

St Mary's Concord

A Reflection based on the Homily for Sunday 3 October 2021

Mass of the Holy Spirit

To mark the opening of the National Plenary Council, the Mass of the Holy Spirit replaced the Mass for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

READINGS: Deuteronomy 30:10-14; Philippians 2:1-4; John 14:23-29

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus all churches have been closed since 26 June 2021. One Mass is permitted so that it can be livestreamed to the parish YouTube channel and to the parish Facebook page: "St Mary's Parish Church Concord". The following reflection is based on the homily from that Mass.

This Sunday we are joining parish communities throughout Australia to pray for those participating in the opening session of the Plenary Council. Our prayer is that together they will discern how the Spirit is at work among us.

What does that mean? When we say that someone is a discerning person, we usually mean that he or she makes good judgements. We all make judgments every day. Mostly, they are part of our daily routine: what will I eat? what will I wear? But there are times when we are called to make a choice that is far from routine.

Will I apply for that new position, if it means I will need to move to another city? What impact will that have on my family and friends? Some of the choices we make in life determine our whole future. We could think of a young couple choosing to marry.

Faced with life-changing choices, how do we decide which path to follow? Do we simply toss a coin and leave it to chance?

It is not only individuals who need to make choices. Communities are constantly called upon to make decisions about their priorities. Almost every day we listen to our political leaders making decisions about the lockdown. They may listen to the advice of various experts but in our society, we accept that the final decisions are made by the leaders we have elected.

In situations where there is no agreement and a compromise is not possible, the political solution is to have a vote! A limitation of that democratic model is that a majority vote usually leaves winners and losers. Is there another way?

As the delegates gather for the first assembly of the Plenary Council, they are being asked to follow a particular process. As they reflect together on the challenges we face, they are being asked first and foremost to listen to the Holy Spirit.

The process they will follow is called discernment. It comes from the insights of St Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Discernment aims to help us make good decisions by becoming more conscious of how the Holy Spirit is at work in my life.

It is a challenge we all face whenever we make an important decision in life. We may find ourselves balancing our own needs with those of others, but do we ever ask ourselves "What is God asking me to do?"

It is easy to presume that whatever we want is what God wants for us. So how do I know that the choices I am making are God's Will for me?

The delegates are being asked to apply that process not only to their personal journeys but also to the Mission of the Church. That is why they are asking us to pray with them and for them.

In John's Gospel, Jesus prepared his disciples for his coming death in what is called the Last Supper discourse. It is also about how he was preparing them to continue his Mission.

The sign that will tell them that they are in touch with the Spirit is the gift of peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you"

That is also true for us. When we are faced with an important decision, we may find ourselves resisting the step we need to take. It is like the two people tossing a coin to confirm the choice they have made. One suggests "heads we go or tails we stay?" But when the result is not what they wanted, the other adds, "what about the best of three?"

If we take seriously our search for God's will, we will pray for the guidance of the Spirit. And if we follow the Spirit rather than our own will, the Spirit will pour out on us the gift of peace. It is a sign that we are on the right path.

St Ignatius and other spiritual writers described those moments in prayer as an experience of consolation. And often that is all we experience, a moment of deep peace or a moment of insight that tells us we are doing the right thing.

For a Christian community, it is also about discerning God's will and that demands we put aside self-interest. Like any human community, a Christian community can find itself divided into factions. Each one wanting to impose a particular agenda on the community or the wider Church.

The Plenary Council is reminding us that discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit and so the first step is always prayer. As we reflect on the challenges facing us the key question is not "What do I want to happen in the Church?" but "Where is the Spirit at work?"

Hopefully, that will be the path adopted by the Plenary Council as the delegates seek to respond to the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel in 21st century Australia.

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