

# THE JOURNEY SO FAR

As we conclude the First General Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, the process of discernment continues. From the opening Mass to the closing of the Assembly, our prayer has been 'Come, Holy Spirit.' The call to hear afresh the Good News of Jesus Christ through a spiritual posture of 'deep listening' has been a central element of the preparation of the Plenary process and a distinctive feature of this week. We adopted a regular pattern of prayer and spiritual conversation throughout each day. This slow process of deep listening allowed space for still nascent dreams and visions to come to greater maturity.

The opening session each day began with a Welcome to Country, spoken from various regions of Australia. Indigenous voices, both young and old, paid respects to Elders past, present and emerging, welcomed the Members of the Plenary Council to the day's gathering, and invited all of us to a time of quiet and prayer. As Members offered their reflections day by day, they regularly acknowledged the Indigenous peoples of the land from which they were speaking.

Over three hundred participants gathered for six days, meeting virtually across five different time zones, with many more people following the opening session of each day online. The gift of listening to one another has planted promising seeds and raised important questions for us. Many described the small group conversations and reports as the heartbeat of this First Assembly. Our process of discernment requires time and space for mature reflections to emerge, and further spiritual conversations will be necessary in our considerations of what God is asking of us in Australia at this time.

As the many personal interventions demonstrated, there is no shortage of passion and charisms among the community of believers. These interventions covered a wide range of the complex realities of the Church and Australian society in this particular moment of our history. They expressed personal wisdom and aspirations that have been a gift to this Assembly's deliberations. Many elements of the Council's Agenda were carefully considered. Discussion of other issues, including some not formally on the Agenda, was initiated, and will require more time.

As participants in this Assembly, we have experienced and expressed the range of emotions that come with facing profound issues together, holding in tension diverse interpretations and expectations. Through prayer and reflection, we have been called to be patient with the process, with each other, with the Church and, most importantly, with the Holy Spirit.

We listened to the confronting and important voices of victims and survivors of abuse in the Church. They reminded us of the great wounds and failures of the Church and the continuing need to discern pathways of true healing and renewal.



The plain speaking of First Nations people has brought into even sharper focus the need for reconciliation with Indigenous communities, as well as the need for justice and for the healing of this land itself through an 'integral ecology'.

In responding to the Agenda questions, we considered ways of living as Church today. Many affirmed what they value about their Catholic faith: spirituality, community, prayer, liturgy and sacramental life, and service through the vocation of all the baptised. Members spoke of the ministries of pastoral care and education, health and aged care, and the many social services and advocacy the Church provides in the Australian community. These are great gifts to a world that is seeking meaning and more authentic living.

Other interventions expressed hopes for renewal, offering perspectives on what might be possible for a Church facing crucial questions, tensions and uncertainties. Many called our attention to the importance of enhancing the role of women in the Church. We heard the call to conversion and fidelity, as well as to imagination and renewal. We were reminded of the needs of rural dioceses and parishes, as well as those of large cities. We celebrated the gifts that the Eastern Churches bring to the Catholic community in Australia.

Often expressed through the lens of personal experience, the discernment of this Assembly has threaded together conversations about what the Church can offer today's world on the one hand, and how the world can inform the ways and structures of the Church on the other. We reflected on questions of leadership and governance in light of Pope Francis' call for us to be more synodal. The missionary vision of Pope Francis has both inspired and infused all the deliberations of this First Assembly. Missionary discipleship has been a key theme, as has the

call to go out to the margins. Another recurring theme, expressed in different ways, is the need for ongoing processes of ecclesial listening which can form and inform how the Church lives its mission today.

The Assembly also considered how all people might feel at home in our communities, regardless of their particular circumstances. Various voices drew our attention to young people, women, single people, parents and families, people with disabilities, people with diverse experience of sexuality and gender, and others who feel, for a variety of reasons, that there is no place for them. We asked how a missionary Church might connect with those who feel distant from the community of faith.

Each of these voices has been a powerful reminder that the Church, as a sign of the kingdom of God, has the vocation of being an image of Christ and an icon of grace

to the whole human family.

With the closing of this First Assembly, the Plenary Council process now enters a time of prayer, reflection, maturation and development. This will involve continuing reflection by the Members of the Council, and consultation with the wider Church community, as we develop propositions for presentation to the Second Assembly of the Council next July. This will be coordinated with Australian preparations for the 2023 Synod, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.” In faith, hope and charity, we entrust all these tasks to the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Our prayer remains, as always: ‘Come, Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit of the great South Land.’

*Concluding Statement from the First Assembly ACBC. Bishop Paul Bird CSsR is chair of the Plenary Council Drafting Committee.*

