

Response of Australian Catholic dioceses on three key issues

Richard Curtain and the Sense of the Faithful Editorial Committee

The Plenary Council as well as the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference have endorsed three areas of change in the Catholic Church in Australia. These relate to indigenous recognition, diocesan pastoral councils, and Laudato Si Action Plans.

The Catholic Church operates in practice a highly decentralised system of governance. This is based on the diocesan bishop or archbishop, known as the Ordinary. This refers to his status in Church law as the sole officer responsible for the governance of the Church in his domain. Bishops Conferences, the Vatican Curia or indeed the Pope can strongly encourage certain actions, but it is up to the bishop as the Ordinary to implement them. This large gap between higher level intention and action on the ground is clearly evident in Australian dioceses in relation to these three important issues.

The following analysis has used diocesan synod reports and scrutiny of their website (as of July 2023) to see to what extent and how have Australian dioceses are implementing these changes. The results of this analysis of diocesan responses are summarised in the table below and then presented in detail under the three headings in the table.

Key actions in relation to	Dioceses
Indigenous recognition	Brisbane, Parramatta, Sydney
Diocesan pastoral councils	Adelaide, Brisbane, Ballarat, Bathurst, Parramatta, and Sandhurst
Laudato Si Action Plans	Brisbane, Parramatta, and Wollongong, Adelaide, and Canberra-Goulburn, Sydney (toolkit only), Sandhurst

1. Indigenous recognition

Census data for 2016 show that 16 Catholic dioceses have over one-fifth of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resident population who identify themselves as Catholic. The main dioceses where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics live are Brisbane (15,403), followed by Darwin (11,000), Bathurst (Dubbo), Broome, Townsville (Palm Island), and Cairns (Thursday Island).¹

The Plenary Council committed the Catholic Church in Australia to Reconciliation by Healing Wounds and Receiving Gifts. This commitment involved saying sorry to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in and beyond the Church, for the part played by the Church in the harms they have suffered; and committing to walking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in continuing to work towards recognition, reconciliation and justice. The PC also endorsed the Uluru Statement from the Heart and encourages engagement with processes for implementing the statement, including local, regional, and national truth-telling efforts.

¹ <https://darwin.catholic.org.au/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-catholic-council/>

The Australian national synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (August 2022) stated under the heading ‘Journeying with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ the following:

Within the Catholic Church in Australia, our synodal journey with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is vitally important to moving towards unity in faith. Indigenous communities are growing, and people in these communities continue to have a great love for the Church despite many negative experiences. There is a continued need to acknowledge, accept and recognise past failings and the inter-generational trauma that exists, and to complement this with a deliberate welcoming into parish communities and practical support for people with health and wellbeing issues. There is also a need to consider new ways of being Christian and new forms of Church life better suited to First Nations cultures (para 16).

The [national synod synthesis report for Australia](#) noted (para 33) that ‘in dioceses with a greater presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a yearning was expressed for greater recognition and use of Indigenous spirituality in liturgy and Church life, both in the diocese and the wider Church in Australia’. Several diocesan synod syntheses with large Catholic indigenous populations refer to the need for their diocese to give greater recognition to the indigenous population. How actions have they taken?

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference recently issued 11 May 2023 a [Statement on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament](#). The bishops noted that despite First Nations Peoples having lived in Australia for thousands of years, Australia’s Constitution does not mention their custodianship of the land which is ‘an omission which needs to be rectified’. The bishops asked all Australians to educate themselves as well as possible concerning the proposal to establish the Voice. The bishops intend to issue their annual Social Justice Statement just before the referendum on the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australian society.

Actions taken at the diocesan level in Australia

Brisbane: The Archdiocese of Brisbane has an ‘Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan’. This is a guide for agencies and parishes to build respective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, acknowledge historical impacts of colonialisation, and identify opportunities to build new pathways.

Parramatta: The Diocese of Parramatta has a ‘Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan’ (RAP). The plan identifies areas for improvement across the diocesan agencies, parishes, and school communities, and seeks to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their families to flourish. The RAP Committee is developing a vision statement with local Elders providing feedback. Ongoing dialogue with Elders will continue for the implementation of the RAP.

Sydney: The Archdiocese of Sydney also has a ‘Reflect Reconciliation Action plan’ for the period March 2023-March 2024. The plan covers parishes, schools, agencies, religious communities, families, clergy and individual faithful, asking for a commitment to the ongoing task of reconciliation: acknowledging past mistakes, repenting of enduring injustices, seeking forgiveness and renewed friendship.

Darwin: The Diocese of Darwin, despite having one-fifth of the Aboriginal population who identify as Catholic has not developed a Reconciliation Action Plan. The diocesan website has an indigenous section, with information about the Voice to Parliament and links to the Uluru Statement from the Heart. There is also a page on the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry with links to the NATSICC Northern Territory and national websites.

Adelaide: The Archdiocese of Adelaide website provides information about the new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) website called 'One Journey, Together' for Catholics to learn about the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

Melbourne: The Archdiocese of Melbourne website provides a detailed write up of a presentation by Frank Brennan SJ speaks on Catholic Social Teaching and the Voice referendum. There is also a link to the new NATSICC website 'One Journey, Together'. Another item reports on the 'Bishops issue statement on Indigenous Voice to Parliament', dated 11 May 2023.

However, the following dioceses with significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations who identify as Catholic make no public effort to recognise them via their websites or in responses to their diocesan synod consultations. These dioceses are Bathurst (Dubbo), Broome, Townsville (Palm Island), and Cairns (Thursday Island). Many other dioceses have made little or no efforts to promote greater indigenous recognition.

2. Support for diocesan pastoral councils

The Australian national synthesis for the Bishops' Synod in its conclusion stated that 'the bishops had already decided that each diocese would conduct a diocesan synod within five years of the Plenary Council concluding, and this decision was endorsed by the Plenary Council'. So which dioceses have responded to date?

Adelaide: The Archdiocese of Adelaide has established diocesan and regional assemblies as well as a diocesan pastoral council. The 2021 and 2022 Diocesan Assemblies have been part of a larger movement of synodality within the diocese and inspired by the Australian Plenary Council and 2023 International Synod in Rome.

Brisbane: The Archdiocese of Brisbane in its synod synthesis report proposes 'that processes of decision making in the Church be made transparent and open'. The statement further notes that 'this includes procedures for appointing bishops and priests, as well as making changes at an Archdiocesan level and the parish level'. However, Archdiocese of Brisbane does not have a diocesan pastoral council. The Archdiocese of Perth launched the process for setting up a Diocesan Assembly on 4 June 2023 which is to be held in July 2024.

Canberra-Goulburn: The Archbishop of Canberra-Goulburn set up in April 2022 a Working Party to advise him on the formation of an Archdiocesan Pastoral Council and a report was produced in August 2022. But further action to implement a DPC is not evident.

However, the Archdioceses of Melbourne, Hobart, and Sydney have not set up diocesan pastoral councils. Melbourne in its synodal synthesis concluded with seven non-committal questions "for further discernment for the Church going forward." The final question addresses the issue of governance in the following terms: 'How can we move beyond the talking points, slogans, and concerns about governance, so that we do not lose 'the fragrance of the Gospel?'.

The Archdiocese of Sydney in its synthesis report stated that in relation to governance that the diocese is to ‘undertake a review of current Church governance and management structures and practices in dioceses and parishes in response to calls for greater accountability and transparency’. It further noted that it will ‘ensure that parish and diocesan councils are established and that lay women and men have deliberative roles (and requisite training) in decision-making at all levels of governance’.

Ballarat, Bathurst, Parramatta, and Sandhurst Dioceses have diocesan pastoral councils

The regional dioceses with pastoral councils are Ballarat, Bathurst, Parramatta, and Sandhurst. Dioceses with no information on the establishment of a diocesan pastoral council are Armidale, Broome, Bunbury, Lismore, Cairns, Geraldton, diocese of Maitland Newcastle, Port Pirie, Rockhampton, Sale, Toowoomba, Townsville, Wagga Wagga, and Wilcannia-Forbes.

Regional dioceses that are still to act on setting up a diocesan pastoral council

The diocese of Broken Bay’s synthesis report noted that the diocese proposed to set up a Diocesan Pastoral Council ‘to assist and advise the bishop with pastoral care initiatives, finance and asset oversight, Diocesan celebrations, clergy and religious pastoral care and professional and spiritual development’. However, the website of the diocese does not make mention of a diocesan pastoral council or of a process in place for setting one up.

Darwin diocese also undertook to ‘establish structures and processes such as a Diocesan Pastoral Council that will assist in discerning new ways of being Church in the diocese of Darwin’. The diocesan directory shows there is an Aboriginal Diocesan Pastoral Council, composed of Representatives from each of the Aboriginal Communities in the Diocese. The diocesan directory also provides the names of the members of a Bishop’s Consultative Panel, consisting of one priest and five lay people. The website provides no further details on the council.

The diocese of Sale conducted a diocesan assembly in 2019 which identified the pastoral priorities of faith formation and spirituality; leadership and governance; families and vocation; liturgy and prayer; and the welcoming community. However, this has not been followed up with the setting up of a pastoral council. diocese of Maitland Newcastle has a long history of a diocesan pastoral council but its website notes that ‘the Diocesan Pastoral Council is currently in abeyance’. The diocese of Toowoomba has a Diocesan Pastoral Plan June 2018– June 2023, to be revised in 2023. This plan was the outcome of a process of consultation, analysis and facilitated conversation which started in early 2017. However, there is no mention of a Diocesan Pastoral Council.

3. Laudato Si’ Action Plans

The Plenary Council (PC) committed the Church to recognise the sacred duty to care for and protect the Earth as a common home for all God's creatures, including the generations to come. The PC further encouraged Catholics to accept Pope Francis' invitation to join the Laudato Si' Action Platform and either develop Laudato Si' Action Plans, or participate in existing Laudato Si' Action Plans, as a vehicle for their ecological conversion.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) on 5 June 2023 launched its [Laudato Si' Action Plan](#) for 2023-25. The plan covers the operations of entities under the direct governance

of the Conference. These are the Plenary Meeting of the ACBC; the Permanent Committee; the Episcopal Commissions and Episcopal Panels; and the General Secretariat. The ACBC Laudato si' Action Plan incorporates longstanding commitments of the Conference which are consistent with Laudato si'; initiatives undertaken since 2015 that respond to Laudato si'; and new initiatives undertaken following the Conference's commitment in 2021 to develop a Laudato si' Action Plan.

On the surface, this looks to be a major step forward for the bishops' conference, even worldwide, as it appears to be the first bishops conference to do so. But it remains to be seen to what extent Australian dioceses and parishes adopt their own action plans. Caritas Australia through its Earthcare arm has been asked by the bishops to support parishes and dioceses in the implementation of the plan. However, the bishops plan does not mention how progress in getting every parish and diocese in Australia plan to develop their own plans will be measured. Without some regular reporting requirement on progress, the plan runs the risk of being a token effort.

Laudato Si Action Plans in Archdioceses and dioceses

According to information sourced from the Laudato Si Platform, there are seven dioceses worldwide formally recognised as having an action plan and three of them are in Australia (Brisbane, Parramatta, and Wollongong). Other dioceses such as Adelaide, and Canberra-Goulburn have Laudato Si' action plans that not registered yet on the Platform. Sydney has a Laudato Si' toolkit in May 2023. The Archdiocese of Perth has shown strong interest in developing one. This is probably related to the fact that the Archbishop Tim Costello is President of the ACBC which, as noted above, released on 5 June 2023 its Laudato Si' Action Plan.

Brisbane: The Archdiocese of Brisbane launched its Laudato Si Action Plan one year before the ACBC launched a national action plan. The 2022-2023 plan is for the first of seven years of action. Each year a new plan is to be developed building on the previous years' plan, responding to each of the seven Laudato Si Action Platform goals. The agencies of the Archdiocese of Brisbane have collectively developed the Laudato Si Action Plan to demonstrate its commitment to taking action to embrace Pope Francis' vision of an integral ecology.

The plan also acknowledges the importance of healing the relationships with First Nations people of this continent, who have cared for the land for thousands of generations. The plan builds on the Archdiocese's first Reconciliation Action Plan, which was released in 2020. The plan also reaches out to the peoples of the Pacific region, who are on the front line of climate change, and calls for solidarity and action with them.

Adelaide: The Archdiocese of Adelaide set up its Laudato Si Action Plan in September 2022. The plan covers the year 2022-25 and addresses seven key areas: Cry of the Earth; Cry of the Poor; Ecological Economics; Sustainable Lifestyle; Ecological Education; Ecological Spirituality; and Community resilience and Engagement.

Canberra-Goulburn: The Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn released its Laudato Si' Action Plan on 8 May 2023 for the period 2022-2029. The plan outlines the vision, background, urgency, and detailed actions for the Archdiocese to implement the seven Laudato Si' goals: Response to the Cry of the Earth; Response to the Cry of the Poor; Ecological Economics; Adoption of Simple Lifestyles; Ecological Education; Ecological Spirituality; and Emphasis on

Community Involvement and Participatory Action.

Sydney: The Archdiocese of Sydney has launched a Laudato Si' toolkit in May 2023. The digital toolkit is available is for parish groups who wish to get active around care for creation. There is no archdiocesan action plan, however. The archdioceses of Melbourne, Hobart and Perth do not have action plans yet.

Regional dioceses with action plans

The dioceses of Parramatta, Sandhurst, and Wollongong have Laudato Si Action Plans. But the following regional dioceses do not: Armidale, Broome, Ballarat, Bunbury, Bathurst, Broken Bay, Lismore, Cairns. Darwin, Geraldton, diocese of Maitland Newcastle, Port Pirie, Rockhampton, Sale, Toowoomba, Townsville, Wagga Wagga, and Wilcannia-Forbes. However, parishes within these dioceses are active. In the diocese of Ballarat, for example, parishes have been [encouraged](#), as part of the Laudato Si week activities 16-24 May 2023, to join the Laudato Si' Platform, following the lead of St Patrick's Cathedral Parish. The diocese of Sale through their parish associates is also interested in getting involved.

Parishes involved in the Laudato Si Action Plan process

A web search revealed that there is no comprehensive list of which Catholic parishes in Australia have Laudato Si' Action groups. Very few parishes (four only) came up as having some form of involvement in Laudato Si activities. However, according to Kerry Stone, the Earthcare Parish Program coordinator, there are 80 parishes involved in 21 dioceses. Also, many or most religious congregations are registered. In Melbourne, she was able to list five parishes only which directly involved in the Earthcare Parish Program process, and another three parishes showing interest but are acting independently of the Earthcare Program. There is, however, no coordinated support from the Archdiocese. Its Social Justice and Ecology webpage refers readers seeking more information on initiatives in the Archdiocese of Melbourne supporting these efforts to contact Proclaim the archdiocese's Office of Mission Renewal.