

Opening address

Speech 1: at 2.00 pm at the National Gathering – to begin the Gathering and introduce James Haire

· Grace and peace be with you all. Welcome to this National Gathering of the Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction. This great event of the Spirit in the life of the Churches in this country is the culmination of vision and hard work. The culmination of a desire for a body to speak to and to speak for the community of spiritual directors in Australia. So let us dispose ourselves to the Spirit of God – opening ourselves as generously as we can – welcoming the Spirit of truth, peace and unity, and join with me by saying the responses of this litany together.

God of holy dreaming: from the dawn of creation you have been in this ancient land.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Your presence endures as the rock at the heart of our land.

Come as holy fire, and burn in us.

As life-giving Spirit, you breathe life into us and we become living beings.

Come as holy wind, and blow through us.

You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.

Come as holy truth and wisdom, and satisfy us.

We stumble in the darkness and wound your love.

Come as holy forgiveness, and free us.

Eternal Spirit within us and beyond us,

teach us to treat each other with dignity and respect.

For every person is your dwelling place and home.

Let us share in choice and action

your deep desire for justice and peace.

Let us in the spirit of forgiving

make friends with those we have harmed and failed to love.

Stay with us,

as we walk with others.

Look on us,

as we look others into life.

Listen to us,

as we listen others into speech.

and gift us,

as we learn to be instruments of your grace.

God of holy dreaming: may Jesus's words be ours, for this Gathering and for the Council:

I have come to cast fire on the earth and would that it were kindled.

- Two contemporary insights into the mystery of God suggest that "God is a beckoning word" and that God's best name is "Surprise". None of us — especially those of us who have been caught up in the planning, dreaming, working and listening that has gone into the last five years would disagree. God has been beckoning us always, leading, encouraging and challenging us beyond what we know and what we are comfortable with and God has been constantly surprising us.

- The history and the genesis of this Council will be touched upon during this weekend. The story of our beginnings will be told formally and informally and there will be opportunity on Sunday morning to further the conversation between the Council and the community of spiritual directors. This conversation will naturally focus around how we got where we are, about why there is no membership in a general sense and why we moved away from accrediting individual spiritual directors to a process of recognition of formation programs. The story begins with the initiative that came from the Catholic Bishops of Australia and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes.

- For whatever reasons this initiative was made, it spoke of the realization that something was needed. And the last five years also suggests quite strongly that this initiative from the leadership of the Australian Church was matched by the desire of spiritual directors and those involved in formation programs. We have been heartened — those of us who have been working over these years towards this day — by the response of the community of spiritual directors in Australia. So the word "Australia" in the long title of this Council was relatively straight forward. This was to be a Council by Australians and for Australians.

- It was relatively straight forward too to include the word "Ecumenical". The sharing of a common vocation and charism brought us and brings us together — and our experience in this ministry of spiritual direction is of openness, acceptance and sharing of what unites. What the Second Vatican Council said:

Let there be unity in what is necessary,

freedom in what is unsettled,

and charity in any case.

has most certainly been our experience. And the Council wants to co-operate with that spirit of ecumenism and to foster it.

This is not about saying or doing something we cannot truly own. This is not papering over obvious differences. Many of us longed to share in the Eucharist at this Gathering. But we are not doing so – and it hurts us. Ecumenism is about speaking the truth in love and genuinely experiencing that communion – which is an event of the Spirit – which occurs when we hear or make room for “the Other”.

In our desire to see this Council come to birth we took the view that the Council was to focus on Christian spiritual direction – but there can be little doubt that a deeper ecumenism is calling us too. Is not this one of the theological frontiers of our time? And given the diversity of cultures in Australian society, as well as the divisions which threaten our world, there is an imperative for us to make space for the other and to hear the Spirit speak to us through difference.

- It was a given too – that the Council was to be about spiritual direction – the ministry and charism of spiritual direction, an ordinary yet special ministry and vocation within the life of the Church. The term is unashamedly the traditional term. It is a history we wish to celebrate. But we also want it to be an inclusive term, encompassing a diversity of models. Some of us will prefer the term spiritual companionship or another term; but all of us will have images of this ministry which derive directly out of our experience and which extend, challenge and enrich our whole understanding and practice of what the tradition simply calls spiritual direction. But it is about more than a ministry: it is about persons, and this Council is committed to the people who are engaged in this work. It is committed to the lived and practical response of ordinary people like you and me, so that as much as possible we dispose ourselves to the transfiguring work of the Spirit.

- This is a Council that wants to serve and encourage the spiritual direction community of Australia. We did not want to be an association - drawing spiritual directors into membership, but rather we wanted to encourage you to belong to one or other of the growing number of networks, associations and alumni groups of formation programs, both in Australia and overseas. We want to create a culture of conversation, of listening to each other and providing opportunities for dialogue among formation programs and associations and individual spiritual directors. We want to set standards for formation programs, promote ethical guidelines as well as encouraging the ongoing personal, spiritual and professional development of spiritual directors.

- This is a Council that seeks to call each of us who have responded to God’s call into this ministry to live out of the prophetic dimension inherent in this calling, and to engage with and work and live in ways that are just, reconciling and healing for all people and the whole of creation.

Philip Carter