

## **SPEECH**

### **Launch**

#### **A Church for all: A guide to the Australian Plenary Council and Beyond**

**7:00pm Thursday 9 September 2021**

**Francis Sullivan AO, Chair Catholic Social Services Australia**

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Thank you Andrea. As I speak tonight on Ngunnawal Country I pay respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

I would like to spend the brief minutes available to share some thoughts as someone who is a delegate to the Plenary Council and is grappling with the challenge of participating in what appears to be a very controlled, clerically dominant and cautiously scripted event.

There has already been widespread bewilderment in the published agenda for the Plenary. It appears to be very bland when compared to the 17,500 heartfelt submissions and the impassioned discussions and dialogues over the last three years.

Also there is a sense of foreboding that the Plenary discussions will be curtailed so that some of the difficult, controversial for some, issues won't be given serious air time because they are beyond the remit of the Plenary Council.

Frankly this was not the invitation the bishops issued to encourage Catholics to embrace the Plenary and get involved in the process. Back then, 'everything was on the table'.

Somewhere along the line - someone has taken things off the table!

It is hard to trust a process that changes the rules of engagement as it goes. Even up to today some elements of the conduct of the Assemblies are still unclear.

Yet, we hang in there in good faith and hope. With fingers crossed we place our feet on the path.

Delegates to the Plenary Council are being asked to embrace a planned program of dialogue, deliberation and determination known as synodality.

It is meant to be the preferred papal governance model for an emerging Church.

The working process is also meant to be prayerful reflection, discussion, consideration and consensus for the common good. This will be how discernment plays out in practice.

An interesting aside is the fact that very few people can actually explain what synodality and discernment mean. Even senior archbishops admit that they don't really have that understanding. A curious situation when we are less than a month from starting the process!

Pope Francis sees this approach as the vehicle for the Church to shed itself of out-moded customs and structures, to adopt a humble non clericalist attitude and to embark on a missionary as opposed to propositional agenda.

From my experience he is spot on! Pope Francis sets out a simple formula for this transition. He says, firstly discern reality. Then debate ideas.

Undoubtedly this is our moment to face realities. Only the naïve would think that our Church is not in crisis.

Around 90 percent of Catholics no longer regularly attend weekend worship. Large swathes take issue with current Church positions on matters of sexuality, marriage and gender identity. They speak of disaffection, disinterest, even discrimination from a Church too rigid and too reactionary to resonate with their heartfelt sense of personhood and goodness.

Unless there is a sincere effort to acknowledge and breach this chasm our common project is doomed.

And that common project is to be authentically Catholic in following the Gospel.

A movement of Catholics if you will.

From its earliest understandings, to practice Catholicism is to seek wholeness and unity across differences. It is to participate in the Divine juggle! That is, we believe that God's life is in our lives, with all our diversity and plurality and that we achieve wholeness together, not apart.

And the key is this – our unity, our Catholicism, is not about insistence on conformity – rather it is to value our differences as human beings – not to seek to reduce human life to a normative straitjacket where some are legitimate Catholics and others not.

It is to build bridges, not walls of exclusivity. To be welcoming of diversity, not to be judgemental. To embrace equality amongst the baptised not instil privilege and entitlement.

This is the style of Catholicism that can be missionary, that can be relevant in a world cynical of religious ideologues and cultural warriors.

This is a style of Catholicism that humbly acknowledges that it doesn't have all the answers, doesn't sit in judgement of others, doesn't seek to abandon the frontiers of human endeavour, development and enquiry out of fear, suspicion or prejudice.

I put it to you that this spirit which seeks inclusion, equality and fraternity, undergirds the contributions to this volume.

As Claire Victory so eloquently outlined, all the contributors speak from deep spiritual insight with hearts afire for the Gospel message and its unfolding challenges.

They give voice to the cries of ordinary Catholics for a vibrant, relevant church, one they can recognise as being a reflection of their lives and circumstances, one that feels responsive and understanding, compassionate and nurturing, brave and prophetic, exciting and free.

Delegates to the Plenary Council will be asked to develop tangible proposals for the Church in Australia. Ways to put the sentiments I have expressed and the style of Catholicism that most reflects its origins into effect.

They will need ideas to discuss once they acknowledge our present reality.

*A Church For All* has offered a pathway for that work. It is a prayerful consideration of our current circumstances within the framework of deliberation provided by the Plenary Council.

It is completely consistent with our Tradition of theological reflection and discernment. It provides multiple tangible proposals that are aimed at being a missionary, vibrant Church.

The Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform along with Joan Chittister, Debora Zanela, Robert Fitzgerald and John Warhurst are the beacons of hope in the wider Church conversation that so easily can be constrained by inertia and a lack of imagination. When I read their contributions I feel a sense of excitement and possibility. I dream again that change can happen.

Pope Francis speaks of a change in era. The change may not come easily it may well come messily. We need to gird our loins for the change that is coming!

The spirit of change stirs passions and reactions. It instils an insistence to persevere at the level of intuition and instinct to fuel what some call a 'prophetic imagination'. It calls for disciples of a movement Jesus would recognise. Disciples prepared to embark on a road where uncertainty and toil gives way to enlightenment and community.

A road where fellow travellers sometimes come from unlikely parts.

A road wide enough for the refugees from another time in the Church to join the march.

A road with enough curves to collect the bystanders, the weary, the uncertain and the rejected.

A road that takes us to heaven.

Finally, I am delighted to join with Claire Victory in launching *A Church For All* this evening. It is the collection of years of sincere and intelligent reflection by committed, dedicated Catholics. It deserves widespread attention and should be carried into the Plenary Council by delegates and advisors alike.

ENDS

1,162 WORDS