

The Church: Graced, Missionary, and Synodal

A Theology for the Plenary Council

Let us rethink our usual way of doing things; let us open our eyes and ears, and above all our hearts, so as not to be complacent about things as they are, but unsettled by the living and effective word of the risen Lord.

— Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 137

This challenge from Pope Francis resonates with the method and goal of the Plenary Council: to hear and respond to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Catholic Church in Australia. ‘The living and effective word of the risen Lord’ empowers the ecclesial community to proclaim and embody the gospel ‘with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meanings for today’s world’ (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 11). The Plenary Council, as agent of the entire Catholic community in Australia, seeks to incorporate into the church ‘the newness which God mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 12).

The church, as a work of grace, of God’s self-giving, is inseparable from the whole of God’s creation. The presence of God in all that can ‘fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love’ (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 55), no less than in all that needs healing, fashions the church’s horizon and inspires its action.

This theological reflection profiles this horizon through five elements integral to the church: God’s self-revelation; mission; sacramentality; communion; and synodality. These five features shape the ecclesial community, illuminating its past, present, and future, while also promoting the church’s unity, conversion, and creative engagement with society. They convey too the summons of grace drawing the church, with creation, to fulfillment in God.

God’s Self-Revelation as the Source of the Church

The church has its origin in the word of God. God’s ‘Let there be’ (Gen 1:3 NRSV) initiates life and manifests who God is: God is life-giver, giving life by self-giving. The creator God desires communion with all that God brings to life and guides to fulfillment. The church flows from this desire.

God’s life-giving begins a new phase through the covenants with Israel, covenants that identify the people of Israel as God’s people. Foundational to the covenants is God’s promise of faithfulness: ‘I will take you as my people, and I will be your God’ (Exod 6:7;

Lev 26:12; Jer 30:22; and Ezek 36:28). The covenants embrace the past and present, but are also forward-looking: ‘I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done’ (Isa 46:9-10).

Christian faith professes that in Jesus Christ, the ‘mediator and sum total’ of God’s self-giving, God’s relationship to creation takes its definitive form (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 2). In Jesus, God ‘addresses men and women as his friends, and lives among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company’ (*Dei Verbum*, 2). The words and actions of Jesus on behalf of the kingdom or reign of God make God’s love present, promising ‘that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ (John 3:16).

The reign of God comes as a gift to all who are willing to receive it, like a treasure one discovers (Matt 13:44) or a super-abundance of food for the hungry (Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:35-44; Luke 9: 12-17; John 6:1-14). This gift changes its recipients, like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), so that what was previously unimaginable becomes possible. Jesus addresses outcasts and the despondent, those in need of God’s mercy (John 8:1-11): ‘With a tenderness which never disappoints [Jesus] makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 3). Significantly, Jesus’s activities on behalf of God’s kingdom are not a private enterprise: Jesus gathers disciples to share his life (Matt 4:18-22; Luke 6:12-16). Intimacy with Jesus reshapes the world of the disciples, substituting service for self-promotion (Mark 9:33-7; Luke 22:24-7), and drawing them into community.

‘The will of him who sent me’ (John 4:34) fuels the words and actions of Jesus. Even in the face of rejection, Jesus remains faithful to God and to his mission to reconcile all people to God. Jesus’s faithfulness and the Father’s response to it transform death into life, the cross into a symbol of hope. The resurrection of Jesus reveals the boundlessness of God’s creative love. As ‘Christ’, ‘Lord’, and ‘Saviour’, Jesus is the means of fulfillment for all peoples and all times (Rom 8:15-17; 2Cor 5:17-21; Col 1:20-22). Access to the new life of the risen Christ comes through the Holy Spirit, who is the church’s guiding light.

The Church’s Mission in the World

The Holy Spirit, ‘who moves the heart and converts it to God’, enables God’s self-revelation as Trinity to be ‘more and more deeply understood’ (*Dei Verbum*, 5). The revelation at Pentecost (Acts 2) extends to the church the Spirit’s role in the incarnation and life of Jesus. The Spirit who ‘overshadows’ Mary (Luke 1:35) and ‘alights’ on Jesus (Matt 3:16) as he begins his mission is the same Spirit who is the ‘Advocate’ for the community of

faith, forming disciples of Christ (John 14:25-6). In Christ and through the Spirit, the church witnesses to ‘the one God and Father of all’ (Eph 4:6).

The church, through grace, is ‘entrusted with the task of manifesting to [all people] the mystery of God, who is their final destiny’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 41). The church fulfils this mission through its worship, its offering of the Good News, and through the manifold ways in which all members of the community of faith embody the gospel message of God’s unconditional love, acceptance, and justice. In so doing, the church expresses its sacramental identity as ‘the seed and beginning of [God’s] kingdom’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 5).

Vatican II, in its decree on the church’s mission, emphasises that the Spirit, at work in all the baptised, plays a multi-faceted role in this mission: ‘[the Spirit] at times visibly anticipates apostolic action, just as in various ways [the Spirit] unceasingly accompanies and directs it’ (Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 4). Similarly, ‘a community of missionary disciples’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24), Pope Francis’s oft-stated vision for the church, requires the baptised to allow the Spirit to ‘enlighten, guide and direct us’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 280).

As disciples responsive to grace, members of the church are to be attentive to the gaps between what God’s life-giving love enables and the harmful circumstances that often prevail in society, as well as in the church’s history and present. This attentiveness can stimulate repentance for past failings and be an impetus for new forms of discipleship. The priority that the Plenary Council is giving to reconciliation with Australia’s indigenous people witnesses not only to a desire for Catholics to redress historical damage, but to be part of building a hopeful future. The Spirit, who speaks through ‘the grief and anguish’ of the world, no less than through its ‘joys and hopes’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1), calls the church to conversion. By its solidarity with survivors of clerical sexual abuse, the council is acknowledging that conversion requires commitment to the church’s formation as a just and healing community.

The church is part of the world, the world that God creates and guides, so the church must engage openly and constructively with all eras and cultures. In addressing pastors, theologians, and the whole community of the baptised, Vatican II accentuates the church’s obligation ‘to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times, and to interpret them in the light of God’s word’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 44). As it navigates between competing visions for the well-being of humanity and the world, the church must draw from its own resources—from the gospel and the life of grace in the believing community’s past and present—to discern how best to engage society.

Achieving a right relationship between the community of faith and wider world is no small task. This task has been challenging from the time of the Acts of the Apostles, but the

now-dominant globalised, inter-cultural, and multi-faith environment has added layers of complexity. Today, Christian faith and the behavioural norms it esteems are no longer the common currency of Australian society. Patterns of belief and social values have changed in recent decades. As ‘no religion’ has become more pervasive, receptivity to the church’s message and mission has waned. Diverse social values, as well as scandals enveloping the church, have cultivated an atmosphere that can be suspicious of the capacity of faith communities to participate positively in debates about social policies.

As the Plenary Council discerns how Catholics in Australia might best participate with other citizens in forming this nation as a place of peace, safety, and welcome for all people, the church’s existence as sacrament of God’s ‘abundant’ life (John 10:10) can be its lodestar. The church, being properly ‘catholic’, can affirm all that speaks of grace, including what emerges from sources other than the church. The church can also be critical of certain social values, without thereby adopting opposition as its defining feature.

The church, as a pilgrim, must remain open to the ways in which the Spirit might be urging the ecclesial community to be more creative, courageous, and inviting. Society’s questions and longings can be a means by which the Spirit challenges the church to deepen and express its faith in new ways. As the ecclesial community takes up this challenge, it need neither repudiate its past nor treat the past as the fullness of all that God enables.

The ‘integral ecology’ that Pope Francis champions (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*’, 137-62) models how the Plenary Council might bring the gospel into dialogue with Australian society. The pope is attentive to modern science, appreciative of humanity’s technical capacities, but unequivocal in naming the damage that flows from economic priorities that elevate profits over God’s creation. Crucially, the way of proceeding that Pope Francis offers the world has its foundations firmly in the church’s faith. This is especially evident in the link that he establishes between ecological sustainability and care for ‘the least’ (Matt 25:45), the excluded and dispossessed people who have a particular call on the mercy of God.

The Church as Sacrament of Christ through the Holy Spirit

Pope Francis’s efforts to stir the church to a deeper missionary engagement in the world align well with the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the church. Vatican II stresses that church, through the Spirit, is to be *lumen gentium*, ‘the light of the nations’, reflecting Christ’s life-giving and reconciling presence. The church, then, is ‘in Christ, like a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the

entire human race' (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 1). As sacrament, the human community of faith is a source of encounter with God's ever-present grace. The church, through the Spirit, proclaims to all times and places the good news of Jesus Christ (Mark 16:20), in whom 'everything has become new' (2Cor 6:17).

The word of God that the church proclaims and the Eucharist it celebrates nurture the community of the baptised for discipleship, for serving the gospel with 'boldness' (2Cor 3:12). Through its discipleship, which includes its spreading of the gospel, the church enacts its identity as a sacrament of Christ. The fruitfulness of the church's sacramentality depends radically on the community's openness to grace. It is hospitality to the full range of the Spirit's gifts (1Cor 12:4-11) that enables the church to be, and continually become, the 'sign and instrument' of the God who creates, heals, and fulfils.

The sacramentality of the church neither implies that the ecclesial community is perfect nor inoculates it against the complexities of history. Indeed, as a human reality no less than a graced one, the church is 'at once holy and always in need of purification' (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). Paradoxically, then, the ecclesial community's self-criticism and its embrace of ongoing conversion witness to the movement of the Spirit in the church. Without conversion, the church that exists to manifest God's presence can uniquely obscure God's offer of grace, as the clerical sexual abuse crisis indicates so tragically.

As it participates in humanity's ever-changing history, the church is both the 'universal sacrament of salvation' for the world and a 'pilgrim', one that recognises its own incompleteness and need for God's mercy (*Lumen Gentium*, 48). As sacrament and pilgrim, the church lives from grace, which unifies the church's diversity into a common witness.

The Church as Communion

The impact of Pope Francis owes much to his personal wisdom, warmth, and witness. Yet, as important as are his personal qualities, the worldwide audience for his voice is a consequence of the fact that Pope Francis, as pope, embodies and represents the Catholic Church. Embodiment and representation spotlight the human reality of the church, its existence as a communion of people. This communion is open to all who, through the call of Christ in the Spirit, desire to live as disciples and pilgrims. As a people, the church seeks to be as expansive as is grace. The church is neither sectarian nor nationalistic. It is enriched by the gifts of the Spirit that transcend time and place, while finding a home in diverse cultures and in all that is good in 'people's abilities resources, and customs' (*Lumen Gentium*, 13).

The church, ‘a communion of life, love and truth’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 9) in Christ, thrives through the gifts and talents of its members. All the baptised share in the mission of the church (*Lumen Gentium*, 13). Each member also receives the Spirit’s call to holiness of life, a call that the sacraments nourish, a call that flowers when all members of the church ‘manifest in their ordinary work the love with which God has loved the world’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). Religious life and the church’s ordained ministries embody this universal vocation to holiness in particular ways. These ways are not superior to others, but channels for the Spirit to support the whole community for its service to God’s reign.

As a body in history, the Christian community requires ‘organs’ to facilitate its gathering for worship, clarify the faith that binds members together, resolve disputes, and promote the church’s social engagement. Preserving, handing on, and enacting faith in Christ is impossible without the Holy Spirit. In the church’s self-understanding, however, grace and ecclesial structures are interwoven.

Vatican II teaches that the Spirit endows the church with ‘different hierarchic and charismatic gifts’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 4). These gifts are not algorithms that function with minimal human participation; rather, they take shape in human beings. Remarkably, the council declares that ‘in somewhat similar fashion’ to the union of God and humanity in the incarnation of Jesus, ‘the social structure of the church serves the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). This principle characterises the church’s structures as sacramental, as graced, human structures. Pre-eminent in this interpretation is the church’s ordained ministry, particularly episcopal ministry.

In the formulation of Vatican II, the church’s bishops, through the Spirit, ‘are authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach to the people assigned to them the faith which is to be believed and applied in practice’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 25). The clerical sexual abuse crisis in the church has made more difficult a positive reception of episcopal and priestly ministry. The abuse crisis has amplified other currents of disquiet over the exercise of episcopal authority, including the perceived distance between the bishops and the whole community of the baptised. This disquiet makes plain a longing for episcopal leadership to reflect more fully the qualities evident in Jesus’s relationship to his disciples (Matt 20:25; Mark 9: 33-5; Luke 22:24-7), qualities that intensified trust in Jesus.

The synodal dimension of ecclesial life, which the Plenary Council symbolizes and for which Pope Francis advocates tirelessly, can be a conduit for a deeper understanding and revitalised practice of episcopal and priestly ministry within the one people of God. Synodality, in short, can renew the church as a single, graced communion called to mission.

Synodality in the Life of the Church

Synodality builds on the conviction that all the baptised, having received ‘an anointing which comes from the holy one cannot be mistaken in belief’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 12). Through the grace of their baptism, responsibility for the church’s faith, communion, and mission is the patrimony of all the baptised. The emphasis acknowledges that each baptised member of the church shares in ‘the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). Bishops have specific duties for the church (*Lumen Gentium*, 20-7), but the mission of the entire ecclesial community benefits when the bishops and all the baptised discern and respond together to the movement of God’s Spirit in history.

The effectiveness of synodality, therefore, depends on the whole community of the faithful. Shared discernment manifests the Spirit’s guidance of the church. It displays the inextricable bond between the health of the church and its existence as a single, yet differentiated, body. Only through the Spirit, and only together, can the church narrow the gap between its creedal profession and the failings that impede its pilgrimage from giving unambiguous testimony to grace. Only together, can the ecclesial community truly be ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.’

Synodality frames a specific gift that the Spirit offers to the church through the episcopate: their responsibility for ‘drawing from the storehouse of revelation new things and old’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 25). Bishops hold the church’s memory. This memory, which connects the Christian community in every time and place to all that God has done in Jesus Christ, is an instrument of the Spirit. The uniqueness of the church’s memory—indeed, its paradoxical quality—is its orientation: not exclusively to the past, but to the fullness of life in Christ.

Memory animates the ecclesial community’s movement into the future. Through their ministry to the church’s memory, bishops are essential to the synodal church’s faithfulness to the long history of God’s accompaniment. This same ministry can bolster, support, and encourage the ecclesial community’s responsiveness to the Spirit’s guidance into the future. Pope Francis describes strikingly episcopal ministry that can effectively serve the pilgrim community: a bishop is to ‘go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and—above all—allowing the flock to strike out on new paths’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 236).

Synodality can be a platform for the creativity that expresses the faithful reception of the church's lived history of faith. This creativity enables a deeper appropriation of what the community in each time and place receives from the past. Creative reception discloses levels of richness that become apparent only through questions proper to specific contexts. This richness, in turn, witnesses to the Spirit of Christ at the heart of the church's faith.

'The living voice of the Gospel' that is to 'ring out in the church—and through it in the world' (*Dei Verbum*, 8) requires the breathing together of the bishops and all the faithful. This mutuality depends on a common exposure to the word of God, to prayer, openness to questions, humble self-criticism, and the desire to embody the church's faith in cultural settings that, with all their complexity, are also the sphere in which grace abounds. The church's Spirit-given capacity to discern what 'has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28) underpins synodality. This same grace enables people of faith to remain hopeful amidst all that the church must negotiate for the sake of its communion and mission.

Discernment is integral to synodality. Discernment, as Pope Francis describes it, differs from 'self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection', it is 'an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God' (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 175). The goal of this discernment is to prepare the ground for decisions on how best to express the mission of the church in circumstances of a specific time and place, such as Australia in 2022. Through its discernment, the ecclesial community, faithful to the exhortation of Pope Francis that begins this reflection on the church, seeks to communicate the gospel 'with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meanings for today's world' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 11).

The portrayal of the church in this reflection emphasises that the church will remain a pilgrim until God brings about the fullness of the kingdom. The Holy Spirit, who initiates and sustains this pilgrimage through word, sacrament, and the common life of faith is God's abiding gift to the church. Through the Spirit, the church on pilgrimage can grow as a community of generous and compassionate disciples whose presence can be a source of hope for Australia. As a graced, human community, the church that has its foundations in the joy and peace of Easter, in the new life of the risen Jesus, can be a light for the nations.