

**Address to the Synod of The Murray**

**Saturday May 25<sup>th</sup> 2019**

Brothers and Sisters, I expect for some of you it appears rather strange to have me addressing you and chairing this synod. Strange for some because my presence is only caused by the absence of the bishop who you have got used to as your leader for the past five years, and strange for others to the extent of it feeling inappropriate given that I reside in another State and diocese. The extent of that disquiet is reflected in the tone of some of the written questions that appear on our synod papers.

It is also strange by the way for the community I serve in Melbourne, but I am grateful that the parish of Brunswick which pays my stipend, it's churchwardens and parish treasurer did not demur when I was asked to give some time to the Diocese of The Murray. You will have noted from your papers perhaps that the costs attached to this diocese for my participation has been \$666 to date – a rather unfortunate biblical number, but that is simply airfares. There is no stipend or sweeteners.

Well, here I am, as Vicar General of the diocese and it is my responsibility to steer us through the Agenda set before us, which I will seek to do with a mixture of firmness and generosity of spirit. You will by the way, have to forgive me if I need to be prompted over some procedural matters. But I will have both the Registrar and the Chancellor by my side. I ask your forbearance. Dioceses have varying customs.

I am however confused over a more serious matter than the intricacies of synodical procedure. I am confused because ever since I was appointed Vicar General, I have been hearing and reading of two very different narratives about the life of the diocese. They cannot both be right, though I accept that they are held with equal conviction.

The different narratives or stories seem to be as different as the Two Cities of Dickens fame, and are the cause of considerable tension and disagreement, even heart ache. Listen to these words from the Dickens' opening chapter:

*'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the season of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...'*

Is it not the case that such contrasting opinions might well express that differences of opinion surrounding these past five years in the diocese, or actually I suspect, for a longer period. I well remember coming to the diocese during the last episcopal vacancy to conduct the clergy retreat. During a healing liturgy I laid hands on Fr Richard Seabrook, the then Vicar General. As I prayed he collapsed into what can only be described as a sobbing and quivering wreck of a man. Some present, and they were clergy, seemed to have no compassion at all, others wept with him.



I didn't know what to do, and I'm not sure I know what to do now.

In preparation for my role as Administrator and for this synod I decided to read all the minutes of this synod for the past five years, and all the minutes of the Diocesan Council. That it must be said, is a day in my life that I will not get back, but I console myself that it will be counted to me as righteousness. I have also read considerable documentation surrounding the complaint that has been made against the bishop and the implications of his oversight reported therein. That action and its documentation by the way is not *sub judice* in contrast to the matters relating to Fr Peter Carlsson about which I will invite the Chancellor to make a statement before we get down to the synod business, so I am free to speak of it.

The narrative of the minutes of meetings and in actual discussions with the elected members of the Diocesan Council, and with the Registrar seem to be the story of a rural diocese trying, like many others to face the challenges of being the church in the twenty first century. It is a narrative of a strong but consensual bishop with a theological understanding of the diocese as a single entity, even as a family, with a company of elected representatives from this synod, numbers of whom have worshipped in the diocese for many years and some with the freshness of more recent arrival. They are minutes of meetings which have sought to bind the Council together through hospitality and discussion, and that often mention the bishop's ministry with thankfulness, and are relentlessly peppered with the phrase, 'a discussion took place...' It is the narrative of a group of people who, while it is not explicitly said, seem to think that the foundation document that constitutes any diocese is the New Testament, and that while respecting the existing Constitution and Ordinances of the diocese, saw the need for updating. It is a narrative of them deciding together, after legal advice from the Chancellor on a programme of living 'as if' with the hope that a new organisational and pastoral structure in the diocese which incorporates 'mission and pastoral' in their title may help to shift the congregations in a more mission focussed direction. It's a narrative that speaks of some growth in response to the 25% growth challenge, but has an acceptance that a turn around is still to be won.

It is perhaps a narrative that speaks occasionally of running ahead of itself, and of some frustration that the vision has not been captured by everyone in the diocese, but it seems, reading minutes that it is a story of a leadership team that takes its financial stewardship very seriously, and in its aim to advance the diocese ensure that the diocese is not put at financial risk. It is the story of a bishop trying to find ways to foster vocations, to form, ordain, and fund new clergy in a very dispersed diocese with little historic resources.

And there is more that I could say, but this gives you some sense of this first narrative. It ends with considerable disappointment that the bishop has decided to retire earlier than he might have done, but with an understanding that there is a need for him and his wife to return to their family, and a request to the bishop's election committee to ensure the appointment of a new bishop who will continue the momentum of the past five years.

Now the other narrative, which is, very, very different but as I said before is as strongly felt. It is articulated in, but not confined to a long list of complaints that have been made to the professional standards body of the Australian Church about Bishop John and his leadership. It is a narrative that can be discovered in a list of hoped for outcomes from a suggested process of conciliation presented by complainants, a process suggested by the convenor of the Episcopal Standards Commission.

This tells the story of those whose experience is such that they want a guarantee that the outgoing bishop will never be able exercise influence or visit the Diocese of The Murray again. It's a narrative of a bishop experienced as a bully and provides some testimony to that experience. It speaks of a diocese so heading in the wrong direction that it can only be salvaged by the virtual disbanding of its existing bodies, preferably including the Diocesan Council who are perceived as weak and over influenced by the bishop, simply used by him to legitimise his agenda. It is a story of a bishop's election committee so tainted by the bishop's interference that it needs to be stood down. It's a narrative of parishes that have been improperly forced to become pastoral districts without consent or consultation. It's a narrative that distrusts the financial management of the diocese and calls for an independent review of that management. It's a story of parishes having clergy imposed upon them, and is so concerned about the clergy that it sees the need for a review of all clergy trained and appointed over the bishop's tenure. It's a group of people angry at a bishop supposedly sick who nevertheless had the effrontery to spend his last weekend in the diocese licensing a canon theologian and then ordaining a new priest.

Well that gives a flavour of the second narrative. The two narratives are chalk and cheese.

The second narrative is authored by a group of just over a dozen people, though they claim to represent far more. Now I have been informed that there is precedent in this synod to convey information about people to people by putting leaflets under windscreens. This is not Christian behaviour. I will not read out a list of their names, but if any of you want to know who they are ask me during the lunch break. Those who are the authors of the first narrative are in the public gaze and accountable. I see no valid godly reason for this not to be so of the second narrators. Their influence has been strong and effective. Your bishop and his wife have not returned to England with the words "Good and faithful servant. Enter the joy of your retirement." Ringing in their ears.

John has gone home under the shadow of disappointment, overshadowed by one of these two narratives. When I spoke to him some weeks ago on Skype about all that's been happening, I was taken back to that occasion I spoke of earlier with Fr Richard Seabrook.

Now, there is nothing new or particularly wrong with disagreement. I have no doubt that all concerned with these two narratives believe their narrative. But it is important in the Christian community to disagree and express our disagreement in ways which reflect Christian virtues.

However, it seems to me that the diocese needs to decide which narrative should form its future.

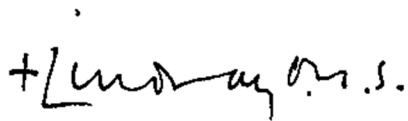
This you owe to yourselves, to whoever comes as your new bishop, but more importantly what you owe to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ whose witnesses you are.

When I was preparing a sermon for last Sunday on the new commandment given by our Lord to the eleven disciples after Judas had left the Upper Room, I came upon some words from two of the early great ones of the Church. First of all, the second century, Tertullian. Without any irony or cynicism he speaks of the pagans looking in on the Christian community marvelling. What is it they say? "See how these Christians love one another. They are even willing to die for each other." It is a tragedy, nothing less than a tragedy, that 'See how these Christians love one another' is said these days more with irony than marvelling. Let me tell you, it is said with irony of this diocese by people outside of it.

Secondly, the great preacher John Chrysostom in the fifth century. He muses that the prevailing culture has become bored with its own doctrines and way of understanding life and the world. Why is it he says that though they are bored they are yet unable to hear the beautiful doctrines of the Christian faith which offer so much that is true and noble and lovely? They do not hear, he says, because we do not love one another enough.

If this be true, I'm afraid that in the end no amount of restructuring or the blocking of restructuring will bring about the renewal you all hope for in the Diocese of The Murray.

May God be with us, and may this be a holy Synod.

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name 'Lindsay Urwin O.G.S.' in a cursive script.

The Right Reverend Lindsay Urwin OGS  
Vicar General of The Murray