



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## PLENARY MEETING

November 8-12, 2021

Due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on travel and gatherings, 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 four subsequent days. Bishops in some provinces gathered in “hubs”; other bishops participated from their home dioceses.

### **Opening Mass**

The Mass of the Holy Spirit was celebrated on Tuesday, November 9. The President of Conference, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, provided the homily.

### **Welcome**

Archbishop Coleridge welcomed his fellow bishops and welcomed Msgr John Baptist Itaruma and Msgr Giuseppe Quirighetti from the Apostolic Nunciature.

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

### **Appointments and Resignations of Bishops since the last plenary meeting**

Two bishops had been appointed since the previous plenary meeting: Bishops Martin Ashe and Anthony Ireland, who were appointed Auxiliary Bishops of Melbourne. Bishop Mykola Bychok, who had been appointed Bishop of Saints Peter and Paul of Melbourne (Ukrainian) in January 2020 but whose arrival in Australia had been significantly delayed, was also attending his first meeting.

The resignations of three bishops had been accepted since the May 2021 plenary meeting: Bishop Emeritus Max Davis, Military Ordinariate of Australia; Bishop Emeritus Peter Stasiuk CSsR, Saints Peter and Paul of Melbourne (Ukrainian); Bishop Emeritus Christopher Saunders, Diocese of Broome.

### **Message from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to the Holy Father**

The bishops sent a customary message to Pope Francis. The message reflected at length on the first general assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, held in October 2021. The period leading to the second assembly, scheduled for July 2022, was described as a time of “prayer, listening, dialogue and discernment”. The letter also noted the complementary nature of the Plenary Council and the lead-up to the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which has seen local consultations commence in dioceses across the world.

The message included insights into the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, including its impact on public worship, as well as a description of the 2021-22 Social Justice Statement, *Cry of*

*the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, and how it builds on the foundation of Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato si'*.

### **Elections and memberships**

XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: Archbishop Patrick O'Regan and Bishop Shane Mackinlay were elected as Australia's two delegates to the assembly, which will be held in Rome in October 2023. Archbishop Anthony Fisher was elected as the substitute delegate.

Bishops Commission for Professional Standards and Safeguarding: Bishop Greg Bennet was elected chair of the Commission, to complete the term of Bishop Bill Wright, who passed away shortly after the plenary meeting.

### **Appointments to Bishops Commissions**

- Bishop Mykola Bychok was appointed to the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry.
- Bishop Martin Ashe was appointed to the Episcopal Panel for Canon Law.
- Bishop Anthony Ireland was appointed to the Bishops Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-religious Dialogue.
- Bishop Michael Morrissey was appointed to the Bishops Commission for Professional Standards and Safeguarding.

### **Special sessions**

#### *Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited*

The bishops welcomed representatives from Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited, who provided updates on the National Response Protocol, which the Bishops Conference approved at its November 2020 plenary meeting. There was also a progress report on the Second Edition of the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards, which will include safeguarding measures for adults at risk, as well as children.

#### *Response to The Light from the Southern Cross*

The bishops, for a third successive meeting, discussed 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. It was noted that many recommendations that relate to the Bishops Conference have already been completed, with others expected to be finalised by the end of 2021. The president encouraged those with responsibility for some of the recommendations, including bishops commissions, to ensure that work continues.

### **Pastoral discussions**

#### *Fifth Plenary Council of Australia*

Across each of the four days of the plenary meeting, the bishops devoted time to discussing the first general assembly of the Plenary Council and the ongoing journey toward the second assembly in July 2022 – and beyond. Several bishops spoke favourably about the first assembly, despite the challenges of participating online, with many members isolated in their own homes. The stable technology and excellent technical support were appreciated.

Many bishops spoke of the small group sessions on each day of the first assembly as the “highlight” of the week, with respect, openness and attentiveness to other people observed.

Some bishops spoke of the ongoing need to see the Plenary Council as a journey across several years, and the importance of documents like the *instrumentum laboris* in helping shape the path of discernment.

The development of the propositions following the first assembly was seen to be critical in the months leading to the second assembly. It was also seen that the second assembly would be different in character from the first, given the need to move towards decision-making and also the overwhelming consensus that the second assembly must be held in person.

#### *Synod of Bishops – Local, National and Continental*

Dr Trudy Dantis and Mr Stephen Reid from the National Centre for Pastoral Research, together with Dr Sandie Cornish of the Office for Justice, Ecology and Peace, gave a presentation to the bishops on local, national and regional aspects leading to the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

Dr Dantis, who leads the Australian national committee for the Synod of Bishops, explained how changes in the timeline for local consultation could be revised in light of the Holy See’s extension of the time for dioceses to submit the fruits of their consultation. The bishops accepted the revised timeline as a sensible approach.

Dr Dantis outlined a series of initiatives to support local engagement, including resources for reflection, and Mr Reid gave an overview of the online portal.

Dr Cornish presented an overview of the proposal of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania for the “continental” phase of the Synod of Bishops process, which in view of the timeline for the Synod of Bishops process has now been associated with the next Assembly of the Federation, to take place early in 2023.

#### *Antiquum Ministerium*

The bishops discussed Pope Francis’ apostolic letter *Antiquum Ministerium*, on the ministry of catechists. It was noted that the term “catechist” is used in various contexts in Australia, including for those who provide Christian formation in government schools. The establishment of the Ministry of Catechist by Pope Francis is seen as confirmation of the need to prepare suitable lay persons for catechetical ministry. It was emphasised that the training of catechists needs to be careful not to develop a “graduation mentality” but to recognise that formation for ministry is necessarily ongoing.

#### *Traditionis Custodes*

The bishops discussed Pope Francis’ apostolic letter *Traditionis Custodes*, which revisited the initiatives of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Saint John Paul II in making provision for the continuing celebration of the Roman Rite according to the Missal of Pope Pius V (1962 Edition). The discussion outlined the reasons for Pope Francis’ letter, the historical evolution of liturgical rites, the different liturgical calendars and lectionaries, the reverent celebration of the Mass and the local Australian context – which is considered quite different from that in other countries, including in the composition of Catholics who prefer the Missal of Pius V.

## **Uluru Statement from the Heart**

The Bishops Conference had previously expressed its support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart, but was keen to receive advice from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) on the document. NATSICC recently endorsed the Statement from the Heart, and the Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People recommended the Bishops Conference follow suit publicly.

In addition to NATSICC's endorsement, a number of members of the Plenary Council, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, had expressed their desire for the Bishops Conference to endorse the statement.

## ***Created and Loved: A National Policy Framework for Catholic Schools on Gender***

The Conference approved a new document, *Created and Loved: A National Policy Framework for Catholic Schools on Gender*. The document has been several years in preparation and constitutes a deep concern for young people, their teachers, school principals and others in responding to instances of gender incongruence. There has been broad consultation during the preparation of the document, including focused input from educators. The resource builds upon Christian anthropology and offers a well-researched and informed response to current gender issues.

## **Euthanasia and pastoral care**

With the passing of voluntary assisted dying legislation in Queensland in September, the only state without legislation permitting euthanasia is New South Wales, with legislation there soon to be introduced to Parliament. The push for legalising euthanasia in the two territories is expected to gain traction. It was observed that with the passing of voluntary assisted dying legislation in most Australian states, the issue has shifted to how the Church can best engage with society about concerns regarding life and death once euthanasia becomes lawful.

It was noted that the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference has recently published pastoral guidelines for ministry in the context of voluntary assisted dying. It was considered beneficial for the Conference to develop pastoral guidelines for dealing with voluntary assisted dying in Australia.

## **World Youth Day Project**

The bishops approved the establishment of a World Youth Day 2023 Project, facilitated by the National Centre for Evangelisation. It will support national collaboration, but dioceses will be responsible for organising pilgrimages. The World Youth Day 2023 Project will coordinate key tasks, including liaison with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the creation of resources for pilgrims. A network of World Youth Day coordinators will also support Australians' preparation for the event, scheduled for mid-2023 in Lisbon, Portugal.

## **Council for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry**

The Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry recently appointed the inaugural members of the Council for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry. Expressions of interest were publicly invited and applicants vetted, interviewed and appointed. A skills matrix was used as the primary point of reference for reviewing the expressions of interest received, along with a secondary assessment of cultural and ethnic background, location, gender and age. The process helped identify suitable appointees who might not otherwise have been considered for an advisory role.

## **Children of priests**

The bishops continued their deliberations on responding to the issue of priests who father children. They considered the draft document *Pastoral Guidelines and Principles Regarding Priests who have Fathered Children*, which was prepared in light of advice received from the Congregation for the Clergy, as well as the *Principles of Responsibility Regarding Priests who father Children while in Ministry* of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. The bishops agreed to study the draft pastoral guidelines and provide feedback to assist the further development of the draft.

## **Code of Conduct**

The Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia in 2018 accepted a recommendation of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse for codes of conduct to apply equally to both ordained, vowed and lay ministers. *Integrity in Ministry*, for clergy and religious, and *Integrity in the Service of the Church*, for lay Church workers, therefore need to be reconceived as one code of conduct. Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited has been asked to oversee this initiative, and work has begun.

## **Half-way review of Bishops Conference**

A statutory external review of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is conducted every 10 years, with the last such review taking place in 2016. At the half-way point between those reviews, an internal review takes place. This year's review was chaired by Bishop Michael McCarthy and supported by senior staff at the General Secretariat.

Among other motions carried were the approval of work to clarify the relationship and responsibility of executive secretaries, agency heads and bishops delegate in relation to the work of commissions, and the establishment of a review to determine the desired future scope of the Conference's remit relating to improving the Church's public image and increasing the Church's media presence. A number of minor changes were made in naming conventions within the Conference, and a number of mandates for Council and Commission were approved and adopted.

## **Appointments to the National Catholic Education Commission**

The Conference confirmed two appointments to the National Catholic Education Commission, as endorsed by the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education: Ms Kate Rayment as Commissioner and Chair of the NCEC Faith Formation and Religious Education Standing Committee; and Professor Francis Campbell as Commissioner.

## **National Council of Churches Australia**

The Commission noted that Anglican Bishop Philip Huggins has completed his term as president of the National Council of Churches Australia, a key ecumenical group. The Reverend John Gilmore, from the Churches of Christ in Australia, has been appointed as National Council of Churches president.

## **Preface for the Solemnity of St Mary of the Cross**

The Bishops Commission for Liturgy, in response to a request, developed a Preface for use in Masses on the Solemnity of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. Other prayers have already been approved for Masses on that day; the Preface is an addition to those prayers. The Conference approved the text, which will next be sent to the Holy See.

### **Marriage Catechumenate**

The Marriage Catechumenate Formation Program, proposed in Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, has been under development. It is hoped that it will be launched during 2022, possibly to coincide with the World Meeting of Families in June.

### **Day of Prayer for Myanmar**

On the advice of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service, the Conference encouraged all Catholics to participate in a Day of Prayer for Peace in Myanmar on Sunday, November 28 – the First Sunday of Advent. The day has been organised by Pax Christi International and other faith groups, working alongside Burmese people in Australia.