

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE
PLENARY MEETING
27 NOVEMBER 2018

Homily preached by the President, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, at the Opening Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit.

The Mass of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate at the beginning of our meetings is always a kind of epiclesis – not unlike what we do when we call down the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine we place on the altar, knowing that the Spirit alone can transform such humble stuff into the Body and Blood of Christ.

But the Mass this morning is not so much a calling down as a calling forth of the Spirit, more an ekklesis than an epiclesis; because while all Christians have received the Holy Spirit we bishops are among the most anointed of men. Baptized, confirmed, ordained both presbyter and bishop, we are well and truly chrismated.

What we seek therefore as we begin our meeting is the release of the gift we've so lavishly received. The alabaster flask must be broken (Mark 14:3) for the fragrance of its contents to fill the house as they do in the Gospel of John (12:3); otherwise, the fragrance remains sealed. At this time, we bishops tend to be in bad odour, which is why the flask has to be broken, so that we may become the fragrance of Christ, which all our anointings call us to be.

According to the papal preacher Raniero Cantalamessa, “ordination provides the authorization to do certain things but not necessarily the authority to do them. It assures the apostolic succession but not necessarily apostolic success”. It's the Spirit who provides the authority and the success.

So this morning we call forth wind and fire and water – all of which can both create and destroy. This is the paradox of the Holy Spirit. The one who is called comforter is also the great disruptor, the disturber of false comfort. Bernini brilliantly depicts the paradox in his image of the Spirit above the Altar of the Chair in St Peter's. The dove descends, the bird of peace; but there is also a hint of a bird of prey, with the dove given talons and ready to pounce. Comfort without disruption becomes inertia which provokes complacency. Disruption without comfort becomes turmoil which provokes anxiety. What we need is the strange combination of the comfort and disruption by which the Holy Spirit draws us beyond complacency and anxiety.

The Spirit also combines, paradoxically, gentleness and power. Gentleness is the way of the quiet, intimate “God behind the scenes” who never puts himself forward proclaiming his own name but who speaks only of the Father or the Son. The power belongs to the Creator who called light out of darkness and whose word creates worlds. The Scripture and the Fathers evoke the combination of gentleness and power in speaking of the Spirit as “dew”, as we will

in the Eucharistic Prayer – the dew that comes quiet and unseen but is a vital source of life in the dry earth of the Holy Land whose ancient name, Canaan, meant “the land of the dew”. Gentleness without power becomes impotence which provokes passivity; power without gentleness becomes violence which provokes fear. What we need now is the strange combination of gentleness and power by which the Holy Spirit draws us beyond passivity and fear.

We hear this morning from the Book of the Apocalypse. The word “apocalypse” means “unveiling” – and in recent times there has been much painful unveiling in the Church here and around the world. The pain has been worse because much of the veiling was done by us and those who went before us. That kind of veiling was certainly not the work of the Holy Spirit, but the other unveiling, the apocalypse, is. It’s been disturbing, disruptive, but it’s the only way to true comfort. It’s been powerful, searingly so, but it also contains in mysterious ways the gentleness, even the intimacy of God who cuts through all pretence, who knows what really is in the human heart.

The Book of the Apocalypse speaks of the final harvest, but for us that time has not yet come. Yet the sickle of heaven is at work in the Church, because now is the time for painful pruning – a pruning so severe perhaps that it can seem to destroy the vine. But from the seeming destruction, and from it alone, will come the new life made possible only by the pruning.

The destruction of the Temple predicted by Jesus in the Gospel was unthinkable. The whole edifice of Judaism seemed to depend upon the sacred cornerstone, just as the whole edifice of the Catholic Church can seem to depend upon things which now seem shakier than they did. Jesus speaks of wars, earthquakes, plagues and famine – all of which ravaged the Temple and the People of God who looked to the Temple as the cornerstone.

We too know our own wars, earthquakes, plagues and famine: these rage around us and are ravaging the Church. But what the Holy Spirit reveals to those with eyes to see is that these are not death-pangs but birth-pangs. Both are painful but, if we fail to distinguish birth and death, we fall victim to the final confusion. Only the Holy Spirit – comforting and disruptive, gentle and powerful – opens our eyes to see the difference. That’s why we call the Spirit forth, out of the depths, as we begin our meeting where we will have to discern once more what is death and what is birth.