



27th Sunday Ordinary Time

Homily

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

**Sunday 5 October 2020
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As I mentioned at the beginning of Mass, today we formally commission all the delegates from our diocese who will attend the Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia, which will hold its first Assembly in October next year. We also commission those other delegates living in the Archdiocese of Perth who will attend the Plenary Council as representatives of religious congregations and other Church bodies here in our city and state.

Had Australia, and indeed the whole world, not been struck by the COVID-19 pandemic the first session of the Plenary Council would have commenced today in Adelaide. Notwithstanding the many urgent and serious challenges which the pandemic places before us all, the decision to postpone the first assembly for twelve months has at least given us more time to enter more deeply into our reflection and prayer concerning the fundamental question of the Plenary Council: *what is God asking of us in Australia at this time?*

In a few moments I will invite the delegates to step forward for the important ceremony of commissioning. Before I do so, however, I just want to offer a few brief reflections.

Today throughout the universal Church we celebrate the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Saint whose name the present pope chose at the time of his election. It was Saint Francis who, kneeling before a crucifix hanging in a half-ruined church, the church of San Damiano, in the countryside outside the town of Assisi, seemed to hear a voice from the crucifix speaking to him and saying, *“Go and rebuild my church which is falling into ruins”*. Francis at first thought these words referred to the half-ruined building in which he found himself, so he immediately set himself the task of restoring that church building to its original beauty. It was only through prayer, trusting faith and patience that Francis came to understand that the Lord was asking something much more important: that Francis, through his radical commitment to the gospel, might lead the whole Church to a renewal of its original beauty and to a deeper fidelity.

It seems to me that our Plenary Council might well be our “San Damiano moment”, when we hear the Lord calling us, as the community of the Church here in Australia, to return once again with courage and boldness to the beauty of the gospel and begin to build our lives, our institutions, and our ministries more solidly on the basis of gospel principles.

As for Saint Francis, so for us, this is not a call to tear down the Church and start again. The Lord Jesus promised to be with his Church through the gift of his Holy Spirit and he has been faithful to that promise across the last 2000 years. Saint Francis did not destroy the church of Saint



Damiano: he rebuilt it and restored it to its original beauty. The Plenary Council, whose delegates from our part of the Church we commission this morning, will be engaged in the same task: not to tear down the Lord's Church and create one of our own but, rather, work with the power of God's Spirit to restore and renew the Church and enable it to be all that the Lord is calling it, calling us, to be.

It is because this is the task of the whole Church and not just the bishops that the delegates to the Plenary Council will include lay men and women, religious sisters and brothers, deacons, priests and bishops. We will undertake this challenge together.

This is a delicate and demanding task and our delegates to the Plenary Council will need the support of our constant prayer. The whole Church in Australia, including of course all the delegates to the Plenary Council, is seeking to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. The danger is that we simply presume that the Holy Spirit wants for the Church exactly what we might want for the Church. But as the Lord says to us in the Scriptures: *my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts* (Is 56:8-9).

Please pray for all the delegates as we commission them this morning, and please keep them in your prayers as the next twelve months unfold. They will be months of intense spiritual preparation. May the delegates, and all of us, be attentive to the words that Mary, the Mother of the Church, once spoke to the stewards at Cana: *you do whatever he, Jesus, tells you to do*.