

Diocesan Assembly
Archbishop Patrick O'Regan Input
17th September 2021

1. Setting the Scene

Slide 1: Saint Chapelle Image

My dear sisters and brothers. Thank you for coming here it is good to be here. Our Assembly seeks to put God at the centre of all that we are and all that we do. I come here tonight as a Pastor and Shepherd, who seeks gather our family together. Welcome to your Assembly

Slide 2: Shoes

Let me begin with an image of worn-out shoes.

One of the most notable shoe paintings that Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh created was this image *A Pair of Shoes*, in 1886.

A reason that the shoe paintings still fascinate us today is that these works are also often interpreted as a study of Van Gogh's life. In these paintings, he captures a pair or pairs of shoes on the floor most with laces untied as if they have just been taken off at the end of a long day. Unlike other still life subjects, the shoes have been to all the places and have seen all of the struggles of the owner. To many, Van Gogh's shoes with the worn leather and tired soles represent the rough life of the artist himself and the weathered journey he has endured.

Worn-out shoes were an unusual choice of subject for a painting. An acquaintance of the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh's in Paris described how he bought old work shoes at a flea market. Then he walked through the mud in them until they were filthy. Only then did he feel they were interesting enough to paint.

Ever since 2018 our dear Catholic Church in Australia has been on the journey to the Plenary Council. It is now but a mere two and a bit weeks away. Since the beginning of this journey we all have been trying to answer the important question, "*What do you think God is asking of us at this time in Australia?*" At the time it was first proposed I thought it a most curious question. It took awhile to wind ourselves into it. For me it has ended up being the most important question. For it led us to discovering the importance of *Dialogue* and *Listening* and the importance of *Discernment*.

In the image we see worn out shoes. They are a good image of the journey we have been on, and the one yet to continue to take and the ones yet to be completed. It reminds us that we are a *Pilgrim* people, nomads whose true homeland is the kingdom of God in all its fullness. In all this process of answering that beginning question and the journey into Dialogue, Listening and Discernment we have filled those shoes and we have taken that journey together. Yes our friend COVID may well have displaced the timetable but it has not derailed the process.

2. Our Diocesan Assembly and Beyond

Slide 3: A Bridge Central Park and Leaderfoot Viaduct, Scotland

These two images of bridges describes the journey of the Church in our Archdiocese and in each of our Parishes and Communities, of God and the Plenary Council. They are great images of what faith is all about. God coming to us in Jesus Christ, inviting us to cross, gather our hope in the firm foundation of the Father's great plan for the whole of Creation.

And so what are we doing here tonight and tomorrow?

We are here first of all to pray together for nothing succeeds without and through prayer.

In 1878 Robert Louis Stevenson wrote the following:

“Little do ye know your own blessedness; for to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour.”

I have been conscious of the difficulties that we all face and the frustration and at times despair at what the last few years in our Archdiocese and country and world has placed before us. For most of us and God’s Holy People it has been a difficult and bewildering time and not a few people have asked when will it all end.

Stevenson sums up his essay by beginning with the words, ***“Little do you know your own blessedness”***. As those called to build our lives around the Eucharist this surely is wonderful reminder that as Eucharistic people we above all are called to “Know our own Blessedness” for the Eucharist. Dear sisters and brothers and let us always know our own Blessedness and from whence it comes.

Next Stevenson continues, ***“to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive”***. However much we can be tempted to think that we have arrived, and sometimes yearn to do so, we are called first to travel, that is we are pilgrims and to do so hopefully.

Our world, and all believers look for hope, that great theological virtue. We cannot be satisfied with mere optimism, there is enough of that at times in the world, which at times peddles a false hope. But we need to be grounded in hope. If we travel hopefully we can better absorb the slings and arrows that at times beset us. If we travel hopefully we need to keep our eyes not on ourselves but on Jesus Christ, the *“author and perfecter of our faith”* and thus we have a much better chance to be, as the Year of Mercy called us to be, ***‘Merciful like the Father’***. So as we approach the Assembly and the Plenary Council and beyond let us aim to know in our lives, in our Parishes and Communities and Schools, to know that it is a better thing to travel hopefully than to arrive.

Stevenson finishes his essay with the phrase, ***“and the true success is to labour”***. Thus he is reminding us that baptism, priesthood, diaconate, episcopate, religious life is in the doing, the quiet persistent, patient day-in-day out doing. In a world that like to look for Key Performance Indicators we seek for success in the doing. It is work it is labour, but it is labouring with the Holy Spirit at work amongst us and through us.

Slide 4: Central Station

And so welcome to these two days, our Diocesan Assembly. When we do things infrequently it is hard to know what to expect. So if you are a little uncertain, unsure of what the Assembly is all about that is okay. We are out of practice but wish to get into this good habit of the direction in which the whole of the church is moving.

Most of us would be familiar with the Stations of the cross, perhaps, sadly, less so with the stations of Light during Easter. The ‘Station’ is not so much the event that is commemorated as the small cross that marks where one becomes stationary; where one stops. In a busy world; a world anxious about where COVID has placed us stopping is not such a bad idea.

A Diocesan assembly does just that. It is a stop, a station on the way to somewhere, but a stop we take together. A chance to catch our breath; to see how far we have come; perhaps how far remains; it gives us a chance for gratitude which lies at the core of who we are to rise from the depths of our hearts and give thanks.

In reading through some of the 1500 responses you have sent in in preparation for the Assembly one word came through especially: **diversity**. This describes not just the range of responses but also the people we have become in 2021. We as the People of God in this place are diverse yet draw into communion with our God and one another through the gift of the Spirit.

The aim of tonight and tomorrow is simple: to come together as God's Holy people; to pray and to listen to God and one another; to be renewed in hope. We stop at a station not called despair but of hope.

In this precious time together and I thank you for giving of your time, many things are at work. Out of all that God wishes to do with us and we can lay the foundations for hope two clear goals emerge.

First, that we come together as the local Church of Adelaide with our six members who are going, on our behalf, to the Plenary Council, and reflecting with them on the agenda items, they are prepared as best they can to listen and take with them, not simply their own ideas rather, as best we can, carry the hopes and joys of this Assembly and beyond.

Second, to begin to form a Diocesan Pastoral Council. As you might be aware the Plenary Council formally ends in July next year after which is the 'Celebration' stage or implementation stage. I have no idea what the Holy Spirit might prompt the church in Australia to do during the Plenary, there are no shortage of suggestions. What I do know is that whatever is decided will need a group of people to assist in the task of implementing it.

So as we will share with you a little later we shall form a Diocesan Pastoral Council who will speak the next few months in preparation and formation, discerning what the priorities of our Diocese need to be and it will become one of the main vehicles in assisting us in implementing the decisions of the Plenary Council.

Both of these, while not necessarily easy, are achievable.

Slide 5: Group

We need to travel not alone but together. That's what syn-nod means. That is why I suggest we take with us St Joseph as our patron, in this year of St Joseph. That is why we ought re-discover that great virtue of solidarity. It is very counter-cultural and prophetic being in solidarity with, and most fruitful. Our God has entered deeply into solidarity with us in sending his Son be like us in all things but sin. It is tempting in a complex world to want to draw the wagons into a circle, it remember the purpose of a station is not the goal to which we are going but rather a stop along the way.

We cherish that we we have become in our diversity; we choose to travel together on the way of solidarity.

So my dear sisters and brothers my appeal to you is to bring with you to these two days your wisdom and experience; to drink deeply of our diversity and enter into this experience our first for some time Diocesan assembly. Bring with you your listening ears, and listen stereophonically: that is listen to God and to others

My hope is that this type of experience will become a regular feature of our Diocesan life; either at the full Diocesan level; at a Parish or community level. My thanks to all those who have been working so tirelessly for so many months in bringing us together, well done.

Slide 6: Isaiah

Isaiah 54:2 says "*Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.*" Isaiah encourages to stretch ourselves.

We started with those old pair of boots. There is something rather comforting about something that fits us so well, that hugs the contours of our lives; that supports us so well where we drag ourselves around. These are the boots of a pilgrim a nomad. Tonight and tomorrow pull on those boots, cross the threshold of hope and dare to discern the dream.

Slide 7: Boots

These days will not solve every problem nor answer every question. It is but a humble and a most important beginning. We take the responsibility given to our generation to open ourselves up to our future in God.

Many things fill me with hope, only God can fulfil that hope. The words of an old Irish poem describe my experience of being a Bishop and being on the journey to God. “*The will of God will never take you, where the grace of God cannot keep you.*”. These words spring to mind as we gather for our first Diocesan Assembly, my hope is that this will be your experience too. God is Good, Good indeed.

Let me finish with a prayer:



SLIDE 8: Prayer

In 1968 Patriarch Ignatius IV, Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and the East when he was Metropolitan of Latakia, gave an address at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches. In it he spoke of the Holy Spirit in a striking and memorable way.

Without the Holy Spirit God is far away.

***Christ stays in the past,
The Gospel is simply an organisation,
Authority is a matter of propaganda,
The Liturgy is no more than an evolution,
Christian loving a slave mentality.***

But in the Holy Spirit

***The cosmos is resurrected and grows
with the birth pangs of the kingdom.
The Risen Christ is there,
The Gospel is the power of life,
The Church shows forth the life of the Trinity,
Authority is a liberating science,
Mission is a Pentecost,
The Liturgy is both renewal and anticipation,
Human action is deified.***

Greek Orthodox Patriarch (Ignatius of Latakia)

His Beatitude, Ignatius IV, Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and the East.