



Catholic Bishops conclude meeting on historic day for the Church in Australia

Australia's Catholic bishops today concluded their twice-yearly plenary meeting, on the 200th anniversary of the first officially permitted Mass celebrated in the fledgling colony of New South Wales.

The first Mass was celebrated by Fr James Dixon on May 15, 1803, following a proclamation from Governor King on April 24, 1803.

The Government Gazette of the day described the move as Catholic "emancipation". It was a major step for religious freedom in Australia, even though this freedom for the Catholic community was withdrawn within 12 months and was not regained until 1820.

The bishops concelebrated a special bicentenary Mass at St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, to mark the occasion.

They were in Sydney for their twice-yearly plenary meeting, where they considered reports from the 19 committees overseeing the Church's mission and activities throughout Australia and beyond.

The meeting ratified the mandate of Catholic Earthcare Australia, which will seek to promote ecological conversion in the Church and the wider community. It also approved the topic for this year's Social Justice Sunday statement - A Generous Heart in the Love of Christ: Challenging Racism in Australia Today – which touched on a number of areas of concern to the Church in Australia, including the plight of asylum seekers and refugees. They expressed a strong sense of concern especially for those in detention and the East Timorese threatened with expulsion.

The bishops focused on ways of reaching out to the marginalised in society, and pursued measures to maintain and strengthen the Church's mission to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

They discussed an interim report about a major nationwide consultation on the Church's response to the needs of people with a range of disabilities.

The bishops restated their commitment to maintaining professional standards and to dealing compassionately and fairly with the issues surrounding abuse by Church personnel. They affirmed and refined the established procedures and made it clear that these apply to the bishops themselves.

They sent a formal greeting to Pope John Paul II, welcoming his recent encyclical on the meaning of the Mass. They looked at ways to enhance due reverence for Holy Communion. The bishops also sent directives for recognition by the Vatican on ways to provide for the spiritual needs of people in remote areas where regular access to a priest may be difficult.

The bishops noted that they were meeting in the shadow of the recent conflict in Iraq and stressed the Church's concern for the humanitarian impact of the war. The bishops' overseas aid agency, Caritas Australia, has already provided \$280,000 in emergency aid for Iraq, which helped fund the purchase of medical aid and equipment, and the bishops were keen to find concrete ways of supporting the Christian communities of Iraq and the Middle East.

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