Pilgrim People, the sheep-fold of the Lord, the sacrament of communion, the Body of Christ. Reborn as members of Christ through baptism and united with Him through the Eucharist we are drawn unfailingly into the divine life of the Trinity. Today Jesus assures us that if we keep His word, His Father will love us and He and the Father will come to us and make their home with us (John 14:23). Drawn into the mysterious life of God, the Spirit, too, is with us to teach us and to remind us of all that Jesus has shared with us. And so, as *Lumen Gentium* tells us, borrowing some words from Saint Cyprian, “we are a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (LG 4). We are indeed, as individuals and as a community of faith, made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26,27).

As this week we consider our life together, our pastoral care and our outreach in education, health and aged-care, our social services, our structures and governance, and many others things besides, the Lord is inviting us to reflect deeply and courageously on how we can better, as individuals and as communities of faith, be this living image of the life-giving God who, in Christ, is always seeking to be present and active in our world. He seeks to do so in and through us.

Pope Saint John Paul II once wrote that our response to all the challenges and opportunities we face as the Church in our mission today would be *hopelessly inadequate if we have not first contemplated the face of Christ* (cf NMI 16). Much of the work ahead will need, therefore, to be done on our knees, metaphorically if not literally. How can we be a missionary and evangelising Church if we are not listening to the Lord Jesus who says to us, as He said to His first disciples, “As the Father has sent me so I send you” (John 20:21)? How can we be an inclusive, participatory and synodal Church if we do not reflect deeply on the hospitality of God made known in Christ, who draws so many people into His



mission of preaching, healing and teaching? How can we be a prayerful and Eucharistic Church if we do not journey with Jesus into the hills to pray, or if we forget that when He asks us to celebrate the Eucharist *“in remembrance of me”* (Luke 22:19), He is also asking us to become the Eucharist, giving ourselves away for others as He did? How can we be a humble, healing and merciful Church if we have not tasted the bitter gall of our failings and sins, and then, purified by the Lord, begin to reflect Jesus, the face of the Father’s mercy, healing and compassion? How can we be a joyful, hope-filled, servant Church if we do not contemplate Jesus on his knees washing the feet of his disciples? How can we be a Church open to conversion, renewal and reform if we fail to let the cry of Jesus, *“Repent and believe in the Good News”* (Mark 1:15), pierce our hearts?

As we solemnly inaugurate the first Assembly of the Plenary Council today, I want to be so bold as to say, therefore, that perhaps the most important thing God is asking of us at this time is to return the Church to Christ and return Christ to the Church. What has always been true in theory and in principle urgently needs to become true in the day-to-day experience of everyone who encounters us. We must become, even more than we are already, a community of true disciples. We must become a living icon of Christ who humbled himself, taking the form of a servant. We must learn from the One who is meek and humble of heart. We are being sent by Him just as He was sent by his Father. If we remain in Him, as branches remain part of the vine, we will bear much fruit. *Maranatha – Come Lord Jesus, Veni Sancte Spiritus – Come Holy Spirit.*