



**Archdiocesan Assembly  
Closing Speech**

**Speech**

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Archbishop of Perth**

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Newman College, Churchland**

Normally, when I have to give a closing address, I've had a chance to prepare it days beforehand and type it all out and know exactly what I wanted to say. But I prepared absolutely nothing for this afternoon, because I wanted to be able just to respond to what the day has brought forth, at least as I've been experiencing it myself. So, I've got about 10 pages of scribbled notes here, I'm not going to go through all of them.

So, first of all, a great big thank you to everybody who's been involved in preparing for and in conducting today's processes. That includes everybody here. So, a big thank you to all of you, particularly to the organisers, the people who have put all of this together over a long period of time, through many meetings, through some sleepless nights, through lots of time and energy and commitment. I'm enormously grateful, as I'm sure all of you are as well. So that goes without saying, but it's important to say it anyway.

So just a few thoughts. And in a sense, they're scattered thoughts, but I hope that they'll make sense to you, I think they will, given what we've experienced together. What we're doing really is trying our best to respond to the call of Pope Francis to become a more synodal church. And I'll say a few things about that as we go along. To recognise that what we're doing here is being mirrored in all sorts of ways right across the church in Australia, and right across the world. We're engaged in something which is a transforming moment, in the life and experience of the Catholic Church, in our Archdiocese, here in WA, in Australia, and indeed, universally. It's hard to over stress, the importance of what we're doing together. I hope that people have a sense that it's really important.

Synodality, of course, is one of those churchy words, which is bit technical, in some senses, hard to define. But I think it's not hard to understand if you experience it. And that's what we've been doing this morning and this afternoon. We've been experiencing what a synodal church looks like and feels like and how it operates.



During my recent talk to the clergy of Sydney, I spoke about synodality and I had a slide up and it showed a meeting of the Synod of Bishops I think from 2012. It was a photos from the meeting of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation and a photo of a meeting of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023.

In 2012, all the bishops were dressed in their cassocks with their zucchettos. They were all sitting in the Synod Hall, which is like a tiered theater hall. So rather than like this, it would be those chairs at the back had still been in place and everybody's sitting in rows. The Cardinals were in the front. The Archbishop's came next then they were the bishops, then they were the monsignors, then they were the priests and then there were a few other stragglers up the back. That was 2012.

In 2023, the photo looks almost exactly like this. The one difference probably was at that table there, sitting at a table, together with a few other people was Pope Francis. And every table had a mixture of cardinals and bishops and priests and lay women and lay men and religious, all equally involved, all equally engaged, all equally sharing their understandings of what it is to be a Christian and a Catholic in today's world responding as best we can to the call of the Lord. So, we are here reflecting something that is now becoming the experience of the universal church.

And I want to say just two quick things about that because I think it's very important. At the Synod that's presently going on, so last October, there were quite a number of Australians there. There were five bishops, which is rather a large number, given the size of the church in Australia. There was a significant number of lay people who were either formally members of the Synod, or who were facilitators, like the facilitators you've had at your tables today, or who were theological or pastoral experts. The Australians walked into the Synod Hall, and immediately felt at home, because it was like this. And that's what we've done at our Plenary Council. None of the other participants in the Synod had experienced it before. I think it's worth saying to you, and a number of people involved in the preparation of the Synod have said this to me again, as recently, as a few weeks ago, when I was in Rome.

We took the methodology for the Synod from the Australian Plenary Council. That methodology is what we've all been doing for the last few hours together. So, it's good for us, I think, to know not because we want to pat ourselves on the back, but to recognise that the Australian Church has now reached a maturity, where it can offer something of real value to the Universal Church and be recognised in doing so. So, I think that's something that we should acknowledge that we can, in a sense, be proud of, and grateful to God for that through us, the Lord has provided this special gift to the universal church. So that was the first thing I wanted to say.

I think today, as I've sat listening, two important aspects have come to my mind. There is the aspect that you've been focusing on for most of the day and that is the question that we're



considering. A Diocesan Pastoral Council. What will the membership be like? What are the issues that it should discuss? All of those things are really important and that's what we've been discerning together. And I will be receiving as the Archbishop, I'll be receiving the fruits of all of that, so that I can then reflect on it together with other people as we work our way forward.

But I think the other thing that's really important for us to focus on - it's really what I wanted to focus on just briefly this afternoon - is the way we have approached this question. So, the question is vitally important. The Plenary Council of Australia has asked that every diocese in Australia have a Diocesan Pastoral council. The Synod of Bishops is certainly considering a proposal to make this obligatory right across the universal church. So, we're right on the money in terms of considering this issue. But it's also important to think about the way we are going about considering this question. And that's what I really wanted to focus on just briefly, this afternoon.

To do that, I think we need to just go back a little bit and remember, as I've just done. The reality of the Plenary Council in Australia, through that formation for the Plenary Council, we discerned together the methodology that we called 'Spiritual Conversations', and which the Synod, in order not to be too obvious about pinching it from us, called 'Conversations in the Spirit'. It's actually the same thing. It's that methodology, which is at the heart of what the church around the world is now doing. And it's a methodology that is all about discernment. And discernment is an intentional and deliberate and prolonged and prayer filled attempt to discern, to discover what it is, that God is asking of us at this moment. And so, in terms of our thinking about the Diocesan Pastoral Council, it's not just will we have one, or won't we, who will we ask and who won't we ask, what topics will we discuss and what won't we discuss. Behind all of those is the more fundamental question. What is God asking of us, as the Catholic community of the Archdiocese of Perth at this moment in our history, as we are being led, I believe, by the Spirit into this process of discernment around these questions for the Church moving forward.

So I think that's a really important thing for us to remember that we are not just going through a mechanical exercise, to establish some new structure that we hope will make us more efficient or anything like that. We're going through a deep discernment of what God is inviting us into, in order to enable us to be more faithful than we already are, and we're already well on the way. But to be more faithful than we already are, as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ. If the Diocesan Pastoral Council doesn't help us and everyone in the Archdiocese to together, become a more faithful community of disciples of Jesus, then there's no point.

Having said that, all the other questions then come into play, what will it look like? How will it operate? Who will be a part of it? What will we discuss? They're all very important, as long as we keep in mind the fundamental point and that is, that it's all geared towards helping us to be a more



faithful community of disciples of Jesus Christ, in 2024 and beyond, in this part of the world. And all of those dimensions are important.

We're not being called to decide what the church in Australia should do. We're being called to decide what we here in Perth need to do. We're not called to decide what should be done in 50 years' time; we're called to decide what shouldn't be done now. That's what the Lord is inviting us into. And behind all of that - Pope Francis is particularly convinced about this - is the idea of listening. Just the other day, at the beginning of last week, or Tuesday, I think it might have been Cardinal Grech, the Cardinal in charge of the Synod, together with a couple of other people who are involved in the Synod, launched the latest document, which will guide the work of the Assembly in October.

During that launch, he said this, he was talking about listening, as being at the heart of the Synodal process. He said, the purpose of listening - that's what hopefully, we've been doing, not just talking, but listening - the purpose of listening, Cardinal Grech said, is always and only to search for that which God wishes to say to the Church at this moment in our history. And even as we bring the day to a close, we might not exactly have an examination of conscience, but ask ourselves, was I conscious that this is what this is all about? That I'm listening to other people, not just listening to myself, listening to other people, because this is the way that we can move forward in discovering what it is that God is trying to say to us in the Church at this moment. And Cardinal Grech was really just reflecting I suppose you could say, on the constant refrain of Pope Francis about the Synod.

Pope Francis has said often and many of you would have come across this many times - a synodal church is a Church, which listens. And then he spells it out. He's talking about at the universal level, the faithful people of God. Now remember, the faithful people of God, going back to what Fr Vincent reminded us of this morning - is all of us. Sometimes, people talk about the people of God, as if it's distinct, somehow, rather, from the priests and the bishops. The faithful people of God, is all of us. Because as Fr Vincent stressed so beautifully and so strongly this morning, we're all equal, because we're all baptised into the community of disciples. So, it's the faithful people of God, listening to each other. And then all listening to the College of Bishops, while the College of Bishops listens to the faithful people of God, and then the faithful people of God and the College of bishops, to the Bishop of Rome, who equally is listening to the College of Bishops, and all the people. And Pope Francis will talk about a mutual listening, in which everybody has something to learn. And he says, this is the way we can begin to listen and discern the voice of the Holy Spirit. And the other thing Pope Francis says, is that listening is much more than simply hearing. We can hear each other and dismiss it. We can hear this noise and not allow it to be anything other than noise that we forget immediately afterwards. Listening is a different thing altogether. And



some of you have heard me talk about this before, if I, as I've tried to think this through for myself, I've come to the point of talking about what I call non defensive listening.

Listening in a synodal church involves a non-defensive listening and what does that mean? To put it simply, I think it means that if I listen, in order to see whether the other person is smart enough to agree with me, that's defensive listening. That I just want to have my own point of view confirmed. And if I don't, well, they've obviously not understood the issue properly. That's defensive listening.

Non-defensive listening is when I am prepared not to abandon what I believe, but to put it to one side, to listen with an open heart and an open mind to what other people are saying. And then perhaps, to allow what I'm hearing to be brought into engagement with what I think, because then I might begin to see something new in the whole point. So I really wanted to stress this because if our Diocesan Pastoral Council is to avoid the trap of the previous ones, the history of which Bishop Don shared for so well, this morning, if it's to avoid that trap, and eventually kind of just run out of steam, we can't afford to fall into the trap of a Council that operates on the principle of defensive listening, that we've got all the answers, that we're going to tell the rest of the people in the Church what they have to do. And if they don't go along with it, it just shows you how blind and stubborn they are. I don't want, a Diocesan Pastoral Council that operates that way. Now, this is easy to say. But even as you reflect on the three sessions we've had today, some of you might be able to reflect that actually, "I can understand what the Archbishop is saying, because I was kind of listening to see whether other people were agreeing with me. But I wasn't really listening to see if there were some gems, some insight, some beautiful gift of the Holy Spirit in what they were saying that I wasn't prepared to hear."

So, I really wanted to stress that I think this is really a key to not just the success of what we're trying to do in re-establishing a Diocesan Pastoral Council, but what we are trying to do and to become, as the Catholic Church here in this Archdiocese. My hope is that this approach to being the Church, will begin to percolate through everything that we do. Already for the last two or three sessions, for example, of our Council of Priests, which is a body of priests that provide advice to me, we've tried to run those Council of Priests meetings, on this model. If Parish Pastoral Councils could adopt this model, that would be great. If school staff could adopt this model, that would be great. I think there's something in this approach to a deep and respectful listening, which offers a hope for all of us, not a blind optimism, but a hope founded in faith.

I was very interested to listen to Bishop Don's explanation because I wasn't here in the days when there was a previous Diocesan Pastoral Council. So some of that was new to me. I was very interested to hear that. And one of the things that that rang a bell for me was when Bishop Don drew a link between the way the Diocesan Pastoral Council, in one sense, operated or the ideal



by which it was operating was to compare it to the, See, Judge, Act methodology of the old YCW and the YCS, the famous Cardijn method, the Cardinal Cardijn method. I think there's a lot of truth in that and that's worth considering. But I think the Church has moved on a little bit from that. Developed it a little bit, if I can put it that way. And I just made myself a few notes here to say what that difference might be.

See, which is to acknowledge what the situation is, Judge and then Act. This morning, we didn't start with the See. We started with prayer. And I think this is not just a trivial thing. I think this is fundamentally important. Some of you who followed the journey of the Plenary Council will know there were some challenging moments. And one day in particular, when there were issues, particularly around the role of women in the church, which caused quite a bit of anguish.

We managed that and we worked our way through that. And as I look back on that and ask myself, how is it that we managed to do that? I'm convinced that the answer lies in the fact that right at the start, the organisers of the Plenary Council decided that we would spend, in spite of all the pressure we had, to keep moving and achieve things and come up with decrees and all the rest of it, that we would spend at least 20 minutes in a deep and contemplative and well prepared and creative prayer experience. That changes things. If you enter into a process of discernment of decision making, through prayer, not through saying prayers, not through a quick side of the cross and a quick Our Father and then off we go. I'm not knocking that. But for these sorts of really important things, if we enter into the discernment process, through a deep prayerful experience that will change, everything will change the way we see each other. It creates an atmosphere of respect and openness that otherwise isn't necessarily there. So I think that's one difference.

I'm not saying that when I used to be in YCW and YCS myself, we'd always start with prayer. But this is something a little different. This is a deep experience of prayer, an invitation into an encounter with the Lord. And that changes everything.

I would hope - I don't want to pre-empt anything - but I would hope, that when the Diocesan Pastoral Council is eventually established, this insight is somehow rather incorporated into the meetings. Then comes the identification and the consideration of the issues that might be the See, and then the 'Judge' part of it. But you've got to ask yourself, 'Judge', what does that mean? I prefer to take the word 'Judge' out and put the word 'Discerning'. Because we're trying to read the signs of the times - we've talked about that a bit today - to read the signs of the times. But always, and often - we didn't make the mistake this morning, Fr Vincent is too good a theologian - but often people quote, *Gaudium et Spes* about discerning or scrutinising the signs of the times, and leave out the last part, 'In the Light of the Gospel.' If we're disciples of Jesus, our decisions about how we move forward and how we organise ourselves and what decisions we might make - if they're not made in the light of the Gospel, then they're not decisions of disciples.



So as we look at the realities of 2024, in this part of the world, and the challenges and opportunities that the church is facing, our decisions about what we do and how we go about things and how we move forward and what we might decide, they must always be brought into dialogue with the Gospel. Not so that we can modify the gospel, but so that the gospel can modify us. So I think this is another essential dimension of what it is to be a discerning people, a community of disciples.

And then the last thing I talk about is the 'Act'. One of the things that struck me, particularly in the feedback from the first of the two discernment sessions today, when we were talking about what issues should we entrust to the Diocesan Pastoral Council. And it also came up a little bit in the most recent discussion about who might be part of the Council, was the fact that so much of what was said was mission oriented. That's a sign of a very deep maturation in our thinking. One of the challenges the Church faces is that it can so easily become self-referential. We look to ourselves and we almost become focused only on how do we maintain what we've got, you know, the famous maintenance model of Church rather than the mission model of church. But that wasn't the way things came out of the discernment so far today. There was a lot of talk about the mission most recently, in terms of having that mission focus, relating it, of course, to Jesus.

Pope Francis is very insistent on his belief that the Lord at this stage in our history, is inviting us very consciously and very deliberately, to become a missionary oriented church. A Church which looks outward to what we can do for others, rather than a Church that looks always inward to how we can sure up our falling numbers or something like that. And maybe, if we shift from a maintenance approach to the Church to a missionary approach to the church, the beauty of our faith in the attractiveness of the Christian gospel will become more obvious to more people. And all of a sudden, the Church will begin to grow in numbers. But this is a very important thing that we must turn our eyes away from ourselves, at least away primarily from ourselves and turn our eyes outward. How can we and our local parish or our local community or whatever it is, how can we be an outward looking group of disciples who want to share the goodness of the Gospel with others and invite them to share it with us? I think that's a really good important thing.

I think it's really important that I finish just by addressing the question of what next. Because I think, we don't want to think that after what we did in September last year, and all the work that so many of you have done between then and now, and what we're doing here in July of this year, we don't want to think that that's all going to be lost. So if I can just give you a bit of an idea of the plans we have, although they're not fully formed yet, it might give you some confidence that this won't be wasted.





So, as you know, all the material that's been generated today will be collated and it will, will come to me, not so that I can sit on some throne somewhere and make decisions all on my own about what happens next. But so that I can then gather around me, some people who can help us to decide how best to move forward. And in order to make that concrete, although we don't have the specific details yet, our intention is very soon to establish what we're going to call the Implementation Advisory Group, which will take what's been received from today, and from last October and what's happened in between, and begin to look at the concrete ways in which this must now or could now be carried forward.

So, I hope that gives people a sense of confidence that nothing that we've done up until now is going to be lost. We've all had a lovely day, we've said lovely things to each other, it would be very easy for that just to dissipate. That's happened in the past, it happens often in the life of the Church. We don't want it to happen this time. So, this Implementation Advisory Group will be established. We also need to recognise, I think that we've got to get the balance right between dilly dallying and taking too long to make decisions and rushing too quickly, and making decisions which we may come to regret, because we've discovered that we've created something that has those problems that were there in the previous Diocesan Pastoral Council. So, I'm asking for a bit of patience, but at the same time wanting to reassure you that we're not just going to sit and do nothing.

One of the important things I think, is that we recognise that the Synod, which is not a synod on particular issues in the life of the church, but a Synod on exactly what we're talking about, how to be a more Synodal or church, that Synod is drawing to its close. The final Assembly will be in the month of October, after which the Synod will entrust to the Pope, the results of the two sessions last year and the one coming up this year. And the Pope will then decide how and in what ways he wants to carry it forward. That will be a very important part, I think, of our discerning of how we move forward. As many of you know, I'm fairly involved in the work of this Synod. My sense is that there is nothing likely to come out of it, which would in any way impinge on what we are wanting to do and trying to do here. But there may be new insights and new ideas that come out of the Synod, which we may want to incorporate into what we're wanting to do. So, we'll establish the Implementation Advisory group. That group will help us to discern the kinds of questions you've just been talking about in terms of what will be the makeup of the Council, what will the membership look like. And then final provisional decisions, will be made about how the Council will actually function. I am genuinely open to any suggestions. But I have to be honest, and say that, I would hope that whether it's five people - too few, 20 people - probably too big, 15, something like that, that we end up in a slightly smaller version of this kind of setup, rather than in a much more formal meeting.





In other words, I'd like it to be a Synodal Discernment Council, rather than anything else. That's really what I'm saying. I hope we can continue what we've managed to do together here with the Diocesan Pastoral Council, because I think that will serve the Church very well. And then once we're ready to go, my own thinking about this would be, we would want to make this a big deal for the diocese and have some form of very significant inauguration of this new thing, which is open to anyone who wants to take part. So they're just some thoughts about where we're going in the future.

My thanks to Tony Giglia, in particular, to Tara Peters, and to Gemma Thomson and to Vanessa Strohmeir, and to so many other people who have been involved in the putting together, of not just today, but the whole process of moving from September last year to today. So thank you all for being here. Let's thank the Lord for the wonderful gift that He's given us, in all of you, in all of us, who have been prepared to step forward and be a part of this.

Fr Vincent spoke about confidence this morning - that confidence, which comes from knowing that we're doing our best to be open to the leanings of the Holy Spirit. Let's take that confidence with us. It doesn't mean that everything will be smooth sailing, it doesn't mean that there won't be challenges along the way. But if we rely more on the Holy Spirit than on ourselves, we'll probably be okay. So let's just pause for a moment and we ask for the Lord's blessing on all of us, on our families and those who are dear to us, on the whole of the Archdiocese. And we ask especially for the gift of openness to the Holy Spirit and a willingness to be guided by the Spirit. So, with those thoughts in mind, we asked for the Lord's blessing and I, in his name, bless you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks very much, everybody.