



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## PLENARY MEETING

November 23-27, 2020

*This document provides a summary of some of the matters discussed during the plenary meeting.*

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 four subsequent days. 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 on November 24. 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*

Monsignor Greg Bennet, Bishop of Sale, appointed June 27, 2020

Bishop Karol Kulczycki SDS, Bishop of Port Pirie, appointed August 1, 2020

#### *Resignation of Bishops*

Bishop Gregory O’Kelly SJ, Bishop of Port Pirie, ceased October 28, 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 acknowledged that the effects of COVID-19 are being felt more acutely in many other countries, but spoke of the impact the pandemic has had on life in Australia – including the liturgical life of the faithful.

The message reflected on both the bishops’ 2020 Social Justice Statement, Live Life to the Full: Mental Health in Australia Today, and Pope Francis’ encyclical letter Fratelli Tutti as important reminders of the imperative for people to recognise and respond to the needs of others.

The message further spoke of both the Holy See’s observations on the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the Church in Australia’s ongoing work to create and maintain safe environments for all people. The bishops explained some

of the key considerations that would come before the plenary meeting, including the establishment of a new national agency for all safeguarding, child protection and professional standards matters, as well as a new national protocol for responding to contemporary and historical allegations and complaints.

The bishops referred to the ongoing journey of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, explaining that while the pandemic has been a cause of disruption to the Council's celebration, the processes of listening, dialogue and discernment that have been central so far will remain so.

The bishops asked the Holy Father to extend his apostolic blessings to them as they met.

### **Commissions and mandates**

The bishops approved the establishment of the new Bishops Commission for Professional Standards and Safeguarding, also approving its mandate. Bishop Bill Wright was elected chairman of the new Commission, with Bishop Michael McCarthy and Bishop-Elect Bennet also appointed to that Commission.

### **Other elections and membership**

Bishop Anthony Randazzo was elected to complete Bishop O'Kelly's term on the Permanent Committee, which concludes in May 2021.

Bishop Kulczycki was appointed to the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service.

### **Professional standards and safeguarding**

In addition to the establishment of the Bishops Commission for Professional Standards and Safeguarding, the bishops considered a number of other matters related to the issue.

#### *National Response Protocol*

The bishops reviewed and adopted the fifth draft of the National Response Protocol, a "whole-of-Church" system for handling complaints of sexual abuse. The Protocol was devised with input from safeguarding experts, professional standards leaders and survivors of abuse and their supporters. Bishops and leaders of religious institutes had provided feedback on earlier drafts.

The bishops underlined the need for processes to be managed clearly and applied consistently, the importance of education of clergy, religious and laity around the new Protocol and the need for a transition plan for moving from *Towards Healing* and *The Melbourne Response* to the new Protocol.

The National Response Protocol will be implemented starting from February 1, 2021. It will have interim status until it receives the approval of the Holy See. Matters already commenced under *Towards Healing* and *The Melbourne Response* on or before January 31, 2021 can continue under the relevant process, and those systems continue to be valid until December 31, 2021 as Church entities work towards implementing the National Response Protocol.

#### *Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited (ACSL)*

The bishops had already approved the organisational structure, functions and constitution of the new national company – Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited – to oversee safeguarding, child protection and professional standards matters. The Bishops Conference

is one of three members of the company, alongside Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial PJs.

The bishops appointed Bishop McCarthy, Bishop Bennet and Mr Henry Pruyn as the Conference's member representatives to ACSL.

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

### **Review of diocesan and parish governance**

The bishops discussed the review of Church governance report *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*, which was published in August 2020. They noted the merits of the report, in particular its emphasis on co-responsibility and synodality, as well as its limitations, particularly with regard to Catholic ecclesiology, the prescriptions of canon law which reflect this ecclesiology, and the functions of already established diocesan and parish governance structures.

The bishops noted the report was not intended to be the final word on Church governance, but rather to make a significant contribution to a wider and longer-term process. On the topic of co-responsibility, the bishops observed that it needs to apply not only to governance but also to the mission of the Church. They also commented upon the importance of formation and training for the laity; the costs associated with implementing some recommendations; the importance of the unity of the threefold ministry of bishops and how this is best expressed today; and the necessity of attending to the presence and promptings of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church.

The bishops finalised their response to *The Light from the Southern Cross*; it is expected the response will be published in mid-December 2020. Further collaboration on the report and the bishops' response will take place in coming months.

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

#### *Mode of gathering at First Assembly*

Earlier in the year, the bishops postponed the first assembly of the Plenary Council by 12 months due to COVID-19. At this meeting, the bishops received advice from the Council's facilitation team, the steering committee for the assemblies and the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council on plans for the assembly scheduled for Adelaide in October 2021.

Based on that advice, which included risk assessments regarding travel, social distancing, delegate profiles and finances, among other issues, the bishops agreed to shift the first assembly to a mix of in-person and online delivery. The bishops acknowledged the challenges the multi-modal format would create, but recognised ongoing uncertainty about COVID-19 made it the only path forward.

[Click here to read more about the change to a multi-modal assembly.](#)

#### *Additional people to be called*

The bishops had previously requested a dispensation from canon law provisions around the number of delegates who "may" be called to a plenary council. The bishops' request was granted, in part, by the Holy See, and the bishops approved the calling of another 15 delegates for the Council assemblies. Those delegates were chosen from the earlier list of nominees submitted by dioceses and drew from people from diverse areas of the Church, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, the migrant community and new ecclesial movements.

### **Ratio Nationalis Institutional Sacerdotalis**

Dr Maeve Heaney VDMF, Bishop Anthony Randazzo and Bishop Shane Mackinlay gave a presentation to the bishops on the proposed new program of priestly formation. The *Ratio Nationalis Institutional Sacerdotalis* had been prepared after consultation with formators, academic personnel, seminarians, priests, experts in priestly formation and members of the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy.

Among matters the bishops raised were forming seminarians for lifelong learning; ensuring different types of assessment were administered effectively and professionally; the need for solid spiritual formation; preparation for leadership; and the need for flexible models of priestly formation.

The *Ratio Nationalis Institutional Sacerdotalis* was approved by the bishops. It will now be submitted to the Congregation for Clergy for *recognitio*.

### **Pastoral discussion on marriage**

The bishops held a pastoral discussion on marriage, reflecting on the changes in the celebration of the sacrament in recent decades. Among the changes observed were the decrease in the number of weddings celebrated overall, the decrease in the number of marriages in Church settings and the issue of preparing couples adequately for marriage. It was noted that married couples are a valuable source of guidance for couples preparing for marriage.

The Bishops Commission for Life, Family and Public Engagement will continue its work on marriage, including around the development of appropriate resources for marriage preparation. The need to begin the process of evangelisation about marriage in secondary schools, extending into parish life, was underscored.

### **Pastoral discussion on induction and ongoing formation of bishops**

Resuming a discussion from earlier plenary meetings, the bishops reiterated the importance of formation of bishops new to episcopal ministry, as well as ongoing formation. While noting the importance of formation in key ecclesial matters, several bishops spoke highly of professional secular training options, for example their experience of the Australian Institute of Company Directors course.

A threefold approach to formation for bishops was outlined: accessing existing training programs; pastoral reflection between experienced bishops and newly ordained bishops, with some introduction to the work of the Conference; and mentoring and ministry supervision.

### **Pastoral discussion on children of priests**

Given the reality that some priests have fathered children, the bishops shared their experience in their local situations and how best to respond. The current situation varied widely across the country, and it was noted that the Holy See has issued advice on pastoral responses to priests becoming parents. The primacy of the child in such a circumstance was underlined.

The new Bishops Commission for Safeguarding and Professional Standards will review existing protocols and procedures from other episcopal conferences, consult with clerical religious institutes and consider the appropriateness of national guidelines to assist and inform local approaches. Advice will be provided at the May 2021 plenary meeting.

### **Director of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office**

The Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry advised that Fr Khalid Marogi, a priest of the Chaldean Eparchy who has been serving in the Diocese of Port Pirie, has been appointed the next director of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO). Fr Marogi, who is expected to commence in the role in May 2021, will also oversee national animation of and support for clergy life and ministry.

The Conference acknowledged the excellent service given by Fr Maurizio Pettenà CS during his 12 years as director of the ACMRO. The bishops noted, in particular, the key responsibility of negotiating the Church's labour agreements on behalf of the bishops with the Australian Government.

### **Pastoral letter for the bicentenary of Catholic education**

In anticipation of celebrations of 200 years of formal Catholic education in Australia, the bishops agreed that a pastoral letter be prepared. The letter, to be published in February 2021, will recognise the contribution of Catholic education since its inception.

### **Sunday of the Word of God**

Following the establishment of the Sunday of the Word of God in September 2019, to be marked on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time each year, the bishops chose to explore other potential dates for the celebration in Australia to avoid a clash with Australia Day and related public holidays. The bishops agreed that the day will be marked on the first Sunday in February each year, starting on February 7, 2021.

[Click here to read more about the Sunday of the Word of God.](#)

### **Caritas Australia**

The Conference appointed The Hon. John Watkins AM as a director of the Caritas Australia Board for a term of three years to take effect from December 1, 2020.