



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

PLENARY MEETING

May 7-14, 2020

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic bishops of Australia conducted their biannual plenary meeting using videoconferencing technology.

The eight Commissions of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference held meetings on the first day of the gathering, followed by the plenary meeting over the seven subsequent days – except Sunday, 10 May. Meetings were held with the full membership of the Conference, as well as in smaller groups.

Opening Mass

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

Welcome

Archbishop Coleridge welcomed his fellow bishops and the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana. Archbishop Yllana greeted the bishops, noting that he had earlier provided his address to the plenary meeting via video.

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.

Episcopal Appointments since the last Plenary Meeting

Appointment of Bishops

Bishop-elect Mykola Bychok CSsR, Eparch of Saints Peter and Paul of Melbourne (Ukrainian), appointed 15 January 2020.

Archbishop Patrick O'Regan, Archbishop of Adelaide, appointed 19 March 2020

Resignation of Bishops

Bishop Peter Stasiuk CsSR, Eparch of Saints Peter and Paul of Melbourne (Ukrainian), accepted 15 January 2020.

Message from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to the Holy Father

The bishops sent a message to Pope Francis, as is customary at plenary meetings. The message spoke of the contrasting story of Easter with that of the various afflictions arising due to COVID-19, including the suspension of public worship.

The message addressed some of the additional effects of COVID-19, including changes to the plenary meeting itself and the postponement of the first assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, originally scheduled for October 2020.

The bishops noted the ongoing progress the Church in Australia is making in the area of safeguarding and professional standards, with reference to two documents the bishops and other Catholic leaders would consider. They acknowledged that the High Court's decision quashing Cardinal George Pell's conviction had been welcomed by many and criticised by

others, but it did underline the need for the Church's ongoing resolve to create and maintain safe environments for all people.

Assuring the Pope of their prayers for him, especially as he leads the Church during a time of pandemic, the Bishops also asked the Holy Father to extend his apostolic blessings on them as they met.

Elections and membership

Archbishop Mark Coleridge and Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP were re-elected as president and vice-president of the Conference, respectively.

Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB, Archbishop Patrick O'Regan, Bishop Robert McGuckin and Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay OLM were elected to the Permanent Committee. Archbishop Peter A Comensoli and Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ are continuing members of the Permanent Committee, having been elected in May 2019.

[See this media release for more details.](#)

Archbishop Amel Nona and Bishop Bosco Puthur were appointed to the Episcopal Panel for Doctrine and Morals to fill current and forthcoming vacancies until the next bishops commission elections, to be held in May 2021.

Professional standards – National Response Protocol and National Office for Safeguarding

The bishops reviewed the latest draft of a National Response Protocol, a “whole-of-Church” system for handling complaints of sexual abuse. The protocol has been drafted with input from safeguarding experts, professional standards leaders and survivors of abuse and their supporters.

Additional feedback on the protocol will be sought from bishops and from local and state professional standards organisations, with a new liaison group established to assist with finalising the protocol.

The bishops also considered the report submitted by the Safeguarding Steering Committee, *Catholic Safeguarding Australia: a national office for oversight and coordination of safeguarding and professional standards for the Catholic Church in Australia*. They acknowledged the need for a national office, as proposed, to provide oversight and coordination of safeguarding and professional standards nationally.

The bishops appointed a reference group to prepare a final report, following consultation with key national, state, diocesan and congregational professional standards and safeguarding offices, that would create the framework for establishing the national office by the end of 2020.

[See this media release for more details.](#)

Review of diocesan and parish governance

The bishops considered the report of the Implementation Advisory Group's Governance Review Project Team, *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*.

They noted that the provision of the report so close to the plenary meeting did not allow for adequate consideration of the report and its 86 recommendations. It was also noted that some recommendations could be matters for the Conference, others for dioceses and others for the Plenary Council.

The report will remain under embargo until the bishops have had adequate time to consider it, with the expectation that the report and the bishops' response would be published at the same time.

[See this media release for more details](#)

The Fifth Plenary Council of Australia

Mindful of the historical precedent for representatives of other Christian denominations and other faith traditions at major Church gatherings, including the Second Vatican Council, it was suggested that the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council consider ecumenical and interfaith representation at the Council's assemblies.

Pastoral discussion on COVID-19

The bishops considered how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world, the nation and the Church. While noting the creative ways that many Catholic communities have responded to the pandemic, they discussed the pastoral, liturgical, financial and other effects on the faithful and clergy, on parishes and on other ministries.

The delay in the celebration of the Plenary Council was noted as a challenge, but the bishops recognised that changes in the understanding of mission and evangelisation during the time of the pandemic could provide useful insights during the Council.

Social Justice Statements 2020 and 2021

The Conference adopted the document *To Live Life to the Full: Mental health in Australia today* as the Social Justice Statement for 2020-21. The document will be released in anticipation of Social Justice Sunday, which this year will be marked on August 30.

The bishops also considered possible themes for the 2021-22 Social Justice Statement and agreed on the theme "Integral ecology: the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor".

Implementation of *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*

The bishops received, and approved, advice from the Episcopal Panel for Canon Law regarding various aspects of Pope Francis' apostolic letter motu proprio *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*. The advice contained recommendations on the ongoing implementation of aspects of the document within all Australian dioceses, including the reporting requirements outlined in *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*.

Entrustment of Australia to Mary Help of Christians

The bishops accepted a recommendation that they entrust Australia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary under the title Our Lady Help of Christians, seeking her intercession for the safety of all people especially in this time of COVID-19.

With the feast day of Mary Help of Christians transferred from 24 to 25 May, due to the Solemnity of the Ascension, it was noted that the Entrustment could be made on either 24 or 25 May.

[See this media release for more details](#)

A Word of Encouragement to the Catholic People of Australia

The bishops accepted the recommendation that a message of encouragement be sent by the bishops to the Catholic community at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, acknowledging the uncertainties and challenges of the current yet changing circumstances.

[Click here to read the Word of Encouragement.](#)

Future dates for Plenary Meetings

The bishops agreed to change the timing of the plenary meeting held in November from the final week of November to dates earlier in that month, starting in 2021. The dates for 2021 and 2022 were confirmed as 8-12 November and 7-11 November, respectively.