



Bishop Paul Bird's Homily

Opening of Plenary Council

Ballarat Cathedral, October 3, 2021

Plenary Councils are special events. Over the past 177 years the Catholic Church in Australia has held only four Plenary Councils. The fourth was held back in 1937. Today we mark the start of number five. After several years of preparations, the first assembly of the Fifth Australian Plenary Council begins today. The assembly will bring together 278 members from Church communities all around the country. There will be 20 advisers and some administrative staff. All together, the assembly will involve over 300 people joining together in prayer and conversations through the coming week. Because of the travel restrictions with the pandemic, we'll be meeting online. However, I pray that this will still be a real meeting of minds and hearts. I pray that all those who take part in the assembly will be united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit.

When we started the Plenary Council process, we looked at a key question: What is God asking of us in Australia at this time? This is a challenging question. It's not easy to discern what God is asking of us in the many areas of our lives. Yet, we can have confidence that we will find helpful answers because we believe we're not alone in our efforts. We believe that the Holy Spirit is always ready to guide us when we honestly seek God's will. The Holy Spirit can lead us to understand with the mind of Christ. That's why we begin the Plenary Council with prayer and that's why prayer will be such an important part of all our meetings. Today we're celebrating the Mass of the Holy Spirit, calling on the Spirit to pour out on us the gifts we'll need, gifts such as wisdom and courage and patience and love. I thank you for your part in our prayer in this Mass and I invite you to say a prayer each day this week for blessings on the Plenary Council.

In the days ahead, the Plenary Council members will reflect on our life as a Church community in the midst of our Australian society. We'll speak about the life of our parish communities. We'll consider our outreach in education, health and aged-care, and in social services. We'll ask how we might be a more missionary Church as we share the good news of Christ with the wider community, particularly with people who are struggling. We believe that God is always seeking to be present and active in our world. We'll reflect on how God might work through us, as individuals and as communities of faith.

All these questions can find a focus in the person of Jesus. We can find inspiration if we contemplate the face of Christ. As we seek to be a missionary Church, we can remember the words of Jesus, "As the Father has sent me so I send you" (John 20:21). As we seek to be a Church in which each person can find a home, we can remember how welcoming Jesus was, especially to the poor and troubled. As we seek to be a prayerful and Eucharistic Church, we can remember how Jesus would go into the hills to pray and how he gave himself at the Last Supper under the form of bread and wine and directed us to celebrate the Eucharist as his memorial. As we seek to be a humble, healing and merciful Church, we can remember the parable that Jesus told of the one who prayed, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner". As we seek to be a servant Church, we can remember Jesus on his knees washing the feet of his disciples.

Over the past few weeks, Christian communities around the world have offered prayers focussing on God's gift of creation. They have celebrated this as a "season of creation", starting on the first day of September and continuing till the 4th October, the feast of St Francis of Assisi. This year, the season of creation flows into the first assembly of our Australian Plenary Council. It's an appropriate time to offer prayers of thanks for the gifts of creation and prayers of thanks for the gifts of our redemption in Christ. In our Mass now, we give thanks for all God's gifts and we pray for God's special blessing on this week's gathering of the Plenary Council.

Bishop Paul Bird Csr