



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

PLENARY MEETING

May 6-13, 2021

Due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and difficulties with travel, gathering and quarantine, the Catholic bishops of Australia conducted their biannual plenary meeting using videoconferencing technology.

The nine Commissions of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference held meetings on the first day of the gathering, followed by the plenary meeting over the six subsequent days – except Sunday, May 9. Bishops in some provinces gathered in “hubs”; other bishops participated from their home dioceses.

Opening Mass

The Mass of the Holy Spirit was celebrated by bishops in their own locations on May 7. Conference president Archbishop Mark Coleridge provided a written homily.

Welcome

Archbishop Coleridge welcomed his fellow bishops and the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana. Archbishop Yllana greeted the bishops, also providing recorded and written versions of his address.

Archbishop Coleridge also welcomed the observers from Catholic Religious Australia: president Br Peter Carroll FMS, vice-president Sr Patty Fawkner SGS and Fr Tom McDonough CP.

Deaths of Former Members of the Conference

The bishops offered prayers for bishops who have died since the previous plenary meeting: Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Former Auxiliary of Sydney; Archbishop Philip Wilson, Archbishop Emeritus of Adelaide; Bishop Luc Matthys, Bishop Emeritus of Armidale; Bishop Bede Heather, Bishop Emeritus of Parramatta.

They also marked the death of Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy AC, Cardinal Priest of Santa Maria in Via Lata, President Emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity – an Australian bishop who served the Church internationally, so was not ever a member of the Bishops Conference.

Message from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to the Holy Father

The bishops sent a message to Pope Francis, as is customary. The message spoke of the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the world, albeit with greater consequences in some other parts of the world.

The message highlighted a number of reasons for the Church in Australia to be thankful, including milestones on the journey towards the Fifth Plenary Council and the commemoration of 200 years of Catholic schooling in Australia.

The bishops also outlined progress in safeguarding and professional standards, with the establishment of Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd and the introduction of the new

National Response Protocol, which offers a framework for Catholic entities to respond consistently to people raising concerns or allegations of sexual abuse.

Elections and memberships

Permanent Committee: Archbishop Peter A Comensoli and Bishop Anthony Randazzo were re-elected to two-year terms on the Permanent Committee. Continuing members are Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, Archbishop Patrick O'Regan, Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay and Bishop Robert McGuckin. The president and vice-president of the Conference – currently Archbishop Coleridge and Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP respectively – also serve on the Permanent Committee.

Plenary Council: Bishop Shane Mackinlay was elected vice-president of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia.

Commissions and advisory bodies: In view of the pandemic, the Conference agreed to extend the current terms of bishops commissions and episcopal panels by 12 months to May 2022, with a similar 12-month extension applied to advisory councils and reference groups until November 2022.

Special sessions

The Seal of Confession

The bishops considered the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, with particular reference to the seal of confession in light of legislative changes in most states and territories. They noted the importance providing support to confessors that takes account of the canonical, liturgical, sacramental and pastoral aspects of the Sacrament, as well as the relevant civil legislation.

The bishops acknowledged the need for a fresh catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance, and for a re-evaluation of the spatial setting in which the Sacrament is celebrated.

Response to The Light from the Southern Cross

The bishops resumed discussion of their response to the governance review report *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*. The bishops published their initial response soon after the November 2020 plenary meeting. While many of the recommendations in the report relate to dioceses and parishes, the bishops reviewed progress on recommendations that relate to the Bishops Conference, including around formation in the areas of leadership and governance. Some of the recommendations have already been fulfilled, while others are in progress. The bishops again noted that some recommendations extend beyond the Church in Australia and are therefore matters for the Holy See.

Clergy permanently removed from ministry

The bishops discussed how a priest permanently removed from ministry could – or should – be supported if there are no other means by which he would have access to finances, accommodation, health cover, counselling and other resources. Current approaches differ, but can include encouragement for such men to take personal responsibility to the extent possible. There are also important considerations about the need for a bishop or diocese to exercise oversight and/or supervision of a priest permanently removed from ministry.

It was noted that important consideration must be given to how the death of a priest permanently removed from ministry is treated, including in the nature of his funeral and place of burial.

Pastoral discussions

Catholic Education

National Catholic Education Commission chair Mr Nicholas Moore and executive director Jacinta Collins facilitated a discussion on Catholic schools, which are this year celebrating 200 years of service in Australia. Mr Moore and Ms Collins offered insights into school funding, enrolment and achievement trends, meeting demand for school places in growth areas and enlivening religious education and faith formation for students, families and staff. It was noted that Catholic education was a prominent theme within the preparation phase for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, and many important matters relating to Catholic education are expected to be discussed at the Council's assemblies.

Pastoral care of bishops

The bishops had previously considered the question of providing pastoral support to bishops who were facing difficulties. The discussion was broadened to better encompass the life and ministry of bishops, including how to assist with the preparation of new bishops for their ministry, Conference retreats, fraternity among the bishops and pastoral and professional supervision opportunities for bishops. The Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry will continue to consider how the pastoral care of bishops can be provided in a meaningful way and bring a proposal to a future plenary meeting.

The Fifth Plenary Council of Australia

The bishops considered a number of matters relating to the Plenary Council – most significantly the preparations for the first Assembly in October 2021. The bishops reviewed and approved the agenda for the Plenary Council, which emerged from the various preparatory phases.

The bishops also reviewed and approved a number of key groups who will participate in and assist with the Council assemblies, including the list of members, advisers (*periti*), observers, chairpersons (and alternates), a drafting committee and a canonical committee.

The agenda is expected to be published in early June. The lists of advisers, observers, chairpersons and the membership of the drafting and canonical committees will be published on the Plenary Council website in due course.

The bishops received an update on planning for the multi-modal approach to the Council's first Assembly, including on risk assessment given the necessary arrangements to deliver a COVID-safe event. They also approved the convocation of the Plenary Council on Pentecost Sunday – a requirement as part of the journey towards the Council.

The bishops confirmed an earlier proposal to gather as a group for a retreat after the conclusion of the Council's second Assembly in July 2022, with plans finalised for that to happen.

Bishops Conference priorities

The bishops discussed the proposed priorities of the Conference identified through a three-stage discernment process during February 2021 facilitated by Br Ian Cribb SJ. The priorities will help refine the work of the Conference, including its commissions, over the coming years.

The three priorities identified were: Formation; Becoming More Missionary; and Fostering Collegiality. An overview has been prepared on the three priorities. [Click here to read more about the Bishops Conference's priorities.](#)

It was noted that the Conference's priorities are limited to the work and mission of the Bishops Conference. It was suggested that the Conference use an established process for assessing the implementation of the priorities in the coming years.

Bishops Conference annual report

The bishops approved the draft of the inaugural annual report of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, which highlights the work of the general secretariat, bishops commissions and various agencies and offices of the Conference. The annual report is expected to be published in June.

Bishops Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-religious Dialogue

The Commission's report explored a range of issues, including dialogue between the Catholic Church and Pentecostal churches, as well as looking ahead to a discussion on the Catholic Church's engagement with the National Council of Churches Australia. It was noted that many religious leaders have been working closely during the pandemic, including in advocating for fair treatment of places of worship when restrictions are imposed on public gatherings when there is community transmission.

The Commission chairman, Bishop McKenna, proposed during the plenary meeting that the Conference expressed its concern about reports of the desecration of Armenian Christian and cultural sites in Azerbaijan. The bishops supported that expression of concern and support, saying the increasing number of attacks on religious buildings and sites "deserve the strongest censure of the international community".

Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry

Fr Khalid Marogi, who commended as director of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office in early May, joined the bishops for an introduction and brief discussion. Fr Marogi also takes on responsibility for liaison with key leaders in clergy life and ministry, priestly and diaconal ministry, and vocations, supporting national collaboration in those areas.

The National Centre for Evangelisation's work to engage with a number of key Catholic groups, including young people, women, men and lay pastoral ministers, was noted. Online and hybrid events have been held and will be held during 2021 to support and enhance that engagement.

Ministries of lector, acolyte and catechist

The Bishops Commission for Liturgy and the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry are working together to consider the implementation of Pope Francis' apostolic letter on the ministries of lector and acolyte. Work will continue on the formation of people for those ministries, as well as relevant rites for the conferral of ministry.

The bishops noted that information about the new ministry of catechist was released during the plenary meeting, prompting a short discussion about how it could support current and emerging ministries. Some bishops spoke of formalised processes for the training of pastoral leaders, who might fit the role as outlined by Pope Francis, that are already in place.

National Indigenous Voice

The Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders noted that it, along with the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service, had supported the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council's submission on the National Voice to Parliament for Indigenous Australians.

[Click here for more on the submission from the two commissions.](#)

Social Justice Statement

The bishops reviewed and approved the Conference's 2021-22 Social Justice Statement entitled *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. The statement will be released in August.

They also considered recommendations for the topic for the 2022-23 Social Justice Statement, with *Respect: Confronting Violence and Abuse* chosen from the three proposals.

Vos Estis Lux Mundi

The bishops were advised about anticipated revisions of the procedures issued a year ago for the implementation of *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* (VELM) in Australia, which outlines processes for the handling of complaints of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. The need for revisions has arisen due to Vatican guidelines, the approval of the National Response Protocol and the transition from Catholic Professional Standards Limited to the recently established Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited, with its responsibilities concerning *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*.

Australian Catholic Cursillo Movement

The bishops agreed to the request of the Australian Catholic Cursillo Movement that it be recognised as a private association of Christ's faithful. It was observed that, with this status, the groups would be required to commit to the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards, which will be reiterated in light of the Conference's decision.