

HOMILY AT THE LAUNCH OF SYNOD 2021-23

ST STEPHEN'S CATHEDRAL, BRISBANE

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Archbishop Mark Coleridge

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52

Through the two millennia of Christian history there have been twenty-one Ecumenical Councils, roughly one every century, though it hasn't been as neat as that. The first of them was in Jerusalem in the very early days of the Church, and last of them was in my lifetime and the lifetime of some of you – the Second Vatican Council from 1962-65. Councils have normally gathered all the bishops in a time of crisis – to correct error, to clarify doctrine, to reform discipline, to decide upon strategies to move beyond the crisis.

We're now almost sixty years beyond Vatican II, and Pope Francis has decided not to convoke a new Council of all the bishops, but to call the whole Church to take a two-year journey which he calls synodal. It's that journey that we launch today in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. Our journey will take us through to the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023. The synodal journey doesn't replace an Ecumenical Council, and it may even prepare distantly for one: who knows? But the logic of it comes straight from the heart of Vatican II's understanding of the Church as the pilgrim People of God, in which all are called to holiness and mission, a communion in which all the baptised share

responsibility. The Pope is calling the whole Church on a journey which involves not just the bishops now and then but the entire People of God all the time.

Here in Australia we've been on the journey of the Plenary Council since 2016 and we've just celebrated the Council's first assembly. We've begun the process of fermentation which will lead to the second assembly in July next year, and then into the long phase of implementation beyond that. So for us the process of the Plenary Council will interweave with the process of the global Synod, an interweaving of the local and the universal, each enriching the other. That's how the Catholic Church works.

Both Council and Synod recognise that the Church here and around the world is at a point of crisis – not just because of sexual abuse, though that has been a mighty catalyst, raising as it does deep questions of culture in the Church and the need for change. Whatever of Church culture, the broader culture – at least in this and other Western countries – has changed with astonishing speed and in ways we didn't see coming, leaving the Church on the back foot, slightly breathless and bewildered. Therefore we need to ask whether traditional ways of proclaiming the Gospel are fit-for-purpose now or whether we need to find new ways of proclaiming the Gospel in such a time. No-one has put this question as clearly and powerfully as Pope Francis.

On this journey of Council and Synod, the key thing is to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, who has stirred both Council and Synod in the Church and who alone can lead us to the place where God wants us to be. To listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, however, we need to listen in new ways to each other and to all the voices, especially perhaps those who have been marginalised or silenced. Only this kind of deep listening will enable the process of discernment without which the Council and Synod will be no more than political. In the cacophony of the

many voices, we need to discern what the Scripture calls “the voice of a thin silence” (1 Kings 19:12) – the voice of the Holy Spirit who alone can take us into the future which God has in mind.

Discernment is slow and messy: dictatorship is always quicker and cleaner. Through much of the last millennium the Catholic Church moved increasingly to a monarchical understanding and practice of papal and episcopal ministry, which had its effect on ordained ministry more generally. But it’s striking now how Pope Francis, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, is doing all he can to dismantle the monarchical papacy and urging bishops and others to follow suit. Part of this dismantling is to stress that all the baptised have a voice in the Church, all have responsibility for mission. The Greek word synod, which in Latin becomes council, means “on the road together”. Not just the ordained but all the People of God are pilgrims together; and as we journey we listen to each other in an attempt to listen to God.

On the journey we have no road-map or GPS; we don’t know exactly where we’re going. But God does know; and that’s why it’s crucial that we keep our eye and our ear on God. If we don’t, it’s highly likely, in fact almost certain, that we will go astray. In that sense, we really are daughters and sons of Abraham. He was called to leave all that was familiar and undertake a journey with no roadmap. He had to trust the one who did know, to listen to the one who led him step by step. God led Abraham into some strange places, but things went well as long as Abraham followed wherever God led. They went wrong, and badly so, only when he took charge, stopped listening to God and decided to listen to himself. That’s also a risk for us.

Like Bartimaeus, the blind beggar in the Gospel, we have first to listen to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus puts the same question to us:

“What do you want me to do for you?” “Master, let me see again”, the blind beggar says. “Master, show us the way forward”, we say. “Go, your faith has saved you”, Jesus says to Bartimaeus, whose eyes are then opened. Jesus says the same to us: “Go on your pilgrim way, your faith has saved you – the faith that opens your ear to hear my word, the word that will lead you on”. Then, we are told, Bartimaeus, seeing at last, follows Jesus along the road. We too now follow Jesus along the road of Council and Synod, our ears and eyes wide open, listening to him and seeing him who leads us.

To *hear* Jesus – to *see* Jesus – to *follow* Jesus: this is the grammar of discipleship in every time and place. It’s also the shape of our journey of Council and Synod in this time and place. The Holy Spirit is calling us now to join the great community of the baptised around the world on this journey into the future. The time of exile is over; the journey home has begun: “They left in tears”, says the prophet. “But I will comfort them as I lead them back”, says God. “I will guide them to streams of water by a smooth path where they will not stumble” (Jeremiah 31:9). Amen.