

Second Sunday of Lent

A personal encounter

Be Opened ... to Listen



Bishop Tim Harris

The discussion and decisions at the Plenary Council in 2020 will be based, I believe on a long listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through the many voices from around Australia.

I have personally been involved in several Listening and Dialogue sessions throughout the Diocese of Townsville that I serve as Bishop. I have found these sessions invaluable because they have empowered people to be open literally with others as their hopes and dreams were shared.

My experience told me that people listened to each other with respect even if amongst the groups, different views were held. These were sessions not to discuss “what was wrong with the Catholic Church” but rather sessions that encouraged a sense that the Holy Spirit was truly present in the Church and amongst the people participating.

I have had the opportunity to hear many things from people who came together throughout the diocese.. I did not necessarily agree with everything I heard, but that was not the point. This is not “my” Church but our Church and we listen together to find a way forward.

Of course, we all draw from the wisdom of the Church’s teaching authority from scripture and tradition, from the Magisterium but this does not stop you and me from listening to the voices amongst us. In this sense, I heard more than anything a willingness to engage in an attempt to deepen an existing faith by seeking to understand.

The participants I heard did not challenge the tenets of the faith but how perhaps we might live them out practically in the world, in the day to day. The present structures of the Church were challenged at times with all sorts of “weird and wonderful” contributions.

I felt the emotion that some people expressed as they shared their struggle with the local and universal nature of the Church, with many favouring the local dimension over the universal, but others saw communion with Rome as the overriding factor. I heard people talk of the role of women - as being a strong theme for the Church going forward, with many wanting the Church to be more open to listen to the voices of women. Mandatory celibacy for clergy was spoken of with a challenge to that discipline. I saw the concern and worry in people as they talked of the Royal Commission and the scourge of child sexual abuse and the link by some to clerical celibacy. And I heard peoples frustrations about how Church attendance rates were so low. Comments about the value and effectiveness of Catholic schools was a recurring theme.

I heard many other contributions, all of which were not angry responses but constructive ones. The term “critical friend” comes to mind, for those to whom I listened loved the Church even if they thought the Church could do things better or differently.

As I continue to reflect on my experience of “listening”, I am mindful of the kind of Church Pope Francis desires. He speaks of “synodality”, a term that is perhaps unfamiliar to many. This concept in fact is something Catholic theologians have been discussing for some time. For Pope Francis, synodality is not just a form of Church government but a way of being Church. It requires not only changing the institution but changing “mindsets”.

The Plenary Listening sessions suggest to me a different way of governing the Church by truly empowering the members of the Church by virtue of their baptism. By listening to the *sensus fidelium* of the whole People of God, the institution is stating that “it does not have all the answers at this moment in history”.

Of course synodality remains a balancing act, because there is by virtue of Ordination, a role of discernment for those in leadership positions, including the Pope himself. The Bishops are part of this discernment as well. So, the spirit of synodality means listening to the voices and legislating accordingly.

All contributions in this sense, especially if a synodal mindset is brought to the 2020/2021 Plenary Process in Australia will need to be ecclesologically, theologically and canonically critiqued to ensure that we remain in communion with the Universal Church.

At the same time, I envisage many “local” ideas to emerge to deal with the local realities of the Church to which people belong. Every local Church or Diocese will have issues that pertain to it and will need local solutions. This is where the balancing act will need to be engaged – the tension that may exist between the local and universal obligations as members of the Roman Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, I believe “listening and openness” is what the Church needs right now. The Church in Australia is under enormous pressure for all sorts of reasons as it discerns a way forward after the Royal Commission into the Institutional abuse and a way forward in an environment of creeping secularisation.

I can see big challenges ahead but we do not do this discernment alone. We do it as a pilgrim Church moving forward in faith, informed by our Tradition, as we seek to find a language that speaks to our present reality. Together we seek to read the signs of the times once again.