

Fr Kevin Dillon - HOMILY DATED 24.11.2018

It's a few years back now but some of you may recall a movie which came out about 2001 called *The Perfect Storm*, with Mark Wahlberg and George Clooney. It was a fundamentally true story about a freak gathering of three storms that came together in the Southern parts of the United States. It was graphically presented. I'd never heard the phrase 'perfect storm' before then, but it's been used more in recent years, perhaps as a result of the success of that storm to describe how things come together from different angles, sometimes for good results and sometimes not good results.

We've got an interesting 'perfect storm' this weekend. This weekend the people of Victoria have gone to the polls, and perhaps for the past few weeks with the early voting, to elect the government for the next four years. That will determine a lot in terms of the people of Victoria and the issues that have been voted about and discussed for another four years. We have had the opportunity to go to polling booths all over the state and have our say.

Today is also the feast of Christ the King. There we have a different concept of authority. Even the whole notion of kingship. Kings are not usually elected, they are appointed. They succeed in family membership and so on. Probably our most familiar recognition of that is the Royal Family of Britain and the United Kingdom. In the feast of Christ the King we recognise a different kind of authority that is an authority of faith and an authority of spirit, which is very important to acknowledge within our life.

Also, the third element of the perfect storm, is that this weekend we are bringing to the attention of our parishioners here, the plenary council which has been called about twelve months ago to be enacted in 2020, which is not all that far away. When it was first put forward it seemed a long time away.

The plenary council is a gathering of church leaders. When the last one was called it was 1937, eighty-one years ago. It will be eighty-three years ago since the previous one. It was almost entirely made up of up in its consultation and deliberation of bishops, and maybe a few religious orders got a bit of a word in along the way. It was almost entirely made up of the bishops of Australia coming together as a totality. No-one else had much of a say, whatsoever. Times have changed.

The church of 1937 is, if not unrecognisable, vastly different from the church of 2018 or 2020. And, while some things are for the good, some things have changed less positively. We talk about

governments and so on, and the influence of a Christian, let alone a Catholic, voice in parliament, in terms of legislation and public principles is almost totally absent. We are struggling to even have Christmas and Easter recognised as they should be.

There are so many examples that we can see where the voice of the church has been almost totally silenced in so many areas of public life. We look around churches – so many that are closed or empty, or they are open for an hour a week. We look at so many empty seats and we know that they are seats that should be filled by the next generation and the next and they are not.

We look at the works of health and education and welfare, which were once an enormous witness to the goodwill and good work of our own church. We know that if government funding was removed from them now, they would stop tomorrow. They are totally dependent on the funding of government to keep going. Good work – sure, but work of the church? Debatable.

So, things are different now, and that's not adding in the area of reality for the past twenty or so years, especially the past five or six, because of the Royal Commission into the institutional abuse of children and minors, the whole element, tragically, of scandal within our church. We all know that that has made an enormous difference. It is not a co-incidence that the call for the plenary council has come at the conclusion of the Royal Commission. One thing leads to another.

I'm going to make a confession here. When the Plenary Council was first called for, I wondered whether it would really do anything. I was probably sceptical about whether it was really going to work. I looked at figures like these: The Catholic population of Australia is 5.291 million people. The total population of priests, of which I'm one, and religious brothers and sisters is 7740. So, I got out my trusty calculator and put 7740 over 5.291 million, and then multiplied by a hundred and I got 0.15%.

And that's where things have changed, because in 1937 nobody even thought of asking the 99.85% of people who made up the church then, what they thought. Here, in 2018-2020, the key focus will be coming from the people of Australia, the 99.85%, and what they have to say. The Vatican council brought it out, but more than ever before, some of the negatives and many of the issues and problems that we have to face, and you have to face within the context of your families demand that the 99.85% be listened to and heard.

So, here's your chance. Here's the chance for people to come together. We might think, and I can understand this, that you might think, 'Who's going to listen to us? It's going to be the same old faces saying the same old things and we won't get anywhere.'

It will be if no-one speaks up. But if a lot of people speak up and say this is not right, this needs to be fixed, this needs to be changed and we remain clearly people of optimism and hope that a lot of the things that have beset our church in recent years can be improved because the stakes are so high. We are talking about the next generation and the next and the next. We all have to do our bit.

The 99.85% cannot sit back and say – ‘It’s out of our control’. No, it’s not. You have an opportunity to really have a say and start to steer this church in Australia in the direction that it needs. Not just in a sense of angry protest - there might be elements of that, sure - but in a sense of true genuine hope that Christ the King, in the best sense of the word and in the title that we give, can move our church into a far greater position of witness and value and of service.