



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## PLENARY MEETING

May 5-12, 2022

The bishops held their first face-to-face meeting in two-and-a-half years, and their first at Mary MacKillop Place, North Sydney, since November 2018.

The Permanent Committee and 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 8.

### **Opening Mass**

The Mass of the Holy Spirit was celebrated on Friday, May 6. The president of Conference, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, provided the homily.

### **Welcome**

Archbishop Coleridge welcomed Archbishop Charles Balvo, the new Apostolic Nuncio. Archbishop Balvo addressed the bishops and remained for the duration of the meeting.

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

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

Two bishops had been appointed since the previous plenary meeting: Sydney Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Meagher, appointed on November 18, 2021; and Brisbane Auxiliary Bishop Timothy Norton SVD, appointed on November 11, 2021.

Bishop Bill Wright, the former Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle, died on November 13, 2021 – the day after he spoke with the bishops during their online plenary meeting.

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

Archbishop Coleridge sent a message to Pope Francis on behalf of the bishops. The message had a focus on the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, the second (and final) assembly of which will be held in Sydney in July 2022. The letter noted how the Church in Australia sees the Plenary Council and the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops having significant complementarity.

The message included mention of the Australian Federal Election and the bishops' statement, *Towards a Better Kind of Politics* – a phrase taken from Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*.

### **Elections and memberships**

**President and Vice-President:** The Bishops Conference elects its president and vice-president every two years in May. The bishops elected Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB president of the Conference, with Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP re-elected vice-president. The bishops agreed that the handover of the presidency would take place on July 13, 2022, after the second assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia.

Permanent Committee: Archbishops Costelloe and Fisher serve on the Permanent Committee due to their roles as president and vice-president. The bishops elected four additional members to the Permanent Committee: Archbishop Patrick O'Regan and Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay OLM were re-elected; Bishop Timothy Harris and Bishop Shane Mackinlay were also elected. Archbishop Peter A Comensoli and Bishop Anthony Randazzo are continuing members of the Permanent Committee.

#### Bishops Commission Elections

Elections were held for the Conference's 11 episcopal commissions, its membership panel and drafting panel. Memberships for the three-year terms are as follows:

#### **Episcopal Panel for Canon Law**

Bishop Randazzo (Chair)  
Bishop McGuckin  
Bishop McKenna

#### **Bishops Commission for Catholic Education**

Archbishop Fisher (Chair)  
Bishop Edwards  
Bishop Ireland  
Bishop Meagher

#### **Bishops Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-Religious Dialogue**

Bishop McKenna (Chair)  
Archbishop Nona  
Bishop Homeming  
Bishop Rabbat

#### **Episcopal Panel for Doctrine and Morals**

Bishop Ireland (Chair)  
Archbishop Nona  
Bishop Mackinlay  
Bishop Umbers

#### **Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry**

Archbishop Prowse (Chair)  
Bishop Ashe  
Bishop Bychok  
Bishop Homeming  
Bishop Kulczycki  
Bishop Mascord  
Bishop Morrissey  
Bishop Sproxton

#### **Bishops Commission for Life, Family and Public Engagement**

Archbishop Comensoli (Chair)  
Bishop Harris  
Bishop Umbers  
Monsignor Reid

#### **Bishops Commission for Liturgy**

Archbishop O'Regan (Chair)  
Bishop Bird  
Bishop Howell

**Bishops Commission for Professional Standards and Safeguarding**

Bishop Bennet (Chair)  
Bishop McCarthy  
Bishop Morrissey

**Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples**

Bishop Gauci (Chair)  
Bishop Macbeth-Green  
Bishop Meagher  
Bishop Norton

**Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service**

Bishop Long (Chair)  
Archbishop Coleridge  
Archbishop Porteous  
Bishop Ashe  
Bishop Kennedy  
Bishop Norton

**Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council (to cease November 2022)**

Archbishop Costelloe (Chair)  
Bishop Edwards  
Bishop Kennedy  
Bishop Randazzo  
Bishop Tarabay

**Drafting Panel**

Archbishop Coleridge  
Archbishop Fisher  
Bishop Bennet  
Bishop Bird  
Bishop Homeming  
Bishop Mackinlay

**Membership Panel**

Bishop Howell  
Bishop Mascord  
Bishop McKenna

**Pastoral discussions**

*National Council of Churches Australia*

The bishops welcomed representatives from the National Council of Churches Australia, including its president Rev John Gilmore of the Churches of Christ. The history, mission, governance, leadership and membership of the National Council of Churches Australia was outlined, along with the “roadmap” that provides a framework for the churches to work together.

The importance of practical ecumenical engagement was highlighted, for example, through a shared ecumenical participation in ongoing initiatives like the Safe Church and Season of Creation programs of the Council.

#### *Pastoral care and ongoing formation of bishops*

The bishops continued their consideration of the pastoral care and ongoing formation of bishops. In a video presentation, Bishop Emeritus Eugene Hurley of Darwin spoke about brotherhood among bishops, the significant change from being a priest to being a bishop, the loneliness that can come with episcopal office and psychological insights which can shape bishops' responses to what is asked of them. Bishop Hurley highlighted the importance of connection with family and co-workers, of prayer and spiritual direction, of delegation of responsibility and being able to enjoy ministry. He encouraged bishops to care for and look out for each other, and especially to stay in contact.

The bishops' ensuing conversation included discussion of the centrality of God in a bishop's life and ministry, but also the challenges of the lack of specific formation and preparation for the episcopacy. They reflected that priests are expected to take time away from ministry for sabbatical and personal renewal, yet no such opportunity is expected of or provided for bishops, and that this warrants further consideration. They explored the contribution that bishops emeriti might make to the ongoing formation and pastoral care of bishops.

The Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry will further develop proposals about the ongoing formation and pastoral care of bishops, to be considered by the Conference.

#### *Ministry of Catechist in Australia*

Ms Clara Geoghegan, executive secretary of the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry, and Archbishop Porteus introduced the pastoral discussion of the ministry of Catechist as established by the Holy Father Pope Francis with the *motu proprio Antiquum Ministerium*. They highlighted that all vocations and all ministry spring from the Sacrament of Baptism and that all lay ministries are an exercise of baptismal priesthood. It was noted that the ministry of Catechist is often understood in terms of instruction and teaching, though it should not be reduced to these functions. It can also involve accompanying others in their spiritual journeys, offering leadership and coordination in Church communities, and forming and training the laity in missionary discipleship so that they are equipped to participate in the mission of the Church in the world.

Mention was made of catechetical initiatives already underway: The *Verbum Domini* Institute in Hobart Archdiocese; the catechetical ministry of the laity in the Syro-Malabar Church; and a program developed in the Diocese of Darwin to form young Indigenous peoples in the faith.

The Conference entrusted the preparation of advice or guidelines for the implementation of *Antiquum Ministerium* in the dioceses of Australia to the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry, noting that the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia and an evangelisation conference in October are forums for promoting and fostering the ministry of Catechist.

#### **Fifth Plenary Council of Australia**

The bishops received an update on progress towards the second and final assembly of the Plenary Council, to be held in Sydney in July. That included the description of the weeks leading up the assembly, an outline of the days of the assembly, including the liturgical

celebrations, and information on how the Council's statutes and regulatory norms will be enacted during the assembly.

There was also significant discussion about the draft framework for motions that the Members will consider during the second assembly. Commenting on the draft framework, the bishops noted the importance of recognising where the Holy Spirit is already present and active in the mission of the Church, of acknowledging the good that is already being done and of remaining focused on God and on what God is doing.

It was observed that many of the proposed motions are more concerned with the inner life and organisation of Church life than with the Church's mission in the world. As a consequence, attention has not been given to the changing face of the Church in Australia and to the context in which the Church in Australia undertakes its mission and seeks to evangelise.

The framework will be reviewed and finalised before publication in early June.

### **National Catholic Safeguarding Standards**

The Bishops Conference approved the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards in 2019. The bishops were invited to review Edition Two of the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards and, after some necessary amendments, approved the new document to replace the 2019 Standards.

The bishops also discussed the status of the Standards, particularly in light of the fact many Church ministries, including health and education services, are required to undertake safeguarding assessments as determined by statutory and regulatory authorities in states and territories. While recognising that reality, the Conference confirmed the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards as the sole formally approved safeguarding standards for use by the Catholic Church in Australia as part of the broader context of the Church's commitment to safeguarding for children and vulnerable people.

### **National Response Protocol and Framework**

The Bishops Conference adopted the National Response Protocol in November 2020, but it has not been adopted by Catholic Religious Australia or the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons. Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd last year proposed the separation of the National Response Protocol principles and its procedures, creating a National Response Framework that contains the principles.

The Conference recognised the new National Response Framework, which will now be offered for adoption by Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons – the other joint members of Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd.

### **The situation in Ukraine and its people**

Bishop Bychok addressed the bishops about the conflict in Ukraine, the tragic consequences for the people of Ukraine from the cruelty and violence they are suffering and the destruction resulting from Russian military aggression. He drew the attention of the bishops to the spiritual dimension of the conflict and the faith of the Ukrainian people. He expressed gratitude to all who are speaking out for peace in Ukraine and for its people, who are supporting those most affected by the conflict, including refugees who have come to Australia. Bishop Bychok asked that another expression of support be extended to the people of Ukraine through the Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. At the conclusion of Bishop Bychok's address, the bishops prayed the Conference's prayer for peace and justice in Ukraine.

### ***The Light from the Southern Cross* governance review report**

The bishops discussed the observations received from the Holy See on *The Light from the Southern Cross*. The observations refer to various recommendations related to ecclesiology, as well as matters pertinent to the universal Church and to the Code of Canon Law. They will help inform the Conference's ongoing implementation of and attention to the recommendations of the report, as set forth in its formal response to *The Light from the Southern Cross*.

### **Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania**

The next Assembly of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania is scheduled for Suva, Fiji in February 2023. The program will have a focus on the oceans. The Assembly will also give time to the first *instrumentum laboris* for the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, in order to prepare the continental report for Oceania to be submitted to the Secretariat of the Synod in preparation for the October 2023 Synod.

The presidency of the Federation will become an Australian responsibility after next year's gathering, along with hosting the next Assembly in 2026 or 2027. The bishops will discuss the question of the presidency at their meeting in November 2022.

### ***Ratio Nationalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis***

The Bishops Conference approved a "Grey Book" (draft) of *the Ratio Nationalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* for Australia in November 2020, after which it was submitted to the Congregation for the Clergy. The Congregation subsequently sent its observations, which guided the refinement of the new *Ratio Nationalis*. The Conference approved the Revised Version (2022) of the *Ratio Nationalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* for Australia, which will now be submitted to the Congregation for the Clergy for *confirmatio*.

### **Support for priests new to Australia**

The Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry is developing resources to assist and support the increasing number of priests who come from overseas to minister in Australia. It was noted that some of these priests struggle with the unfamiliar and sometimes isolated circumstances in which they are appointed to serve. The bishops agreed to hold a pastoral discussion on support for overseas priests during the plenary meeting to be held in November 2022.

### **Social Justice Statements**

The bishops approved the Social Justice Statement for 2022-23, "Respect: Confronting Violence and Abuse", which will be published ahead of Social Justice Sunday in late August.

The bishops also considered three proposed themes for the 2023-24 Social Justice Statement. They agreed on "A Place at the Table: Justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People" as the theme. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council and other Indigenous experts will assist with the statement's preparation.

### ***Laudato Si* Action Plan**

The Bishops Conference committed to the *Laudato Si* Action Platform in its 2021- 2022 Social Justice Statement, "Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor". To clarify the procedures to be adhered to in preparing an Action Plan for the Conference and to ensure that the development of the Action Plan is well-informed, comprehensive and participative and collaborative in the approach taken to its preparation, the bishops approved the

establishment of a *Laudato Si* Action Plan Working Group, to be led by a member of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service.

#### **Accord with the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons**

To support the positive relationship between the Bishops Conference and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons, it has been proposed that an Accord be signed between the organisations. The bishops gave in-principle support to the Accord, mindful that some further work was still to be done on the text.

#### **Catholic-Jewish relations**

The document “Guidelines and Recommendations for Catholic-Jewish Relations in Australia”, first issued in 1992, is currently undergoing renewal in a project led by Fr Michael Trainor and Sr Mary Raeburn NDS. It is hoped that a draft of the renewed document will be ready to submit to the Bishops Conference at the November 2022 plenary meeting.