



Vespers for Unity
60th Anniversary of *Unitatis Redintegratio*

Homily

Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth

Sunday 10 November 2024
St George's Anglican Cathedral

When I was a young boy growing up in Melbourne in the 1960s, at the very time when the Second Vatican Council was unfolding in Rome with a gathering of the majority of the world's Catholic Bishops, I remember my father going to speak to our local parish priest to ask permission to attend the funeral of a work colleague who was being buried from the local Presbyterian Church. My father was, somewhat reluctantly, given permission, but only on condition that he remained at the back of the church and did not take any active part in the service. Ecumenism was not a word my father, and perhaps even the parish priest, was aware of. Unbeknown to me at the time, the Second Vatican Council would transform the attitude of the Catholic Church to engagement with other Christian churches, encouraging Catholics to recognise, in members of other churches, not rivals or strangers or people to be wary of, but rather sisters and brothers in Christ. By the time I was a young priest teaching theology at the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne in the early 1990s, I had no hesitation in occasionally wandering down to Saint Paul's Anglican Cathedral to attend Evensong. Often the congregation was very small but no matter how large or small the congregation was the liturgy was always celebrated with dignity, reverence and beauty. On one occasion, as I took part in the liturgy, the title of the book written by Malcolm Muggeridge about Mother Teresa of Calcutta came to my mind: *Something Beautiful for God*. In the very heart of a bustling Australian city, while endless streams of people flowed past the entrance to the Cathedral on their way to the railway station, inside the cathedral *something beautiful for God* was taking place.

This evening, here in Saint George's cathedral, we are together doing something beautiful for God, and we are doing it together as sisters and brothers united by the unbreakable bond of baptism by which, as Saint Paul reminds us, we have all been clothed in Christ, united with him in his death and already sharing in the new life of his resurrection (cf Gal 3:26).



This communion we share in Christ, while it is not yet fully realised, should never be minimised or dismissed. Indeed, we might even be bold enough to take some words of Saint John and, with the necessary adaptations, apply them to ourselves. “My dear people, we are already the children of God, but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed” (cf 1John 3:2).

These words of Saint John were written to be a source of hope for the early Christian community to which he was writing. They can be a source of hope also for us as we look to the future into which the spirit of God is leading us. At the Last Supper, speaking from the depths of his heart, Jesus spoke about his desire, his earnest prayer, that all his disciples might be one, just as he and his Father are one (cf John 17:21). As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are far from that profound Communion which exists between the Father and the Son, in the Holy Spirit: this is true within each of our churches and true between our churches - but we are on the way.

When I became the Catholic Archbishop of Perth in 2012, I expressed a hope I would like to share tonight. This hope was born of something the leader of the religious order to which I belong, the Salesians of Saint John Bosco, once said. Speaking to men and women who had made the explicit following of Christ the very centre of their lives he put this challenge to them: *“The greatest challenge facing religious life today,”* he said, *“is to return the religious life to Christ and to return Christ to the religious life”*. I have reflected often on this and have come to the conclusion that they are words which every Christian, and every Christian community, and every Christian Church, needs to hear. And as I was reflecting and praying over what I could share with you this evening, it seemed to me that they are words which can speak powerfully to all those who take the prayer of Jesus, his desire for unity among his disciples, seriously. In the end the path to Christian unity must before all else be a pathway to a deeper encounter with Christ. He is, after all, the one who said, *“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself”* (cf John 12:32). It is by being drawn to him that we will find ourselves all gathered together at the foot of the cross. We will find our unity in him.

It is, of course, not easy to stand at the foot of the Cross. According to the gospel tradition very few of those close to Jesus remained faithful to him. To follow someone who speaks beautiful words and who brings healing and hope to the broken is relatively easy unless, like some of the leaders at the time of Jesus, those beautiful words are a challenge to our security and identity. But to follow a man as he carries his cross to the place of execution and to remain there through the agonising hours of his suffering is something altogether different. The gospels reveal that most of those closest to Jesus struggled to understand



him and to accept that what they wanted and expected from him was very different to his own understanding of what his Father was asking of him.

This was certainly true of Peter. When Jesus once asked his disciples what people were saying about him, it was Peter who was able to say that Jesus was not just another of the great Jewish prophets, like Elijah or Jeremiah, but was, rather, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus congratulates Peter who, He says, has grasped this deeper truth about Him because of a special gift of the Father. But when Jesus begins to explain what being the Christ means - *that he would have to go up to Jerusalem, and be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and be mocked and scourge and crucified, and then rise again on the third day* - Peter could not accept this and Jesus, who had just moments before congratulated him, now rebukes him, calling him an obstacle in his path (Matt 16:13-23). There is a confronting challenge here for anyone who seeks to walk the way of Jesus, as we are all trying to do. It is possible to get Jesus right - *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God* - and to get Jesus wrong – *No, Lord, this must not happen to you* - all at the same time.

It is this mysterious and challenging Jesus, who is always capable of surprising us, and stretching us, who must always be at the heart of the journey of faith and fidelity to which we give the name “ecumenism”. It is to the gift of his Holy Spirit, who comes, sometimes as burning flames and roaring winds and at other times as a still quiet voice, and who blows where the Spirit, and not we, decide, that we must remain open. As Archbishop Kay and I said in our letter of invitation to this evening’s celebration, the ecumenical invitation to each Church and ecclesial communion, to us, is to remain open to the future into which the Holy Spirit can lead us if we remain open to the Spirit’s work.

That Spirit, Jesus reminds us, will lead us into the fullness of the truth and remind us of all that Jesus has said and done. Through our baptism, the Spirit has been given: we have been reborn in Christ. But the gift of the Spirit is also a task; the anointing of the Spirit always becomes a mission. The Lord awaits our response. Like the disciples in John’s Gospel, who remained with Jesus even when some of His teachings so scandalised the people that many walked away, may our response also be, *“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life”* (Jn 6:68).

The final document of the recent Synod of Bishops on Synodality in Rome, from which I have just returned, insists that any reform or renewal of the Catholic Church must look beyond issues of governance and structures, important though they are, to the deeper question of a conversion of heart - what the document calls a *spirituality* of synodality. Because of the very clear focus during the Synod on the ecumenical dimension of the life



of the Church, elements of a spirituality of synodality might also have something to say to us as we recommit ourselves to the search for Christian unity:

A Synodal (ecumenical) spirituality flows from the action of the Holy Spirit and requires listening to the Word of God, contemplation, silence and conversion of the heart ... It requires asceticism, humility, patience and a willingness to forgive and be forgiven. It welcomes with gratitude and humility the variety of gifts and tasks distributed by the Holy Spirit for the service of the one Lord. It does so without ambition, envy, or desire for domination or control, cultivating the same attitude as Christ who emptied himself taking the form of a slave (Phil 2:7).

During the Ecumenical Prayer Service which was held inside the Vatican in an outdoor piazza where, according to tradition, Saint Peter and many other Christians died for their faith, Pope Francis, referring to the document *Unitatis Redintegratio* which we are remembering tonight, made this very simple statement: *the closer Christians are to Christ, the closer they are to one another.*

Perhaps rightly, then, we too can say, with humility and with hope: *The greatest ecumenical challenge facing our churches today is to return our churches to Christ and return Christ to our churches.*

Let us pray tonight that we may all have the courage to rise to this challenge.