

**HOMILY AT THE INSTALLATION OF
MARK COLERIDGE
AS SIXTH ARCHBISHOP
OF CANBERRA AND GOULBURN
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In times long past, it was God who called Abraham, and the angel Gabriel who spoke to Mary. But it was neither God nor Gabriel who rang me on 13 June to ask if I would accept to be Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn. It was in fact the Papal Representative in Australia, Archbishop De Paoli, who rang to say that the Pope had chosen me for the mission and to ask if I would accept. I said yes without too much fuss, and here I stand before you today as the new Archbishop.

The appointment could, I suppose, be seen largely in political or corporate terms, as if I were somehow the ecclesiastical equivalent of a political leader or a corporate boss. But that's not how I see it, because after all these years I have learnt something of the art of seeing with the eye of God. The Australian poet James McAuley once wrote this of Jesus in the Gospels: "He rose and walked among the stones and beasts and flowers of earth. / They turned their muted faces to their Lord, / their real faces seen by God alone" ("*Jesus*"). As Archbishop, I would hope to be a man who sees

muted faces – the real face of the Church, the real face of Australia, your real face and even my own, which can be the hardest thing of all. Casting the eye of God upon my appointment to Canberra and Goulburn, I can see that it may have been the Pope who chose me and the Nuncio who phoned me, but it was God himself who called me. The Pope and his Nuncio simply did the work of the angel Gabriel. They passed the message on; they made known the call.

I have been a priest for thirty-two years, and in the journey of those years, there have been extraordinary twists and turns. In many ways, my life as priest and now Bishop has turned out to be very different than anything I expected when I was ordained to the priesthood in 1974. Yet one thing that has never faded in the midst of all the flux is the sense that I am called by God to this – no less personally called than Abraham or Mary. If anything, this sense has grown deeper and more assured as the years have passed.

I have asked or applied to do none of the many things I have done in my years as a priest. I have simply said yes to what others have asked me to do, as I did to the Nuncio on 13 June. And what I have learnt is that, when you say yes to others – especially when you say yes to Christ – the path that opens up is strange but deeply satisfying, more demanding but also more joyful than anything you could ever have planned for yourself. It pays to

follow the Lamb wherever he goes (*cf. Rev 14:4*), even when he leads in ways you never expected.

But the One who calls you to follow also sends you out on mission. This is what it means to be an apostle – to be sent out by Christ – and it's what it means to say, as does the Catholic Church, that the Bishops are the successors of the apostles. In the first place, I am sent to the Church – in the Archdiocese, in Australia and throughout the world. And at this turning-point in my journey, I ask the question: Where and how does the Church stand at this time and in this place? It's plain to see that the Catholic Church in Australia is in some sense passing through a time of diminishment, and there are some who think that this is a process of terminal decline, that we who remain are the last of a dying tribe. A young Church, it seems, has grown old very quickly. If that is the case, then perhaps the best we can manage is to circle the wagons in some self-protective manoeuvre that might delay the end a little.

I see things differently however. To my eye, the Catholic Church in Australia is like the ageing Elizabeth of whom we have heard in the Gospel just proclaimed. She is pregnant against all the odds. As Gabriel reports: "She whom people called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing is

impossible to God”. There is something stirring in the old, seemingly barren womb of Mother Church in this land, and it’s all God’s work.

Not for the first time, the Catholic Church in Australia and elsewhere is passing through a time of deep and permanent change, which may in some ways be death but which is also birth. Both birth and death have their pangs, and they can feel very alike. But according to the Bible it’s vitally important to know one from the other; otherwise you end up in the deepest confusion of all (cf. *Matt 24:3-8*). So it is with us now: what is birth and what is death?

The Second Vatican Council has been described as “the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 57); and for all that we have seen in the last forty years, we are still in the early days of the great renewal called for by the Council. The buds of new growth are there, though they are not always the buds we expected or in the places we might once have looked. But the ways of God are not necessarily my ways or yours. The surprises of the Holy Spirit can come as a shock.

What is increasingly clear to me is that in the Second Vatican Council the Holy Spirit was seeking to stir in the whole Church new energies for mission. The Council was not about renewal of the Church for the Church’s sake, but about renewal, new energy, for the Church’s mission in the world.

This is what Pope John Paul II called “the new evangelisation” – new, he said, “in ardour, in method, in expression” (*Address to the Bishops of Latin America, Port-au-Prince, 24 March, 1983*), by which he meant new fire in the belly, new strategies, new words and images and gestures. If that is “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (*Rev 2:29*), then far from being a time to circle the wagons, this is a time to roll the wagons in new ways through territory we do not know. Now is the time for a new kind of apostolic imagination, a kind of lateral thinking in the drive to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus in fresh and powerful ways that go to the heart of Australia.

All of us must join in that thinking. As a leader, I have always done best in situations where others bombard me with all kinds of ideas and suggestions. It can’t be left to the leader to have all the bright ideas and to make all the best suggestions. I will have some ideas and suggestions certainly; but my task as Bishop is also to make discernments and decisions about what others propose. I will at times say no for one reason or another; but that doesn’t mean I haven’t listened or that you should stop feeding me ideas and suggestions. Because it’s up to us all to imagine and to think how the Gospel might be proclaimed in new ways. Therefore I depend on you and a host of others to dream dreams, to see visions (*cf. Joel 2:28; Acts*

2:17) and to propose initiatives that might light new fires of the Gospel in the Archdiocese and beyond.

But that kind of missionary energy can come only from a Church that is growing more mystical. To renew structures in the Church can be important, but still more important is the renewal of heart made possible by the encounter with Christ in prayer. Therefore, our communities – families and parishes and educational institutions above all – must become genuine schools of prayer (*cf. Novo Millennio Ineunte, 33*), for the way of deep renewal in the Church at this time is the way of contemplation – contemplation of the face of Christ crucified and risen, the face of suffering and the face of glory, the face both human and divine. “Incarnate Word”, pleads James McAuley, “cast flame upon the earth; raise up contemplatives among us, who walk within the fire of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire. Set pools of silence in this thirsty land” (“*Letter to John Dryden*”). Let that be the cry of the Church in Canberra this morning: lead us, Lord Jesus, to a new depth of contemplation for the sake of a new mission. And let that be my charter as Archbishop, as it has been of each of my predecessors, in their different way and in their different time.

Two of them are here this morning, Cardinal Edward Clancy and Archbishop Francis Carroll. In greeting both of them with affection and

gratitude, I want especially to pay tribute to Archbishop Carroll, who now lays down the burden of responsibility after more than half a lifetime as Bishop. For close to forty years, Frank Carroll, Father Francis, has been a great Bishop, universally held in high regard. Part of his secret is that he is one of nature's true gentlemen. But the other and more important part is that he is one of those graced men of God who breathes a deep and radiant humanity. Frank, your contribution here and beyond has been magnificent, and this morning in the name of countless people in all walks of life I want very simply and sincerely to say thanks for everything.

Here I will seek to build upon the legacy of my predecessors from Lanigan to Carroll, and what a legacy it is. After my appointment was announced, I read a history of the Archdiocese entitled "Planting the Celtic Cross". For the most part it's a stirring frontier story of the faith of Irish settlers and the missionary work of Irish clergy, to all of which we paid tribute this morning in singing one of the greatest of Irish hymns, "Be Thou My Vision", at the beginning of Mass. "Planting the Celtic Cross" tells the story of remarkable expansion against the odds, as we see not only in the structures and institutions of the Archdiocese but also in its spiritual vitality. Those times can seem a world away from our own, given the different circumstances and challenges we now face; and in many ways they are

remote. Yet is not the same depth of faith, however different its forms, exactly what we need today to meet the new challenges we face? Is not the same missionary energy, however different its forms, what the whole Church needs now if we are to do in our own time and in our own way what others have done before us? The legacy of our Irish forebears may not be as remote as it seems. Their spiritual genes are still powerfully among us, and they will surely surface in unexpected ways as we move into a very different future as a people different yet surprisingly the same.

Like the Archdiocese, the whole Church now seeks not to reject but to build upon the past as she moves into the new future that God has in mind. The way forward for the Church is always a matter of “back to the future”, and the challenge is always to engage the past in creative ways that stir new energies. This is what the Council meant when it spoke of a need to “return to the sources”, and it’s what I will strive to do as Archbishop – engage the past in order to build the future, and to do so in way that both honours the past and embraces the future..

My mission will range far and wide, but it will have its focus in the national capital, and at this turning-point in my journey, I ask the question: Where and how does Australia stand at this time? In some ways, we are like Abraham, “our father in faith” (*Roman Canon*). He was a rich and

successful businessman. Yet something gnawed away at him deep down; something was missing. In the midst of plenty, there was a lingering unhappiness, a sense of failure, of life slipping through his fingers. He had everything except a child and a land of his own; and without these in his culture, he was a man in whose life death had the last word and a man therefore who was wounded deep within, slowly bleeding to death.

So too Australia is in many ways rich and successful, and there is much of which we can be rightly proud, as Abraham was no doubt. Yet there is also something missing deeper down: we sense it in public life and we feel it in the privacy of our heart. We have a bit of fun but not much joy; we get on well enough with others but struggle to find love; we know little conflict but do not find peace; we have endless options but do not feel free; we move but we do not advance. Like Abraham, there is the wound deep within, and so we just get on with business, proving how rich and successful we can be in a world where fear and greed loom large. There is no hope of the fulness of life we long for deep down – the joy, the love, the peace, the freedom; there is no hope of healing. Or so at least it seems. But precisely at this point of seeming hopelessness, God speaks a healing word – a word of promise to Abraham, “I will give you a child and a land”, and a word of hope to Australia, “I will fill the muted void”. This word comes from

nowhere and opens magnificent and unexpected horizons of hope. It overturns the conventional logic which says that nothing else is possible, so just get on with business. This word is the wisdom of the Cross (*cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25*), and it's the only wisdom to which the Church can lay claim.

There are many crosses in the world – so many forms of suffering – and all of these crosses bar one destroy the human being. The one exception is the Cross of Christ: where it should destroy like all the others, it creates the human being. We have all known someone deeply wounded who has not been destroyed by the wound, but has been strangely created by it – by which I mean led to a new and more radiant depth of humanity precisely through suffering. That is the Cross of Jesus Christ. That is the power of Easter. That is the ground of Christian hope.

As he tells the story of Calvary, St John gives us an unforgettable image of this power: “One of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance, and immediately there came forth blood and water” (19:34). The death-wound of Christ becomes a fountain of life and proclaims to the world that there is no wound that cannot become a fountain, not even the cosmic wound of death. This is the point of my episcopal motto which is inscribed here over the cathedra lest I forget: “Sanguis et Aqua”, “Blood and Water”. This is the hope of Easter which cries out, with the angel Gabriel, that “nothing is

impossible to God”. St Paul says the same thing differently when he writes the strange and simple words that take us to the heart of the Gospel: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). This overturns the logic of a culture like ours which tends to say that when I am strong, then I am strong, and when I am weak, I am nothing. The word of hope the Church has heard from the mouth of God, she speaks to the heart of Australia, knowing that no other power can heal the wound that lies deep down in rich and successful Australia. Without that word, when God is silenced or ignored, we keep looking for the right thing in the wrong place and never find it. Who will lead us to the right place? Who will give us what is missing? The only answer is God, who speaks in the place where we are weak and wounded, bringing babies from barren wombs and dead men from the tomb.

At this new threshold in my life, then, I find myself asking: Where am I going as a man? Where are we going as the Church? Where are we going as a nation? To tell the truth, I cannot be entirely sure. Who of us can be? But that doesn't mean that we are adrift on a morass of uncertainty, nor that I am a steersman without a rudder, the blind leading the blind (*cf. Matt 15:14*). Yet we live at a time when certitudes of some kind are denied to us, a time when faith may be more difficult but when it is more necessary than ever. By faith, I mean what we see in Abraham and Mary, whom I have

chosen as my special companions as I set forth upon this new phase of my own journey. Both were called by God but given precious little detail. In both cases, the call was hard to credit, and they were given no road-map for the strange journey ahead. Yet both said yes, trusting that the One who had called them would lead them safely on and would honour his almost unbelievable promise, “for nothing is impossible to God”.

I have learned through the years that it is more important to say yes to the One who calls than to know exactly where you are going. It is more important to keep your eye and ear on him than to look anxiously for some non-existent road-map that might allow you to take charge. To keep your eye and ear on the One who calls is what I mean by faith. That’s what is now more necessary than ever – for me, for the Church, for the nation.

So here I stand – no political leader or corporate boss but simply a man of faith, a son of Abraham, a son of Mary, poor and powerless enough, wounded certainly, but called by Christ, equipped by Christ, sent out by Christ. To him I say yes once more this morning, as I have so often before, but now at a new depth and with a new intensity.

In saying yes to him, I say yes to you, the Church of Canberra and Goulburn, my future, my family, my flesh and blood in the Lord. For you I will live and for you I will die. And in saying yes to Christ, I say yes to

Australia – home of the Dreaming, Terra Nullius, South Land of the Holy Spirit, lit by the Southern Cross. Beneath the mantle of Mary Help of Christians which enwraps us like the ocean, may we all come, at our own pace and in our own way, to touch the face of God as did the Virgin, setting pools of life in all its fulness, oases of Christ himself, in this thirsty land as we journey on together towards our true homeland which is in heaven (*cf. Phil 3:20*) where God will be all in all. Amen.

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