



To speak boldly, but to listen humbly

by Fr Noel Connolly SSC, Plenary Council Facilitation Team

Pope Francis, talking to the Bishops before the first session of the Synod on the Family told them: “You need to say all that you feel with parrhesia” [boldly, candidly and without fear]. He encouraged them to speak up even if they thought he would not want to hear what they wanted to say.

However, he also exhorted them: “And at the same time, you should listen with humility and accept with an open heart what your brothers say.”

Parrhesia or speaking boldly, listening humbly and always with an open trusting heart is Francis’ prescription for synodality and discernment.

To a certain extent, we have been in “speaking boldly” stage for the past year. More than 68,000 people had contributed to the Plenary Council by the end of January.

From Ash Wednesday, those contributions will be analysed by the National Centre for Pastoral Research to identify major themes or topics, which will then be fed back to the people of the Church in Australia.

People have spoken boldly. It is the first Council for more than 80 years and the first at which the lay people have been invited to speak up as is their baptismal right. Now we are entering the second phase and the emphasis will be more on listening and discernment.

Pope Francis uses the word “listen” 31 times and the word “dialogue” 59 times in *The Joy of the Gospel*. Listening is key to discernment for Francis.

“We need to practise the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur.” [EG 171]

In his message on World Communications Day 2014, he challenges us to “be people of depth, attentive to what is happening around us and spiritually alert”, always believing that the people we are talking with or about are genuine and have something worthwhile to say.

Finally, Pope Francis invites us to listen to a group that probably has not received sufficient emphasis in our preparations for the Plenary Council so far, namely the poor. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, he reminds us, “They have much to teach us... We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way.” [EG 198]

In the Archdiocese of Wellington, the 2017 Synod concluded: “Group discernment requires a commitment to listen attentively and to trust the intentions of others, together with a



willingness to share our own experience and insights, and let go of our assumptions or biases. The question at the heart of a pastoral planning process is not ‘What will we do?’ but ‘What is the Holy Spirit leading us to do?’” [*Synod Outcomes*: Archdiocese of Wellington, Synod 2017.]

The goal of the Plenary Council is not to end up with a Church with perfect structures, good as that might be, but to become more of a joyous, missionary Church, and a poor Church with and for the poor.

Only then will we be Christlike and convincing to our secular brothers and sisters in Australia.