



‘Listen to what the Spirit is Saying’

Monsignor Peter Jeffrey Oration

Bishop Shane Mackinlay

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I begin by acknowledging the Yorta Yorta people, as the original custodians of this land, and I pay my respects to their elders, past, present, and emerging.

I also acknowledge Monsignor Peter Jeffrey, in whose honour this oration is given. He’s a fine example to have before us when we are thinking about ‘Listening to what the Spirit is Saying’, as he’s one of the great wisdom figures of the diocese. I first met him nearly forty years ago, when I was applying to commence studies at Corpus Christi College, where he had already been the rector for a number of years. When I started there in 1983, a distinctive feature of his contribution was the time he made each month or so to have a formal conversation with each of the eighty-odd students who were there at the time. And while he would offer suggestions and guidance, one of my lasting memories of those conversations is how carefully he listened. I know there are many people who would have had similar experiences in a whole range of situations over the decades that he has served as a priest, both here and overseas.

In preparing for this evening, I have spent time looking back at the Final Report on the Listening and Dialogue phase of our preparations for the Plenary Council; and, in particular, on the snapshot reports on the six themes that have been chosen for the Council to focus on. I want to share a few thoughts that occur to me as I try to listen to what has emerged in those reports. Obviously, I won’t be giving an exhaustive summary of what’s been said, nor will my choices reflect the priority that I might give to the various issues that have been raised. Rather, I’m interested in reflecting on a few things that occur to me as we continue to reflect on the voices that are represented in the reports. I’ll begin with a few particular issues, and then make a couple of more general comments about the Council and about this process of preparation in which we are engaged.

One of the first issues that emerges in the reports is the importance of leadership and formation. If we are going to pursue our mission, then we need to focus on core things like this. And, it seems to me, if we are going to be able to do that in a time when we have limited resources and when our public credibility is badly damaged, then we need to be smart about how we do it. That means at least two things: first, especially in a diocese like this, where distance is such a limitation on the capacity of people to regularly come together or to access formation, we need to use the ever-

¹ An adapted version of this talk was presented at *Spirituality in the Pub*, Shepparton, 2 March 2020.



increasing range of technologies that are available to us. Alongside those who travelled from all over the diocese to attend my ordination last year, there were parish and school groups from throughout the diocese who participated by tuning into the livestream. There is no reason that we can't do that sort of thing for a whole range of events and conversations. Second, we need to avoid putting unnecessary energy and resources into duplicating activities that can be better offered regionally or centrally. I've been encouraged by a number of areas in the diocese where there is already consolidation of 'backroom' services like book-keeping or preparing notice-sheets. As we build on that, I think it gives us the opportunity not only to economise on resources, but also to deliver those services in the professional way that they demand.

Another issue that is clearly of very wide concern, and which would be one of those that are raised most frequently when people reflect on priorities for the future is passing on our faith to the next generation. It seems to me that we are in something of a critical moment in Australia. The parents of children in our schools come from a generation in whom their experience of faith is deeply ingrained through the regular practice of their childhood. Even though they might not engage with it regularly in the present, they have something like a muscle memory, so that they feel at home in Catholic liturgy and describe themselves as Catholic without hesitation. Moreover, they want that sort of experience and connection for their children. In a context where so many people feel anger, hostility or indifference to the church, it's both remarkable and inspiring how movingly parents talk about the experience of faith they want for their children when they present them for baptism. They're often not particularly eloquent in articulating what that means, but there is no question of their sincerity in desiring something of what they have experienced in growing up as part of the church.

However, it's not at all clear how that will happen when so few of our young families have a regular experience of parish liturgy and Catholic life. While our schools do a wonderful job in introducing and fostering liturgical practice and faith experience, we all know that schools are most effective in strengthening values and beliefs when they are building on the values and beliefs that have been instilled in the family. Our schools can support what happens at home, but they can't substitute for it. This is why the Enhancing Catholic School Identity project (ECSI) is so important. In this generation, we still have an opportunity to build on the familiarity of parents and teachers with our Catholic tradition and practice, and we are supported by the clear desire expressed by all stakeholders in the survey results for our schools to be Catholic and to be effective in fostering faith. The insights of our participation in ECSI over the last decade have shown clearly that for this to be successful, we need to do it in a way that recontextualises our faith tradition and engages with contemporary experience. We have a window of opportunity, but it will close rapidly, as can be seen in some of the places overseas where similar research has been undertaken. This means that we need to push ahead with developing strategies for implementing this sort of goal, alongside our continued gathering of data about the nature of Catholic identity in our schools.

Rightly, the reports include concerns about the availability of the Eucharist and the sacraments more generally. In this diocese, I think we face two different problems related to that. On the one hand, we have large and growing regional centres where our priests struggle with workload. On the other hand, we have small and contracting communities who struggle with viability due to demographics, isolation and increased mobility. Celebrating the sacraments is obviously at the core of any Catholic community, and we don't want to become like the post office and banks that have consolidated into regional centres. However, we also have to be realistic about building costs and clergy workload. I appreciate that there is a very deep attachment to individual churches. As the places where families have celebrated baptisms, weddings and funerals for generations, they are



connected to the most important moments in people's lives. Communities have an emotional investment in their churches alongside their investment through financing and maintaining the buildings. In general, I think that if we're able to afford it, it's good if we can keep churches open and used on a regular basis. But as many communities in the diocese have already done, there is also a time for making painful decisions and choosing to close them.

One other factor in decisions about where and when we celebrate liturgy is the tension between just having Mass because we're able to make a priest available, and the importance of celebrating good liturgy. This includes factors like the theological, communication and pastoral skill of the priest, involvement by people in various ministries, quality of the music, and a critical mass of people. And even when it's clear that we have the resources to celebrate liturgies in a particular place, there are always issues about how to improve them. The report is clear that everybody agrees that two of the most important things affecting people's satisfaction with Sunday Mass are good homilies and good music, and that people want both of those to be better. However, once you start to ask about what that means, it starts to look very complex, with much less agreement. The report includes people arguing for homilies that address ethical questions by reinforcing the Ten Commandments and promoting traditional devotions, alongside people calling for homilies that help people to raise their children, develop social skills and encourage them to be engaged in addressing community issues. And on the music front, while some people are convinced that we will fill our churches if we have more folk masses, others insist that the only music really suited to liturgy is Gregorian chant!

Governance and leadership is a theme that comes up regularly in the reports and also anecdotally. It's very clear to me that there is widespread weariness and frustration with the Church and especially with its leadership. Many have already walked away because they have given up waiting for us to 'get it'. For others, the Plenary Council is the last chance. There is no question that the stakes are high. But at the same time I also hear remarkable patience and generosity: people keep turning up and contributing faithfully, both to Sunday liturgies and to invitations like the discernment groups for the Plenary Council. People want this to work, people want to participate, and they still care deeply. In some ways, of course, that sort of investment makes the stakes even higher.

The sort of governance that people are calling for is one that is transparent, accountable, and allows for broad contribution. As I've mentioned in a couple of other contexts, one of the things that I'm planning for this year is to establish a review into what structures for consultation and decision-making we already have in the diocese, and how we might develop those in a way that builds transparency, accountability and participation. That will complement the work that is already underway in relation to school governance in particular.

A reflection of the importance that people place on good governance and the concerns that they have about bad governance is the repeated focus on clericalism in the reports. There's a whole range of things that could be said about that, but I think our starting point needs to be acknowledging that this is first of all a *church* problem, not just a *priest* problem. It's about the culture we all participate in that allows, encourages or sometimes even demands that those who are ordained are outside or above the standards and requirements that we have for everybody else. Wherever we see an expectation or practice of exception, entitlement and exemption, we've got a problem. That has obviously been a major factor in how our response to the abuse of children was so badly handled, but it is just as important in everything else we do as well. We all have a role to play in fostering a culture of co-responsibility and mutual accountability.



As long as there are decisions to be made, there will always be issues about how authority is exercised, including a tension between subsidiarity and local decision-making over against centralised decisions about a common approach that is needed in some instances. For example, we need to be clear and consistent in our safeguarding policies, rather than having them developed and applied arbitrarily, according to whim of local bishop or priest.

An example of this sort of tension came up in the very recent decision about choosing nominees from the diocese for Plenary Council delegates. Last Friday, I announced that the four nominees from the Sandhurst diocese are Angela Finn, Cathy Jenkins, Ruth Lawlor and David Walker. I've received tremendous feedback since then affirming the quality of those four people and assuring me of the capacities and commitment of whichever two of them are eventually chosen as delegates. However, I've also had a few people ask me about whether it might have been better to ensure that at least one of our nominees was not professionally involved with the church and its various activities. I can see the merit of that view and I have some sympathy for it, as even though each of our four nominees has strong involvement in parish life, being employed in a church mission gives them a particular type of insight into the various issues that the Council will consider.

However, the problem then becomes one of process. The Plenary Council is intended to be a collaborative discernment that trusts the wisdom of all God's people, and I believe that the decision about choosing nominees should reflect that. So, rather than considering the eleven expressions of interest myself, I asked the ten members of the Diocese's Coordinating Team for the Plenary Council to reflect on them and discern who they believed would be best positioned to participate in the Council as a delegate. I didn't give them any guidance beyond the criteria that had been included in the call for expressions of interest, and I didn't suggest what sort of outcome I wanted. Having adopted a particular approach to choosing nominees, I believe it was then important to honour the outcome of that process, rather than relying on the power I had to over-rule it. I'm not sure that we can have it both ways: if we want to really listen to and respect the voice of the people of God, we have to be open to the possibility that we might not always agree with the outcome! There's clearly a place for centralised authority and decision-making, but I think we need to be clear about when and how that authority is used. It doesn't help much to invoke it because of what we think about the outcome in a particular case where decision-making has been appropriately and sincerely entered into at a local level.

I want to turn now to some general reflections about the Plenary Council. I am quite concerned about our expectations of the Council. There is a lot of focus and expectations about possible outcomes, such as on obvious issues like changes to the rules on priestly celibacy and women priests. This focus on *outcomes* risks overshadowing the *process* we have entered into at both a local and national level of reflection and discernment, which will extend from this time before the Council into the time after each of the two sessions of the Council. In some respects, and using hindsight, the particular instrument we've chosen might not be the ideal vehicle, as a synod might have been more suitable for discussion and discernment. A plenary council, on the other hand, is primarily designed to produce specific outcomes through legislation, which is the reason for the restrictions in canon law on the numbers attending, and the focus on bishops' votes as legislators.

The reports follow Pope Francis' call for us to be more synodal in everything we do: an 'inverted pyramid' as he likes to describe it. That becomes quite challenging when we ask what it looks like and how it actually functions. It may well be that a key part of what we gain from the Plenary Council will be learning about a synodal process. When we think of participation, the only model that we have widespread experience of is democracy. And, in fact our experience is not just



democracy in general, but a very particular form of representative parliamentary democracy connected to the Westminster system of government. While that system has served us well, there are a range of problems that could be identified with it. As Winston Churchill infamously said in 1947: “Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

In that context of Westminster democracy, I have two concerns about the way we might think about participation and synodality. First, is the idea of ‘majority rules’. On the positive side, majority-rule protects us from a situation in which a few powerful people dominate everybody else by making all the decisions, whether they do that benevolently or, worse still, in their own interests. That sort of protection is clearly a good thing. However, the problem with ‘majority rules’ is to think about how it affects the *minority*, whose interests can just be brushed aside or overlooked until the next election (or at least until the next round of sports grants!). It’s hard to see how overlooking the minority like that enables participation by all. It’s harder still to see how it reflects and builds up the approach that Jesus calls us to: of placing the marginalised at the centre, of taking those whose voices are so easily drowned out because they are quiet or intimidated or not well-connected, or just because there are not many of them. If we operate on the principle of ‘majority rules’, anyone belonging to a minority stays where they are: on the edge, unheard, overlooked.

The second concern I have about using the Westminster system as our model is that it is inherently adversarial. So, if you want to advance a particular position, whether in an election campaign or in parliament, then the approach you need to take is to present the position you have developed and do everything in your power to push it to dominant position: using the loudest voice, the most widespread advertising, and the cleverest arguments; and, at the same time, using the same tools to push down and show the shortcomings of the opposing position. In the end, if you have done all of this well, then your party or your position ‘wins’ – and, of course, the opposing party or the opposing position ‘loses’. That’s not necessarily a great approach to getting a good outcome even in civil government, as there may well be a lot of wisdom to be found on the opposing side. But if we’re talking about discernment, and listening for the Spirit, it’s an even bigger problem, because it’s premised on promoting what *I*’ve got to say rather than hearing what *others* have to say or, even more seriously, hearing what *God* might be calling us to.

In learning what a synodal model of participation might be, I think that we’ve been very well served by the process that has been built into each step of the preparations for the Plenary Council, with its emphasis on reflecting together wherever possible, rather than developing an individual submission in isolation from others. The process includes repeatedly stopping for prayer and reflection on what each person has heard, rather than just what I want to say. People responded very generously to that invitation, with almost 10,000 of the 17,500 submissions either being prepared by a group or being prepared by individuals who had participated in a ‘Listening and Dialogue Encounter’. Personally, I find the process in those sorts of encounters is often jarring and difficult to enter into; it doesn’t come easily to me and makes me impatient, because it slows things down by introducing all sorts of complications and delays. I suspect others have similar responses to it. That’s why the discipline of this process is so important. We don’t have much practice at listening and reflecting, because the processes and discussions that we are generally part of encourage us to push for an opinion or position that we are invested in and argue for its merits.

In contrast, while the process of preparation for the Plenary Council begins by inviting us to offer what *we* see, it asks us to do that in a spirit of service and generosity, where we then step back from



it, step away and reflect on it alongside what *others* have seen, listening again and again for where God's spirit might be calling us. So, in that context, one of the things that encourage me is the range of views that are represented in the reports which have been prepared from the Listening and Dialogue phase of preparation. In some respects, they're enormously frustrating, because there is no obvious consensus, and for every view put forward in one direction on a particular issue, there is a whole range of widely diverging views as well. I think those who have prepared the reports have done an excellent job of reflecting the range of voices and keeping them before us, often using people's own words. These next stages of preparation will ask us to continue doing that sort of reflection. Then, when we get to the Council itself, we will have to work hard at ensuring that the process respects that and leads us further into it, rather than devolving into a Westminster-style adversarial approach. Of course, the first session of the Council in October of this year will be something of an intense, grand-scale 'Listening and Dialogue Encounter', which focuses and enriches the preparatory discussions, and in its turn contributes to the discernment that we all be invited to enter into over the nine months that will unfold between the two sessions of the Council.

I think that Pope Francis offers us wonderful leadership as we continue along this pathway. He has made enormous contributions to public debate through his reflections on issues such as refugees and the environment, and most recently on the place of native peoples in the Amazon. At the same time, he is an extraordinary model in terms of process. He pioneered the idea of two-stage synods with the Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015, calling the Church throughout the world to a year-long period of reflection and discernment between them. Perhaps in this he was inspired by the four sessions of the Second Vatican Council, which were held over more than three years. Each session lasted between one and two months, and the historical accounts make clear that each session had very different characteristics, with the bishops returning to Rome each time greatly enriched by the conversation and reflection they had undertaken in their diocese in the intervening months.

In regard to process, equally important is how patient Pope Francis can be. He is no rush to close off a conversation or resolve an issue. Instead, his preference seems to be to give hints as guidance to the conversation, as he did in relation to communion for the divorced and remarried or his enigmatic comment about homosexuals: 'Who am I to judge?' At other times, he steps back entirely from comment, as he did in last week's apostolic exhortation about the Amazon, where he is silent on the questions put to him about married priests and women deacons. This can be very frustrating for the rest of us, but I think it shows great patience, and also remarkable trust – both in the people of God, who will keep discussing these sorts of questions and, more importantly, in the Holy Spirit, whose voice we seek to hear and respond to as we continue to 'Listen to what the Spirit is saying'.