

The Spirit of Pentecost at the Fifth Plenary Council in Australia

Councils that do not engender the permanence of faith, hope and love are better not held



To speak of a fifth Plenary Council in what is still considered the "young" Australian nation (born in 1788 as a British colony within the oldest culture on the planet) might suggest to those beyond this land that the Australian bishops have been exemplary in attending to their duties among us. Let others assess that. In real time, the first bishop arrived in Sydney only in 1834 and had no colleague to make a council with until 1844 when the entire episcopate of three met. The number of

dioceses is now 28 (there are 176 in the United States), and there has been no plenary for over 80 years. The last was in 1937. And in the eight decades since then there have been enormous political, social, cultural, religious and ecclesiastical changes and developments. My parish of nearly 40 years has experienced its own transformation. As parishioners of European stock have been dropping off – a pastoral phenomenon surely meriting a Plenary of its own – families from South East Asia have been taking their place in the stats and, indeed, in the servicing of the community's responsibilities. From Sunday to Sunday, however, people in the parish pews have had extremely little reminding of a Fifth Plenary Council to open on October 3, 2021. Contrasting with this, a number of well-resourced reformist groups have been seeking to find ways of contributing to the development of agenda for the council.

"Listening to what the Spirit is saying" In August 2020 the president of Plenary Council, Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth, had issued an invitation for all to enter into "A Journey of Discernment." From over 17,000 responses from groups and individuals, an *Instrumentum Laboris* (or working paper) was developed as input towards the creation of a Church that would be a "missionary", "inclusive", "prayerful", "humble", "servant" community open to "conversion" and "reform". A pervasive theme has remained "listening to what the Spirit is saying." Hence, I write this on Pentecost Sunday, hoping to be edged that much closer to the voice of the Spirit. Any such invitation takes me to the voice Paul gave expression to in his first letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 12, 4-6). Here the Spirit presents the framework within which the godhead enriches – should I say empowers? – a Church. Sadly, history muffles Paul's voice. Some hear this and some hear that, and one, we'll see, hears hardly anything at all. According to two widely read translations, Paul wrote of different "gifts", "services", and "activities" (NRSV; NRJB), here presented as if "services" and "activities" were just alternative names for the "gifts" delivered by the Spirit. Paul's Greek sentence, however, is structured to mean "different gifts", these include "both services and activities". (For readers of Greek, kai... kai...)

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