



**Opening Address given at the Diocesan Assembly
Federation University
14 February 2025
Bishop Greg Bennet**

Holy Spirit of Wind and Fire, Come!

In the Book of Exodus (Ex 3:1-14) Moses is tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, at Mount Horeb. Suddenly the angel of the Lord appears in flames of fire from within a bush which does not burn up. The inquisitive Moses approaches the bush: “I will go over and see this strange sight and why the bush does not burn up” (Ex 3:3). The Lord sees him approach and calls to him, “Moses, Moses!” As we read so often in scripture when our ancestors hear a call from God, Moses responds, “Here, I am.”

God then cautions him not to come any closer. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then the Lord said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” At this, we are told, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God (Ex:3:5).

My dear sisters and brothers, in your own ways you have answered God’s invitation with your own, ‘here I am.’ You have been called from your parishes and ministries to be part of this Assembly. The holy grounds of our Diocese are rich and varied – from the growth corridors in the West and our regional cities and country towns – the strengths are great and the challenges diverse.

We gather from the four winds of the Diocese. We come before the God of wind and fire. We come before the burning bush to encounter the Holy One whose promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ in whom we find our stories, our church, our mission.



We bring the hopes of our communities to this sacred assembly. We are blessed by those who have come to walk with us and to share this time: Ecumenical friends, Special Observers, leadership from St John of God, CatholicCare, St Vincent de Paul and various organisations who promote, support, and sustain so many people – Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

This is our invitation – to “take off our shoes” before the presence of the God who gathers us here and in the presence of one another, for this is our holy ground.

Holy Spirit of Wind and Fire, come! Blow fresh life through our tired dreams.

We gather with the universal Church and in union with Francis our Pope. This assembly also unites us with the Church across our Province, and Australia.

We are not alone: We are accompanied by the countless saintly women and men, and children whose powerful witness points us to Jesus Christ. We draw from our Tradition and the “sure compass” (NMI) of the Constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, magisterial teaching, doctrine, and the lived voices of the *sensus fidei*. We allow the Living Word to be spoken in our hearts and to interpret our experience. We come to honour our history: In the words of Saint John XXIII, “history is the teacher of life.”

We draw from a rich theological tradition – it provides vast parameters for our creative imagining. The holy ground of Tradition and Scripture serves to shape the work of the Assembly process and paves the way for our creative imagining in our deep listening, discernment and decision making.

Thomas Merton wrote that ‘Pilgrimage is a way of opening ourselves to the mystery of life’. Over these two years of extensive and intensive consultation, the people of the Diocese of Sale have undertaken a pilgrimage. The mystery we have been pondering is about how we are to



live as people of mission in our place and our time. In a “change of era” (Pope Francis) how are we to be credible disciples in amidst changing secular context and even a post-Christian society?

You and many others have gathered to faithfully engage with the process which has led us here. Some of our pilgrims prayed alone and submitted their responses. We have attempted to listen to the voices of those who are beyond the walls of our parish communities, and especially those on the peripheries, who for a variety of reasons, believe they cannot belong among us, or worst still, are not welcomed by us. How do we open the doors to them? As Pope Francis says, the church belongs to Christ and Christ belongs to everyone.

Holy Spirit of wind and fire, come! Reveal more clearly a vision of what is possible.

As bishop, I must also acknowledge the terrible crimes committed by clergy and religious and a few lay people in our diocese, whose evil actions have profoundly wounded the lives of innocent young children, and by doing so, destroyed the fabric of unity among families, communities and friends. Relationships have been fractured by the silence and decisions which caused such harm and trauma. I say again, how sorrowful I am for the suffering of victim survivors and those they love. This was not the fault of lay women and men. The responsibility lies in a culture which enabled clericalism to flourish, unaccountability to manifest and opaque decision-making to dictate such poor pastoral response. For many, these things were hidden, not acknowledged, and were kept in darkness. This cannot be the case any longer. We must use the avenues which enable genuine healing and reparation to those so affected by abuse. We must never be complacent about the safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults. Safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility. We will continue to build a culture of safeguarding wherever we are present across the beautiful Diocese of Sale, so all in our care, all we encounter and all to whom we witness may be safe. Last year’s Safeguarding Audit by external auditors affirmed our compliance and the initiatives which have been taken. We commit to the ongoing work of building a culture characterised by transparency and robust safeguarding practices.



As people of the Kingdom of God, we express mercy, compassion and justice. We know of our need to continue to walk with our Indigenous people and to seek ways which will enable reconciliation and healing. To be the Church which we are called to be.

We think of others so often forgotten who have no-one to speak for them: prisoners, refugees, asylum seekers, homeless poor. Those whose cries of suffering in body, mind or spirit rarely attract our notice. There are current issues too in our land which fracture unity among Christians, and other Abrahamic faiths - Jews and Muslims; expressions of hatred which create fear, must end! In a time of so many wars and fractious peace, we must pray and witness to the Prince of Peace.

Holy Spirit of Wind and Fire, come! Startle us anew with your power and energy!

The two phases of our Consultation process did the following:

The first phase invited us to look back since we last gathered in Assembly in 2019 and trace the ways we had responded to what had emerged, and to see how the Holy Spirit had accompanied us on our journey. The first phase report highlighted the initiatives and strengths, and resilience of our people deeply connected to their communities and living their baptismal priesthood.

Phase two pushed us to look forward to the next five years. The second phase report tells us what participants valued in their parishes and the diocese. It gave voice to their ascending Christian hopes for the next five years. The strengths and challenges are often nuance. They echo in a pre-emptive way this year of Jubilee – to be Pilgrims of Hope. Pope Francis says: *Hope does not disappoint us; our hope has a name: the name of Jesus.*

One of the joys of being a bishop is the opportunity I have to encounter so many extraordinary, wonderful people – the beatitude people- across our parish communities, schools and colleges and Catholic institutions (St John of God, Villa Maria Catholic Homes, CatholicCare Victoria). I am



humbled by your ministries - people involved in prison ministry, aged-care chaplaincy, St Vincent de Paul Society, parish-based programs like Mick's Kitchen-Traralgon, Paddy's Kitchen Pakenham, other groups working together like Frankies in Warragul, Catholic Women's League, prayer groups, and in so many extraordinary and creative ways. These are the places where we encounter the angels without knowing it (cf Hb 13:2). This is mission made visible within our communities and to the peripheries. This is a profound witness to hope.

Holy Spirit of Wind and Fire, come! May we build a Church that radiates and nourishes our unity of faith.

Ten years following the second Vatican Council Saint Paul VI issued an encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in which he proposed that our Christian witness evokes irresistible questions in the lives of others, provoking them to ask: *Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst?* (n. 21) In other words, people read the gospel in the lives of the followers of Christ, and it is this witness which is transformative. The profound gift of our anointing at Baptism is that it makes us all sharers in Christ's prophetic and priestly life.

For many, our discernment raised the natural concern about young people and their engagement. There are wonderful shoots of life to witness: the strength of youth ministry in some parishes is refreshing to see and experience. There have been intentional efforts by many to really encourage, welcome and support young people to find their place in our midst. The J Walkers of Traralgon, the young people in the LAMP project in our larger urban parishes, the experience of World Youth Day for some, Jesus Youth, experiences such as Ignite ministry, and later this year, Australian Catholic Youth Festival. There are many efforts in our parishes walking with younger students and connecting them to parish.

Each year, I have the joy to engage with our college leaders and captains – the best advertisements of our colleges. I am inspired by their Christian witness and leadership. I see in them such optimism and openness to others and to the world.



In the Rule of St Benedict, it is written, that it is often the youngest in the community to whom the Lord reveals new and better solutions (Rule 3:3). So, we look forward to the contribution of the young people amongst us.

Holy Spirit of Wind and Fire, come! May we develop the courage to be people of mission

As we gather in this sacred assembly, we do so in a spirit of co-responsibility. You will have read Father Orm Rush's fine and synthetic paper in our working document. Father Orm says the best definition of synodality is the Vatican Council II. The mission of the Church is the same as that of Jesus (DV 8). Our capacity to read the 'signs of the times' through the Holy Spirit flows, from the particular charisms and gifts of the Church: lay, religious, ordained, all the baptised are called to be engaged in the inner life and outer mission of the Church in the world...all are called to work together – in co-responsibility – in order to carry out the mission of the Church in the world (O Rush, AWD, pg5)

At this assembly, all of us around these tables, we gather to share how we believe the Spirit is leading us. We gather to deeply listen to how other's united in the same Spirit can enrich our dialogue, open us to new possibilities and bring something new to life.

I am the most blessed Bishop in the land! I say this because I have discovered in the presbyterate of Sale (bishop, priest, deacons) such unity of purpose, care, and mission. We are not perfect, of course, but we share the mission of Jesus' sacramental ministry in ways which unite us. We are the youngest group of clergy in Australia, we are diverse, representing different countries of birth, experiences of formation and education. I know of the support and connection our priests and deacons share with you. I know of their efforts to walk closely with you in sharing your joys, sorrows, anxieties and hopes. As clergy, we must continue to learn and grow in living and exercising ministry co-responsibility. We too commit ourselves to our ongoing formation in service of the Lord and you.

Throughout the two reports there are references to Catholic Education. I am pleased that we have provided opportunities for clergy, principals, and religious education leaders to gather and discuss the ways this partnership



could be strengthened. It is clear that we all wish to have a Catholic education system which inspires young people in a Christian vision which elevates them to achieve their best. Our schools are governed by the Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Board and is led by Mr Paul Velten, Chief Executive Officer – these fine people are with us. Our governance framework focusses upon both the compliance and the management of the business; however, this is always through a mission perspective of Catholic Education.

Holy Spirit of Wind and Fire, come! May we develop the courage to be people of mission, alert to new opportunities, always on the move!

Over the next two days you will meet some of the people who collaborate closely with me in the administration, pastoral life and mission, safeguarding and other ministries of support. The work of this assembly will assist us in shaping our response to what we are invited to adopt and consider.

There is so much more which could be said, but now I shall allow each of you, with me, to allow the imagination of the Holy Spirit to inspire us.

Recently, I stood at the lookout at Mallacoota (parish of Orbost), I saw the beauty of the place where the river meets the sea. The confluence of the waters which have flowed from the snow fields meets the ocean – just extraordinarily majestic. The “river” of the past two years, and all that has gone before, now arrives to this time and place where God will be with us. We stand on a holy ground. We stand before one another. We stand before this synodal moment in the history of the Diocese of Sale, to see where the Spirit leads us in the next five years in our renewal and our shared mission.

The Lord now sees us approaching and calls us by name to be here in this place. All we need to say, is “Here, I am Lord” and God will say in response, “be not afraid.”

Our Lady of Perpetual Help, pray for us!