



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## PLENARY MEETING

4-11 May 2017

On Thursday 4 May, the Catholic bishops of Australia gathered for their biannual Plenary Meeting at Mary MacKillop Place, North Sydney. The fourteen Commissions of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference met on the first day of the gathering followed by the Plenary Meeting for the subsequent seven days.

Archbishop Denis Hart, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), opened the plenary meeting welcoming the bishops and the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana.

The Nuncio concelebrated the opening Mass and addressed the bishops at the meeting. He spoke about priestly vocations and formation, the fidelity of bishops in giving witness to the faith of the Catholic Church, the collegiality of the bishops with the Holy Father and one another, and the continuing response of the bishops of Australia to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The President also welcomed the new Secretary to the Apostolic Nunciature, Father Sebastiano Sanna.

Archbishop Hart welcomed the observers from Catholic Religious Australia: Sr Ruth Durick OSU, Sr Monica Cavanagh RSJ and Fr Tom McDonagh CP.

### **Episcopal Appointments since last Plenary**

Bishop Gregory Homeming OCD, Bishop of Lismore, appointed 20 December 2016

Bishop Timothy Harris, Bishop of Townsville, appointed 8 February 2017

Fr Kenneth Howell, Auxiliary Bishop Elect of Brisbane, appointed 28 March 2017

### **Resignation of Bishops since last Plenary**

Bishop Geoffrey Jarrett of Lismore, resignation 20 December 2016

Bishop Joseph Oudeman OFM Cap, Auxiliary Bishop Elect of Brisbane, resignation 28 March 2017

### **Message to the Holy Father**

A letter was sent to Pope Francis from the Bishops informing him about events in the Church including, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, reflections on the apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, the petition for a Plenary Council and preparations for the Year of Youth and the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment in 2018.

### **Message to Permanent Deacons**

Marking the launch of the [\*Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Guidelines for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons\*](#), the Bishops sent greetings to the Permanent Deacons who serve throughout the country. The Congregation for the Clergy approved the guidelines last year. The launch took place in the presence of Rev Tony Aspinell, National Coordinator of the Permanent Diaconate, on Monday, 8 May following Mass with the bishops. Other permanent deacons represented the deacons ministering throughout Australia.



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## **Message to retired bishops**

The bishops sent greetings to the retired bishops. On Wednesday, 10 May, Bishop Tim Harris celebrated Mass with the current and retired bishops for all of the deceased bishops.

## **Elections**

Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP and Bishop Mark Edwards were elected to represent the Conference at the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be held in 2018. Bishop Peter Comensoli was nominated as substitute, if required.

Archbishop Christopher Prowse, Archbishop Fisher and Bishop Hurley were re-elected to the Permanent Committee.

The bishops approved the following changes to Commission membership:

- Archbishop Fisher withdrew from the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education;
- Bishop McKenna withdrew from the Bishops Commission for Canon Law;
- Bishop Ingham withdrew from the Bishops Commission for Church Ministry;
- Bishop McCarthy was elected to serve as Chairman of the Bishops Commission for Church Ministry until the completion of the current three-year term in May 2018;
- Bishop Homeming OCD was appointed to the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education;
- Bishop Harris was appointed to the Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples;
- Bishop-Elect Howell was appointed to the Bishops Commission for Health and Community Services.

## **Meeting with Religious Leaders**

The bishops met with leaders of religious congregations on Saturday, 6 May, to reflect together on the engagement of the Catholic Church with the Royal Commission. They welcomed The Hon. Neville Owen (Chair, Truth, Justice and Healing Council), Mr Francis Sullivan (CEO, Truth, Justice and Healing Council) and Sr Maree Marsh CSB (Member, Truth, Justice and Healing Council) who, together with Bishop Homeming, offered reflections from personal, psychological and spiritual perspectives.

The meeting highlighted the need for compassion in responding to the tragedy of child sexual abuse, first to survivors and their families and also within the Catholic community. Key themes identified in the Church's engagement with the Royal Commission were reflected upon, including transparency, governance, initial and ongoing formation, and professional supervision. The Paschal Mystery was set forth as the paradigm for responding to the effects of child sexual abuse, both personally and within the Church community.

## **Visit of Cardinal Sandri**

On Wednesday, 10 May, His Eminence Leonardo Cardinal Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, visited the Plenary Meeting. He addressed the bishops, responded to their questions, joined them for lunch and met privately with some of them. In his address, Cardinal Sandri spoke about the situation of the Church in the Middle East and about the Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia. The text of the Cardinal's speech is available to read and download from the [Conference website](#).



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## **Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse**

The bishops discussed the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, in particular the Catholic Church Final Hearing of the Royal Commission. They considered the Church's response to those who have suffered because of child sexual abuse. They agreed to produce a single record detailing the policies, norms, guidelines and practices that have been established since the 1990s to promote and regulate professional standards, safeguarding of children and vulnerable people, and responding to complaints of abuse. The bishops addressed matters concerning the Sacrament of Penance, the continuing work of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, and public liturgies of sorrow, lament and healing.

The bishops considered the 'Day of Prayer and Penance' proposed by the Holy Father Pope Francis and progressed by the Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin in his letter to the Bishops Conferences in June 2016. The bishops agreed that the day will be marked on Child Protection Sunday, held on the second Sunday of September each year.

## **Pastoral discussion on Homelessness**

The bishops welcomed Mr Tim Gourlay (Executive Director CatholicCare, Tasmania), Ms Cathy Humphrey (CEO Sacred Heart Mission, Melbourne), Mr Brett Macklin (Operations Manager Men's Services, Matthew Talbot Men's Homeless Shelter, Sydney) and Fr Frank Brennan SJ (CEO, Catholic Social Services Australia), who together made a presentation about aspects of homelessness in Australian society today. The presentation showed that homelessness continues to be a necessary focus of the Church's mission.

The presentation followed a discussion paper, 'Homelessness has a human face', submitted by the Bishops Commission for Health and Community Services and the Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life. It highlighted the already extensive involvement of the Church in responding to homelessness and identified areas of continuing and growing need.

Seven areas of concern and opportunity were proposed to the bishops for their further consideration. Bishops were invited to contribute to the development of an Australian Social Justice Occasional Paper on Homelessness in the coming months. The bishops also approved that homelessness would be the topic of the Social Justice Statement in 2018.

## **Providing Priests**

The bishops welcomed to the Plenary Meeting Fr Greg Bourke, Director, National Office for Clergy Life and Ministry, Melbourne and Fr Maurizio Pettena CS, Director, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office, Canberra in a consultative capacity. The discussion considered vocational discernment and seminary formation, seminarians from other countries who come to be formed in Australia, priests from other countries who come to minister in Australia, and married priests.

Areas of concern included the centrality of the Eucharist to the life of the Church, the benefits of comprehensive induction programmes for priests coming to Australia on mission, diverse cultural influences which shape ecclesiology and approaches to ministry, personal challenges to priestly fidelity and integrity, and providing appropriate accompaniment and adequate support to clergy.

The changing ethnic demography of the Church in Australia was highlighted in discussion about pastoral needs and potential sources of vocations to the priesthood. There was also discussion



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

about the importance of fostering unity and participation of newly ordained priests and priests from overseas within each diocese.

## **Amoris Laetitia**

Archbishop Mark Coleridge and Bishop Eugene Hurley began a discussion about Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* with a reflection on the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops from which it developed. The bishops noted the Exhortation's character as an essentially pastoral document, the tensions concerning its interpretation that have arisen among some members of the Church, and the richness and depth of its teaching.

The discussion of *Amoris Laetitia* focussed on marriage and the family, exploring the varied circumstances of marriages and family life through the themes of accompaniment, listening, discernment, truth, conscience and mercy. The bishops observed the Holy Father's emphasis on engaging with the reality of people's lives, not with some ideal of marriage and family life and of accompanying people through the difficulties and challenges they may experience, in this way bringing them to Christ and Christ to them.

The bishops explored their concerns for Catholics whose marital circumstances pose moral and canonical difficulties, noting the responses already determined by other episcopal conferences. They discussed the contemporary status of marriage and the crisis of marriage and family that is rapidly emerging in Australia. The bishops encouraged the wider promotion of, and reflection upon, *Amoris Laetitia* and identified initiatives that can be used. In consideration of a range of options informed by *Amoris Laetitia*, the bishops resolved to focus their efforts on providing a substantial and thorough process of pre-nuptial formation and accompaniment of married couples.

## **Mass for You at Home**

The arrangements for broadcasting 'Mass for You at Home' have changed in recent months with Channel Ten no longer broadcasting 'Mass for You at Home'. Due to a reconfiguring of regional television broadcasters, it has become necessary to enter into new contracts with WIN News requiring the payment of additional fees. During the current contracted period, the Bishops Commission for Administration and Information will undertake an investigation into the most effective approaches for delivering 'Mass for You at Home' in regional areas.

## **Canonical Matters**

### **Clerics accused of an offence**

The canonical rights of clergy accused of an offence were discussed, in particular the necessity of observing canonical processes when dealing with clergy against whom allegations have been made. The status of procedures outlined in 'Towards Healing', which are linked to certain canons, were raised. The Bishops Commission for Canon Law undertook to provide to the bishops resources to assist them with clergy accused on an offence.

### **Pre-Marriage Inquiry Form**

The Commission for Canon Law has been requested to prepare a new Pre-Marriage Inquiry Form that accurately reflects the questions asked of persons marrying according to the Rite of Matrimony introduced in 2015. A draft of the revised Pre-Marriage Inquiry Form will be circulated to the bishops for comment. Once finalised, it will be published on the Conference website for electronic download.



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## **General Reporting**

### **Appointment of Executive Director, National Catholic Education Commission**

The Conference confirmed the appointment of Mr Christian Zahra as Executive Director of the National Catholic Education Commission.

### **Review of the Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission**

In light of the statutory review of the ACNC in late 2017, the Conference approved of a whole of Church response to the review in collaboration with the various ministries of the Church affected by the ACNC legislation and regulations including education, health and aged care.

### **National Conference of Diocesan Vocations Directors – Australia**

The Conference endorsed the establishment of the National Conference of Diocesan Vocations Directors – Australia (NCDVD-Australia), an outcome of the second national meeting of diocesan vocations directors in November 2016.

### **Marking the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation**

The Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations reported to the Conference on ways in which the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation will be marked. A joint Lutheran-Catholic statement is being prepared and will be launched at St Francis Xavier's Cathedral, Adelaide on 1 November 2017. The Conference noted that other dioceses and bishops would be participating in similar liturgical commemorations around that time.

### **Death of Professor Tony Vinson AM**

The Conference acknowledged the passing of Professor Tony Vinson AM on 17 February 2017 and noted its appreciation of his life-long contribution to the poor and marginalised. In particular, the Conference recorded its thanks for the pioneering work Professor Vinson performed with Catholic Social Services Australia and other Catholic service agencies in publishing the 'Dropping off the Edge' reports in 2007 and 2015.

### **Annual Social Justice Statement Adopted**

The Conference adopted as the annual Social Justice Statement for 2017-18 the draft document, 'Everyone's Business: Developing an inclusive and sustainable economy'.

### **Parish Revitalisation Project**

At the Plenary Meeting of the Conference held in May 2015, the Conference determined that the Parish Renewal Project should become the responsibility of the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation. With the establishment of the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council, and in view of the significant role the Plenary Council is expected to have in the development and revitalisation of parish life and mission, the Conference approved the relocation of the Parish Revitalisation Project from the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation to the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council. Both Commissions are currently chaired by Archbishop Mark Coleridge.

### **Prisoners Sunday**

Inspired by the significant effect of the Jubilee for Prisoners held as part of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016, the Commission for Pastoral Life proposed that 'Prisoners' Sunday' be marked throughout Australian dioceses on 12 November 2017 in a similar manner to the national initiative undertaken during the Year of Mercy in 2016.



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## **NATSICC Retreat**

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council's recent leadership formation retreat, held at Stradbroke Island, Queensland, was attended by Bishop Oudemans and Bishop Macbeth-Green.

Bishop Macbeth-Green reported that the faith of the people was inspiring and their love for God and the Church was tangible. They expressed their desire to be involved in the life of the Church and, in particular, to make their unique contribution to the forthcoming Plenary Council in Australia.

## **Australian Catholic Youth Council Ten Year Anniversary**

In view of the ten year anniversary of the Australian Catholic Youth Council, and recalling the early significant contribution of Bishop Joseph Grech (dec), the Conference approved of the Commission for Family, Youth and Life request: That the Conference acknowledge with gratitude the work of the Australian Catholic Youth Council and its members past and present, for ten years of dedicated service 2007 – 2017 to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and young Catholics throughout Australia.

## **Month of Prayer and Fasting for Marriage and Family**

In partnership with other Christian Churches, the Australian Catholic Marriage and Family Council received approval to repeat the Month of Prayer and Fasting initiative in October 2017, based on the successful approach taken in 2016.

## **World Meeting of Families**

Following from the invitation received from Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, the Commission for Family, Youth and Life briefed the Conference on the World Meeting of Families that is to be held in Dublin, 22-26 August 2018.

Dioceses were encouraged to fund a local family to participate in the Australian World Meeting of Families pilgrimage where possible. The Conference agreed to support a family to go to the World Meeting of Families, as has occurred previously.

## **Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment**

The Commission for Family, Youth and Life advised the Conference that a youth survey has been designed as part of the consultation process to engage young people in preparation for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be held in 2018. The survey will be made available online for four weeks to allow adequate time to gather the responses and provide these to the Office of the Synod of Bishops by October, as requested by the Office.

## **Plenary Council Executive Committee**

The Commission for the Plenary Council drew the attention of the Conference to the normative practice of naming an advisory body a council. To avoid having an advisory council for a plenary council, and having reviewed the name already established by the Conference in November 2016, the Commission proposed a change of name to an Executive Committee.

The Conference noted that the Commission has received advice from the Holy See concerning the process for obtaining the consent of the Holy Father for a Plenary Council for Australia in 2020, and it is acting on this advice.





# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## **Consultation and discernment process regarding Plenary Council**

The Conference discussed submissions received from Catholics who are calling for renewal and reform in the Church. Some submissions relate to the Church's response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, while others concern key aspects of Church life and mission and are more likely to relate to the Plenary Council.

The Conference intends that the scope of consultation and discernment processes towards the Plenary Council will be inclusive of the whole Catholic community in its breadth and diversity. The Conference determined that the matters referred to in recent submissions might properly be referred to the Plenary Council.