



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops name three priorities for work of Bishops Conference

MEDIA RELEASE

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Australia's Catholic bishops have used a weeks-long process of prayer and discernment to identify three priorities to guide the work of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

The recommendation to identify priorities for the Bishops Conference arose from a structured review of Conference operations and financing undertaken in 2019.

Earlier this year, the bishops were guided through a process of shared discernment, punctuated with prayer and conversation, by Br Ian Cribb SJ. Br Ian had earlier led the retreat the bishops made together immediately before their 2019 *Ad Limina Apostolorum* visit.

Following the three sessions, which involved the identification and ranking of possible priorities, the bishops approved the three priorities at their recent plenary meeting.

They are: Formation; Becoming More Missionary; and Fostering Collegiality.

"It is important to note that these are priorities for the Bishops Conference to pursue, which includes the various bishops commissions, the work of the general secretariat and the biannual plenary meetings," Bishops Conference president Archbishop Mark Coleridge said.

"These were not developed to be priorities for the Catholic Church in Australia, though many dioceses, parishes and other ministries are no doubt focusing on one or more of these priorities."

The Conference's ongoing priorities are also reflected in the work of its nine bishops commissions and two episcopal panels, which will take on new focus in light of the new priorities named.

Archbishop Coleridge said the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia will have an important role in shaping priorities for the Church nationally.

"We've already seen during the three years of the Council journey so far how key topics and concerns are being identified, and the Council assemblies will help refine those further," he said.

"These priorities we have developed specifically for the Bishops Conference will help the work we undertake as a college of bishops, to make important decisions and to tread a path that pursues formation, collegiality and a missionary disposition."

Br Ian said he was impressed with the way the bishops engaged with the process of discernment – individually, in small groups and as a collective.

"Bishops are very busy men. It was encouraging to see them take the time during the three sessions and in between sessions to reflect and pray about their shared ministry as members of a Bishops Conference, not just leaders of their dioceses," he said.

"Following on from their 2019 retreat and in preparing for the Plenary Council, the bishops are finding opportunities to practise the skills of discernment that will be valuable for their ministry."

More information on the priorities can be found on the next page.

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Priorities for the work of the Bishops Conference

Formation

The importance of formation, understood in this context as including education and training, has been emphasised by recent inquiries, research and submissions. Formation is for all the baptised and is life-long. It forms faith, shapes discipleship, deepens spirituality, enhances understanding, increases knowledge, effects conversion, builds Church community, fosters co-responsibility for the Church's mission and equips Catholics for service.

Formation needs to be specifically tailored for particular vocations and ministries within the Church community. Formation may include initiatives, courses and programs offered by Catholic institutions and organisations, as well as secular institutions and organisations. Within the Conference, the induction of new bishops and ongoing formation of all the bishops have received renewed emphasis.

Becoming more Missionary

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis dreams of a "missionary impulse capable for transforming everything", enabling the mission of the Church, and especially its Gospel mandate to evangelise, to permeate its faith communities, its apostolic works and its structures. Too readily, the Church can become inward-looking and self-referential, whereas a missionary impulse impels the bishops to present and promote Christ's teachings in ways that are life-giving and appealing.

While certainly about renewing and building up the Church, this missionary impulse is also about offering society a new vision of what it can become – a vision centred in Jesus and the way of living he has shown us: acting humbly, seeking justice, speaking truth, offering healing and leading by service. The Conference embraces this missionary impulse and invites others to share in the work of proclaiming and promoting Christ's vision in contemporary Australian society.

Fostering Collegiality

All Catholic bishops belong to the College of Bishops. Within a country or a territory, the College of Bishops finds local expression in the Bishops Conference. Though much of the ministry of bishops is exercised in the dioceses, they also share national responsibilities.

The Australian bishops' experience of the fruits of gathering for prayer and retreat, of engaging in shared reflection and discernment of significant issues, of journeying together towards the forthcoming Plenary Council and of supporting each other have heightened their sense of collegiality and affirmed its value, both for the bishops themselves and also for the Church in Australia. The Conference wishes to foster the collegiality of the bishops, not as an end in itself but as a means to more fruitful ministry and service in the Church's life and mission.

These priorities were approved at the May 2021 plenary meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference