



What is a Diocesan Assembly, Synodality & Recommendations of a DPC

Speech

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It really is very exciting, I think for all of us to be able to gather here this morning.

As Tara just explained to you, I am going to be basically talking about synodality, Diocesan Pastoral Council, and all those kinds of things. It is really meant to be described as a keynote address; I would prefer to think of it as a kind of an introduction to all of the good things that are going to be part of our time here today.

I want to begin by just saying how grateful I am obviously to everybody who has worked so hard to bring this event together. I am sure you have already picked up just how much work has gone into it. I particularly want to comment on, and I am sure it is in everyone's minds, but I particularly want to comment on the way we started this morning.

The way we started this morning, not just with a quick in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and a rush to Our Father and Hail Mary, then on to the real business of the day.

We started with a significant time devoted to the Lord – to bring us together in the presence of the Lord, to pray it. This is already an indication of the way the church is moving, and what synodality is inviting us into.

You will hear a lot today and over the progress of what is beginning today about discernment. Discernment comes out of the kind of experience we share together this morning, our readiness to stop, to slow down, to reflect, to listen, to let go, so as to make room for new things to happen inside of us. So, I really want to make that point because for many of us now, it is the way we always start these kinds of things, but for many others, perhaps not yet. I think we have already had a wonderful experience of what synodality is inviting us into.

As Tara explained, and as you can see on the screen, what I want to do is to situate the few remarks I want to share with you this morning in the context of the Plenary Council. It might be useful for you to know that the last time I was in Rome, I spoke to the new Prefect of the

Dicastery for Bishops, they are responsible for overseeing the reception of what we did at the Plenary Council. He raised the question with me before I had a chance to raise it with him and he assured me that they had received everything from us. What they do is that they kind of break it apart and distribute different parts of the work of the council to the various, we might call them departments in Rome. And at that stage, which was just after Easter, they were still waiting to receive the comments back from the various parts of the Church's organisation over there. So, things are happening, things are moving. It is not just sitting there on a shelf somewhere in Rome. I can't tell you how long it will take before we get a final response from Rome. When I am in Rome, which I will be shortly, I will raise the matter again.

Having said that, you would all be aware that most of the things that emerged from our Plenary Council are things that we can already begin to do. There are things that we can already begin to think about and pray about and talk to each other about and make some decisions about, and one of them is this question of the possibility of a Diocesan Pastoral Council.

I will talk about that a little bit more in a moment, but really, the whole day is focused on that. So, I don't need to say too much about that except to set some general ideas around it. I did want to just recall for us very quickly, where we have come from in relationship to this matter, because a journey was begun a long time ago here in the Archdiocese, which is now beginning to be crystallised and there is a new energy about taking it forward. Really, it goes back to the year 2012, not because that was the year I became the Archbishop, but because that was the year when we had the Year of Grace. Some of you who were around at that time might remember the Year of Grace, and I will just say a very brief word about why the Bishops of Australia decided to call that Year of Grace.

It was because the bishops of Australia - I had been a bishop then for four or five years - the bishops were deeply aware that the Church in Australia needed a new sense of direction, a new sense of energy, a new focus. And because we had so many issues, so many challenges, and so many problems, really, let us be honest, that we as a Church must face.

What became obvious to the bishops was that we were not yet at a mature stage of our Christian discipleship and had not reached a level of maturity that really equipped us to deal really well with all of the challenges and issues we faced. So, the bishops, basically invited everyone in the Church in Australia to go on retreat, to make a year's retreat, and the heart of that retreat was to return our focus to Christ, and discover again, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

We are nothing if we are not disciples of Jesus, if that is not the thing that holds us together, then we have no purpose to exist. We follow Him, He is our way and that is what we need to rediscover. It is, some of you will remember what I said as my hope for the diocese, when I became the Archbishop, that as a community of disciples, we would return the Church in Perth to Christ and return Christ to the very heart of the Church, so that everything else is seen through the lens of our following of Jesus. I am hoping that what we are doing here today and what will unfold from today, will always have that as a central focus that we never forget that because without that, we tend to get lost in all sorts of things. We get focused on individual issues and forget what the ground and the foundation of those issues is meant to be all about.

So, I really wanted to say that. That then led to the Archdiocese Plan that unfolded, then it led to the decision of the bishops to have the Plenary Council. Luckily, fortuitously, providentially, guided by the Spirit, our gathering today is just one week before the opening of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality. Those of you who were part of the Plenary Council and have been following the journey of the preparations for the Synod will know that the Synod, that is at the level of the universal Church, very significant aspects of our Plenary Council, have been borrowed and are incorporated into that process. So, what we are doing here and what we have been doing in the Church, not just here in the Archdiocese, or in WA, but right across the country is deeply in sync with what the Universal Church is doing, and in many ways, the Universal Church has learned something from us, we have a lot to offer the Universal Church.

You've got up on the (screen) the reference to decree number seven, which comes out of this as the Plenary Council. It comes out of that area of the Plenary Council which focused on the theme of 'at the service of communion, participation, and mission". It is just a quote, it is a bit long, it is a quote from what I would call the Theological Foundation, or the preamble to decree number seven of the Plenary Council. It is really picking up a lot of the things that were part of our reflection this morning, during our prayer.

In baptism, the Holy Spirit gives believers and therefore the whole Church, no one is excluded, a special gift so that together, they can faithfully interpret and live the Christian gospel in the diverse circumstances of history and culture, and in church speak, that is called the *Sensus Fidelium*. That instinctive sense of what is at the heart of our faith that the Holy Spirit shares with all of us. It then goes on to add, the Spirit enables ongoing discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, the signs of the times, the realities in which we find ourselves, which we face, day after day, in the life of the Church and in the life of our society, but always in the light of the gospel, always in the light of our following of Jesus.

And then a favourite phrase of mine, all the baptised, participate in the three offices of Christ, the three characteristic features of the life and ministry of Jesus, if you like, as a priestly, prophetic, and royal people. That is the theological foundation - I have just lifted a little bit out of this, by the way - it is all on the website of the Plenary Council if you want to follow it through. Next is then an affirmation. So, in the light of all of that, therefore, the Plenary Council, it is important to remember that a Plenary Council is one of, or, in fact, the highest level of the Church gathering as the Church that is possible at the local level. And when I say local, I mean the church in Australia, it is very authoritative.

So therefore, the Plenary Council affirms that governance in the Catholic Church, the exercise of leadership, governance in the Catholic Church should be exercised in a synodal manner, with the appropriate participation of all the baptised, so we don't get to just hand it over to the Archbishop or to elite group of leaders to make all the decisions and then we just do what they tell us to do. It is a shared exercise, this is discernment, this is something that has always been in theory at the heart of the life of the church, we do not always experience it in practice.

Governance in the Catholic Church should be exercised in a synodal manner, with the appropriate participation of all the baptised, again no one should be excluded. Then it goes on to a very practical thing. For a diocese or an eparchy, that is in the Diocese of the Eastern Catholic Churches. This would mainly involve the participation of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, well, we can't involve that here in Perth because we don't have one yet – we used to,

but we don't now, but that is why we are gathering today to start that journey. Then the Council of Priests, which is a body of priests, some elected by their brother priests, some appointed by the bishop, to provide advice to him. The College of Consultants which is a smaller group, which the bishop can also seek advice from, the Diocesan Finance Council, the Diocesan Curia, that is the leadership group, within the sort of central governance of the Diocese, various boards and governance bodies, and a times a Diocesan Synod.

The two things that I think we should focus on today are a Diocesan Pastoral Council, and a Diocesan Synod. Now, what those might mean will all unfold throughout this day and in time to come, but they are the two things that I think are important. Of course, for a parish, this would mainly involve the participation of the Parish Pastoral Council, kind of a localised version of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and the Parish Finance Committee. So, there was a theological foundation, then there is this affirmation, and then there is an invitation. In fact, it is slightly more than an invitation. Therefore, here again, remembering the Plenary Council is an authoritative body, presuming that this will be accepted by Rome, this becomes the local law of the Church in Australia. Therefore, this Plenary Council calls for all diocese and eparchies to establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council, and then it goes on to talk about some resources that are already available to help us work our way through all of that.

The important thing that I would want to say here is, and I will say a little bit more about it shortly, but yes, there are guidelines, there are church traditions and laws and all the rest of it around Diocesan Pastoral councils. They are meant to operate at the universal level, so those things are principles which apply right across the world. We must have a Diocesan Pastoral Council, that is, then if you will forgive me for using a rather churchy word but is then incarnated in the reality of our local situation.

It has to work for us. It has to help us make our discipleship truer, deeper, richer and more effective. That is the challenge, how to take something that is being recommended, right across the world, it is already a strong recommendation in Canon Law, but because it is not yet obligatory lots of places don't have it. So, it is already recommended at the universal level. We want to establish it here, but we must create one which is faithful to everything that we are asked to be as part of the Catholic Church, but also realistic and adapted to our reality. I think that is part of the challenge that we have gathered this group of people together to think about.

The fundamental question, which I think we together are being invited to decide, yes, but I would prefer to use the word discern. Decide might be, well, we will take a vote and see what the majority want. To discern is, we will enter a process to try and listen to the Holy Spirit and where the Holy Spirit is leading us. The one doesn't exclude the other, but in a Christian community, you don't get to the deciding part, or you should not, until you have done the discerning part. So, what kind of Diocesan Pastoral Council do we want here in the Archdiocese of Perth, do we need here in the Archdiocese of Perth, we will have to look at what canon law says, and later this morning this will be opened for us.

We do need to pay attention to the Plenary Council, and I will talk about that in a moment. We will of course need to pay very close attention to what is about to unfold in the Synod. It starts today week, goes for a month, then of course, just as our Plenary Council had two sessions, so the Synod has two sessions, and the bishops will gather again in October next year for the final session.

So, we will have to be paying close attention to what happens there and the concrete realities of the Archdiocese of Perth. If I had to sum up the way I understand the question, how can we as the Catholic community of the Archdiocese of Perth, be more faithfully and more fully all that the Lord is asking us to be?

The Plenary Council offered us a lot of help in delving into these questions that I just want to remind you, you won't be able to keep it in your minds, but hopefully these slides might be made available to you all on another occasion.

I want to remind you of six things that came out of the Plenary Council. These were the six topics that had emerged from that consultation that went across the whole Church in Australia, and everything was gathered and out of that very significant consultation, these were the themes that emerged. Two things; First, how is God calling us? So, this is a call from God. It is not just us trying to work it all out on our own. It is an invitation from God, to be a Christ centred Church and it goes back to what I said at the start. If we are not a Christ centred church, we are certainly not the inheritors, and the continuers of what Jesus started 2000 years ago.

So how is God calling us to be a Christ centred church in Australia? And we would say here in Perth, that is missionary, and evangelising and these are key words we might keep in mind as part of the discernment process moving forward. How is God calling us to be a Christ centred church in Australia that is inclusive, participatory and synodal. How is God calling us to be a Christ centred Church, which is prayerful, and Eucharistic, a Christ centred church which is humble, healing, and merciful. The Christ centred church which is a joyful, hope filled servant community, and a Christ centred Church, which is open to conversion, renewal, and reform. This is what emerged from the plenary Council consultations. It mirrors almost exactly what emerged from the worldwide consultation, in preparation for the Synod. So, something is happening, the Spirit is doing something in the Church at the moment. And while the spirit can be rather challenging at times, we should also be very excited, I think, by the fact that it seems to be that at this particular moment, in the life of the Church universally and for us here in Australia, the Spirit is starting to move in a very significant way.

Next, these are the three themes for the Synod; Communion, how can we be more fully a sign of instrument of union with God and of the unity of all humanity? Mission, how can we better share gifts and tasks in the service of the Gospel, the subset meaning, not leaving it just to a few? How can we better share the tasks with everybody? And then; Participation, what processes and structures and institutions are needed in a missionary synodal Church.

These are the questions that the Synod will begin to explore in the coming weeks.

These are the two questions I ask myself. How can we as the Catholic Community of the Archdiocese of Perth, strengthen and deepen our identity as first of all, a community? This is so important, and it is so difficult to develop and maintain. When the pressures are to split apart. We must keep working at maintaining and deepening communion.

And so, I have used that phrase, again, that I referred to earlier, that is "a chosen race chosen by God, a royal priesthood, in which we all share in one way or another with this notion of

Christ as the priest. What that means is a topic for another day, but it is a very important one. A consecrated - that means a holy nation. We are God's own people. To develop that sense of our dignity as this community who are the people of God, but a particular community, not just any community, a community that is entrusted with a mission.

The quote about being a chosen race in the royal priesthood comes from the first letter of St Peter and this is what happens next in that same quote, "This is why God created a chosen race in the royal priesthood, to proclaim the mighty acts of God, who has called you out of darkness, into His wonderful light."

That is the mission to proclaim the mighty acts of God, not just with our words, obviously, but more importantly, with our witness, with our lives with our action, with our outreach.

Lastly, in which all are called to play their part, and that was part of the focus of the prayer this morning. Variety of gifts, but always the same spirit, variety of services, but always the same Lord, a variety of activities, always the same God who activates all of this in everyone. You might think, well, I don't have anything much to contribute to the Church, or many of the people in our parishes might think that or perhaps have never been encouraged to think about it. But this is from the beginnings of our faith. This is fundamental to the beginnings of our faith over 2000 years ago, this is what they knew then, and what we must rediscover now.

So, for me, at least, this is the question that I hope we together can really discern first, and then decide. Guided by the Church because we are members of the Church. We are doing this as members of the Catholic community of the Archdiocese of Perth. So guided by the Church, which is an invitation by the way, to all of us, no one excluded including me, all of us to be prepared to say, "Do I have to actually let go of some things that I have thought in order to be guided by the church?" If I understand the church, not just as a human reality, let us face it, all sorts of horrible histories and all sorts of failures and all the rest of it, not just a human institution, but an institution which is enlivened and constantly healed and renewed by the Spirit.

So guided by this, church, Canon Law, Plenary Council, Synod on synodality they are all elements of the Church's gift of guidance. "What kind of structures, processes and procedures, can we, this group, envisage for an effective Diocesan Pastoral Council, which can meet the needs of our time and place as the Church of Christ in our Archdiocese?" I began by reminding you that what we are doing today is part of a journey that started a long time ago. I also want to say that in many ways, this is a pivotal moment in that journey, and a moment for a bold step forward in that journey, and that is what I think we are all hoping will happen. So, the journey continues.

I will just conclude by saying that as soon as the prayer started this morning, I began to get a little bit emotional, I have to say, but also very excited because I am leaving tonight to travel to Rome, for the Synod on the Synod of Bishops. And I will be able to take this experience of today with me and share it with the people at the Synod, with the Holy Father, to assure them that at least here - and we are not alone, of course - we are fully behind this renewal program, which is unfolding in the life of the Church and of which we in the Church in Australia are playing such an important part.

If you can read that little image on the screen there, it reads, 'If we let Him, He will show us the way.' We can't presume that we have yet got the way, that my ideas are the only ideas and the only way this will work is if everybody is smart enough to realise that I know everything, and they should do it, I think. if we let Him, He will show us the way.

So, the question is, are we prepared to let him?

Thanks very much.