



OFFICE FOR CLERGY LIFE AND MINISTRY
An Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Commission for Church Ministry

REPORT

NATIONAL MEETING DIRECTORS OF CLERGY LIFE AND MINISTRY

MacKillop Place, North Sydney, 12th-16th May 2008

Conference theme:
“Risk and Hope: Changing Faces of the Australian Church”

PRESENT:

Bishops Don Sproxton (Perth) and Brian Heenan (Rockhampton), Directors: John Allen (Sale), John Armstrong (Canberra-G), Martin Ashe (Melbourne), Peter Bianchini (Perth), Kerry Crowley (Cairns), John Daly (Rockhampton), Patrick de Silva (Broome), Ian Dempsey (Adelaide), Paul Finucane (Wilcannia-F), John Kelleher (Darwin), Olix Kenez (Ukrainian), Terry Lyons (Townsville), Paul McDonald (Lismore), John McGrath (Wagga), Brian Moloney (Broken Bay), Michael Morrissey (Geraldton), Adrian Noonan (Port Pirie), Ross O'Brien (Armidale), Chris Reay (Sandhurst), Chris Roberts (rep. Wollongong), Dave O'Connor (Brisbane), David O'Hearn (Maitland-Newcastle), Patrick O'Regan (Bathurst), Vince Redden (Sydney), Barry Ryan (Ballarat), Frank Devoy (Director, Office for Clergy Life and Ministry) and Paul Simmons (Coordinator, Permanent Diaconate). Chris De Souza (Parramatta) was present during some sessions.

Council Members: Paul Cashen msc (Adelaide), Kevin Croker (Canberra); for some of the time, Carmel Crawford (Melbourne), Michael Hogan (Kingscliff), Anthony Aspinall (Narre Warren).

APOLOGIES:

John Girdauskas (Hobart – visit of Cross and Icon for WYD); Martin Langran (Military – deployed to the Sinai); Jeff Scully (Toowoomba, commitment to a mission). There was no priest present from Bunbury Diocese. From the Council: Sr Susan Richardson (Melbourne).

ORGANISATION:

The National gathering was organised this year by the Directors of the Victorian Province led by Fr Martin Ashe.

MONDAY EVENING, OPENING LITURGY 12th May

The opening liturgy was celebrated at 8 p.m. It had a **Pentecost theme**, being the day after Pentecost Sunday. Each Director and Council member brought a red stole or garment to place in the centre of the room for the duration of the Conference.

Following the Opening Ceremony, Peter Bianchini introduced each member of **the new Council** who were present at the national gathering for the first time.

TUESDAY 13th May. Morning Prayer at 9.00am

Session 1: Professor Des Cahill: "Changing Australian Church and the Cross Cultural Dimension". (Lecturer in Multicultural Studies at RMIT Melbourne).

Dr Cahill spoke in general terms of the **significant changes in the world** since the terrorist attack in the United States in **2001**. This change meant government concern for, and involvement in, effective acculturation processes in Australia. He spoke of the Parliament of World Religions being hosted in Australia in December this year, and its concern for religious moderation and good relations among ethnic religions.

He spoke of the **multi-skilled and multi-tasked** nature of priesthood, explaining that overseas priests arriving in Australia needed to be multi-skilled and multi-tasked also in their new culture. He explained that **all migration is a risk** and all who emigrate to another country are at risk; many return because things don't work out for them.

He spoke **four basic attributes** that are needed in the personality of the priests coming to Australia:

1. **Personal autonomy** – having a sense of being personally autonomous, taking control of his life, making decisions, and carrying them out on his own;
2. **Emotional resilience** – referring to the ability to bounce back emotionally when things don't work out, and then move on;
3. **Flexibility and openness** – being open to new experiences and flexible in adapting to them;
4. **Perceptual acuity** – having a natural ability to deal with organisational and legal requirements in the normal conduct of life, for example, arranging one's banking, dealing with the Post Office, with health authorities, social security departments, and the like.

He explained also that learning **English as a second language** requires a certain **aptitude** in each individual; it is not simple. He also addressed the issue of mentoring the new overseas priest, explaining that it often doesn't work out and that we need to give a lot of attention to this issue. In speaking of the document "*Graced by Migration*" (from the Bishop's Office for Migrants and Refugees, which he had a hand in producing), he pointed out that the **migrant is an asset** not a problem. And as long as we looked at the migrant as a problem we would make their adjustment in Australia difficult. We need to ask what are their assets, how can we draw on their cultural knowledge, and how can we link the parish to which they have been assigned in Australia with their home parish.

Dr Cahill spoke of the changing shape of Australia, drawing on **statistics from the census**; he provided the gathering two hand outs on the changing face of Australia. Points included:

1. Greater diversification: shift in migration from UK and southern Europe to Asia; Language change from Italian to Chinese; Migration into rural settlements in Victoria and SA; Growth in the catholic population in India.
2. Religious profile: Catholics are experiencing major slippage, including a loss of about 10% to other faiths; Buddhism is largest growth; young people attracted to spirituality and reincarnation; also, marked growth in new-age spiritualities;
3. Different models of parish or pastoral care in practice;
4. The baggage the overseas priest brings with him: expectations of abundant prosperity; ignorance of Australian History - church and society; cultural superiority.

He then asked the directors to reflect and suggest what might be the various outlooks, attitudes, presumptions found in overseas priests as they look towards coming to Australia. Some of these included:

- Suspicion of racism among Australians
- Issues centring on leaving family
- Fear of decadent Western world
- Piety - issue of popular religion
- Higher status of priest
- Etiquette differences and behavioural attitudes
- Hierarchy of church and social status - understanding of authority
- History of hurt - inter-faith issues
- Inter-ethnic prejudices
- Money-stipend: motivation
- Small country communities - isolation

Dr Cahill spoke about the **complexity of different languages**, factors relating to the structure of discourse; linguistic queues and tonal language; the eastern mindset and its accepting of silence; smiling and what it means across cultures; the issue of eye contact and what it means across cultures; interpreting gestures; matters relating to territory and personal space, and so forth.

Session 2: Fr Noel Connolly: *“Giftedness and challenge in an increasingly multicultural Church”*. (Fr Noel Connolly is the Regional Director of the Columbans in Australasia).

In an effort to help the clergy handle the complexities of an increasingly multicultural church, he presented some foundational information about **the nature of culture**, providing a handout of his presentation.

He spoke of culture as a **powerful but underrated** influence in our lives and stories, and then went on to provide a possible definition of culture:

“culture is the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; basic assumptions that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.” (Schein)

Fr Noel then spoke of culture being comprised of **the things we take for granted** – i.e., accepting the unspoken realities in the world about us allow us to feel at home within the culture. Every society, he said, puts an order on its environment based on its needs and values, and then proceeds to take many things for granted. He spoke of the formation of culture and of the exercise of common sense. He presented a parable, “How a Village learned to cope with lions”.

Fr Noel’s handout included information about the **power of the culture**, culture shock (another parable – “Fred crosses the mountain and returns”), and a description of culture shock.

The **symptoms of culture shock** include feelings of loneliness, anger, frustration or irritability, and the loss of sense of humour; withdrawal, spending excessive amounts of time alone or with fellow nationals and not with locals; preoccupation with health and hypersensitivity; loss of identity, lack of confidence, feelings of insecurity and adequacy; feelings of being lost, overlooked, cheated or abused; negative feelings about the host culture and people – “they are bad because they make us feel bad ...”; compulsive eating and drinking, and excessive sleeping; boredom, tiredness and an inability to concentrate or work effectively.

The handout spoke of **culture shock as an opportunity for growth**, providing opportunities for us to see these people as a resource for the church and the world, and a real positive challenge for all. They are an asset – the starting point, not a problem. Today's biggest challenge, he said, is **facing otherness and difference in a Christian context**.

He spoke of **communicating across cultures**; of the experience of the medical world; genuine communication and what it means, and becoming human together. He then explained St Paul's way of **being human and St Paul's solution**, which included the conviction that Christ loves us and loves all without exception; the understanding that Christian communities must be built across all boundaries, and the realisation that we can only become human together.

Session 3: The AFTERNOON session involved a **general discussion** on the two morning presentations. After an initial reflection by Noel Connolly on the Vatican Council and the ongoing nature of Revelation, we were asked to consider how God was calling us through our own experience, inviting us to listen to each other in a new way, and inviting us to experience a shift in our understanding.

There are many **strategic challenges** facing the church and society today; changes inviting us to appreciate the **mutual benefits** across a multicultural church and nation. There was discussion about the wisdom of **seminarians** from other lands being trained in Australia. While not wishing to be absolute, nonetheless some questions were raised: do they choose themselves; are the problems they face simply those of growing up and, if so, is it wise that they train here in another culture during such growth; are we capable of understanding what they mean by 'yes' and 'no'? If we bring in seminarians at all, we need ensure they are older—mature--rather than younger. These are important issues which should cause us to hesitate about training younger men from other lands.

The magnitude of the issue was explained, namely, that from the end of 2004, **410 visas** were granted: approx. 207 for priests, 173 for religious sisters and brothers.

Frank Devoy explained the **two-step program of acculturation** for priests coming from overseas. The **first stage** related to nuts-and-bolts issues, addressed in a document prepared by his Office and approved by the Australian bishops in November 2005, entitled "*Some Issues to Consider when Welcoming Priests from Overseas*" (issues relating to initial investigations in home diocese, medical and hospital cover, obtaining a car licence, preparation of food and adjusting to it; washing of clothes, dietary habits, language assessment/accent training, establishing bank accounts, relationship with diocesan authorities, boundary issues, cultural differences, etc).

The **second stage**, approved by the Australian bishops at their meeting in May 2008 (entitled "*Welcoming, Enabling, and Integrating Overseas Priests: A Proposal for the Australian Church*"), calls for a four to five day live in program (repeated as often as is necessary), staged at the provincial level, by a properly accredited team in each province, under the guidance – if required – of a national Acculturation Resource Team of approximately 5 people (yet to be approved by the Bishops Commission on Church Ministry). This program is designed to cover 10 topics of critical concern, each listed in the approved proposal.

The first stage is being attempted in each diocese at the moment and may need **some sensitive adjustments** to the process of welcoming, enabling, and integrating these men into their new diocese, their new deanery, and their new parish. The second stage has been in place in the Victorian province for a year or so, proving to be very effective.

Other issues were raised such as: 1) how to maintain Australian values and culture in a multicultural setting, realising that the dominant Australian culture will necessarily change with the

onset of a greater migration – a gift not a problem; 2) the value of an Australian Catholic history to assist migrants in understanding what they are encountering; 3) the government, wishing to deal positively with the changing face of Australia, moved from documenting concerns to the development of an induction process; 4) dealing with married (Melkite) priests who are assistant priests in parishes of the West.

What is particularly clear is that **good mentoring** is absolutely necessary. In the initial years overseas priests certainly need strong support. It seems clear that a greater effort needs to be made in understanding how best to prepare mentors, choosing them carefully, and monitoring their effectiveness.

WEDNESDAY 14th May. Morning Prayer at 9.00 am.

Session 4: Fr Tony Kelly CSSR: *“Facing the future with hope.”* (See his book: **“Eschatology and Hope,”** Orbis Books, New York, 2006). A somewhat limited summary follows:

The parable of hope is found in the **great symphony of Christ death and resurrection**. Hope involves **going beyond** our present projection. In the horizon of hope, death is not so bad as it is the door. Christian life is not replaying the highlights of a game that is won, rather Christian life is **the** play itself. Hope begins by living within the limits of our individual lives, realising that each moment can be filled with the presence of God – the sacrament of the present moment. Enjoying what we can do in the present moment is part of hope.

There are so many pressures in our world pushing us into other unfulfilled moments. In a consumer world our language finds it difficult to speak of hope – a world in which there is deep cultural depression, a strange sense of isolation in a country where we all seem to be competitors. There we can experience the total isolation of failure – the exaggeration of evil, as it were. Hope is born of the understanding that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Hope is finding a way of expressing that God is love – one knows God’s hope for us by participating in the life of God.

Drawing on the **“God is love”** from 1John, Fr Tony explained that there are **seven key terms**, and if anyone is lacking, a complete experience of “God as love” is not present:

- **Father:** the origin of all there is in love
- **Son:** is the self-giving of God in human form that we can relate to
- **Cross:** at the heart of all we fear, love is found
- **Resurrection:** God's love is not defeated -- the Risen Christ is the heart of our acceptance of God's transforming love
- **Holy Spirit:** God's love continues to be communicate to us in the everyday
- **Church:** love actualised, enacted and celebrated in history: sacrament of salvation
- **Eschatology:** the love yet to come continues the experience of what we have received: hence our hope isn't fatuous or hollow.

We learn from Saint Paul (Romans 5:1-5) that Christian hope is justified in faith – **we boast** in our hope of life in Christ. We boast even in our **sufferings**, knowing that suffering produces **endurance**, and endurance produces **character**, and character produces **hope**, and hope that we have will not let us down, **because God’s love** has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which he has given us.

There seems to be **no word for hope** other than perhaps ‘**patient endurance**’; but, above all, most accurate metaphor for hope is “God is love”. Our culture seems often **negative in its language**, in many ways ‘killing’ any expression of hope. In the ordinary passage of life there

seems to be a **failure in imagination**, a faculty given to induce hope. The language of the **psalms** provides a **full repertoire of human emotions** from everyday life; words and emotions are there that should, in a parallel way, assist us placing hope in God – God's love is abundant in the face of life's realities.

Australian **poetry can stretch our imagination** and teach us the language of hope: e.g. Les Murray, "Absolutely nothing", the reflection on a man weeping in Martin Place. The appearance of Jesus after the resurrection made the writing of the Gospels possible – his appearance gave them the hope and the imagination required to write his message. This provides us the imagination, the hope, the opportunity to follow him as the disciples did. ... "God is not the God of the dead but of the living".

Christ, **like no one living memory**, was able to speak to a God free of cultural strictures, thus bringing hope to the poor, the needy, the outsiders. The kingdom of God was open to everyone, literally – even enemies. In the face of total rejection, the Christ of hope was able to say "today you will be with me in paradise".

Session 5: This session was devoted to "**The Way of Jesus: a Meditation,**" written and read by Tony Kelly. A copy is attached.

The AFTERNOON was free for Directors to visit the City and enjoy an evening meal.

THURSDAY 15th May. Morning Prayer at 9.00am

Session 6: The first part of the MORNING was set aside for group **discussion, across provinces**, sharing initiatives and challenges. Each of the six groups was asked to identify two valuable points of interest or challenges:

1. Proposed Synod in Cairns over a five year period.
2. Concern about stress in clergy life.
3. The value of Regional meetings in different centres of the Region – insight in to local scene.
4. Importance of social gatherings for priests – the Friday luncheon get-together, anniversaries.
5. The importance of good conference speakers and retreat directors.
6. Retired priests' foundation set up in Sydney.
7. Shared resources by Broken Bay and Wilcannia-Forbes dioceses.
8. Supervision for clergy in remote areas (John Armstrong).
9. Mini-sabbaticals for 25th, 40th, 50th and purchase of property for this purpose (Cenicle Brisbane)
10. Initiatives for the wellbeing of priests in retirement; get-togethers 3 times a year.
11. Clergy care, health; the Maitland-Newcastle clergy care unit.
12. The importance of sabbaticals and problems getting a supply.

Session 7: Frank Devoy presented the **Director's Report** with these points:

- Congratulations and thanks to the Victorian province for their excellent organisation, especially Martin Ashe and Megan Mitcham.
- Thanked the Council, and Bishops Don and Brian for their continued warm support.
- Thanked each Diocesan Director for the fine work being done around Australia and spoke of importance of Directors working at home as a team; the role is not an end in itself.
- Eastern Churches: possible appointments of DCLMs for Melkite, Maronite, Chaldeans, with implication for NSW province numbers-wise.
- ACBC approval of Acculturation proposal for O/seas priests; details to come from +Michael Malone.

- The National Assembly of Diocesan Priests in NZ – possible model for provinces here; continued link with NZ supported on both sides of the Tasman.
- Spiritual Directors – developing a list.
- Explained the cost structures at MacKillop and their profession approach; each Director continues to be subsidised by Frank's Office \$200 per head.
- Bishops Commission for Church Ministry approved the updating of website.
- Importance of thinking and imagining 'mission in parochial districts' rather than tight isolated parish structures, as parish boundaries blur with amalgamations and clustering.
- Strong call from young priests overseas to be trained in leadership, administrative and interpersonal skills; necessary here too as PPs are younger and without apprenticeship.
- Frank completes 3 years in the job this year (with a further year in 2009); will be reviewed later this year.

Session 8: The gathering met in **Regional groups** to discuss the dates for National Meeting for 2009 and dates and places for Regional Meetings in 2009. The following dates and places were decided:

Regional Meetings 2009: 19-22 January 2009, NSW, at Kensington Sydney; 26-29 January, Queensland in Brisbane; 9-11 February, Victoria & Tasmania in Melbourne; 2-6 February, SANTWA in Port Pirie.

National Meeting 2009: 13-17 July 2009 at Mary MacKillop Place.

Session 9: The CLOSING session took pace at 4pm with each Director nominating a **topic of interest for future** consideration or an expression of appreciation for this meeting:

- How to live in a healthy way in the new situation we face.
- Shift from sense of localised parish priest to sense of mission in parochial district.
- Re-imagining the priesthood and ministry today.
- What essentially comprises the church today?
- Formation for future clergy.
- Professional development of clergy.
- What is the new evangelisation?
- The Parish: a new mission field.
- What energises clergy: what keeps blokes going?
- The creation of enthusiasm in priests, boosting their confidence.
- What is our relationship with the 90% unchurched; does it undermine our confidence?
- History of regional Catholicism; how did we come to where we are.
- The level of cohesion among us: support, openness.
- Communication between retired and active priests – mission beyond the parish.
- Re-imagining the priesthood: honesty, openness, and determination.
- Where we're at is where we're at and that's all we have to work with.
- Like debutants: it's so much easier when the right tune is playing – so?
- Listening to what's happening; the riches of different cultures, and in the presbyterate too.
- Importance of mutual positive support; importance of events like this meeting.
- The blessing of group session like this morning's – inter-province discussion.
- The Diocese: such a mix and messiness; transition of priests to many different cultures.
- Enabling a person to take a step forward by entering into what one fears the most.
- What we can learn from other priests, their experiences and their groups.
- Now is the more normal time: (period of 1950-60s an aberration) get on with the job.
- The value of Tony Kelly's meditation on Christ.
- Inside the Church/outside the Church: the truth out there.
- Facing the future with hope: hope makes the intractable possible.
- Being with this gathering is enjoyable; it is real and supportive – it's what matters here.

- Facing the complex and difficult issues with hope.
- Refocussing, re-imagining.
- Overseas priests, a gift; a two-way street.
- Being a catalyst of acculturation; the ease of being with each other.
- The diversity and unity; looking after retired priests.
- This group: so gifted, so supportive: we'll find a way out of the problems.
- Taking the spirit of the conference home: Noel Connolly's understanding of culture.
- If he's alive, we can never rest in peace again (T Kelly): get on with it.
- Shared experience of brother priests ... a blessing.
- The cross-fertilisation among the regions; the nature of culture *per se*.

This session was followed by Mass celebrated by Bishop Sproxtton. The Formal Dinner took place at 6.30pm during which Fr Paul McDonald expressed congratulations to Patrick O'Regan, Brian Moloney, and Olex Kenez, and Chris de Souza (in his absence), who were celebrating their 25th anniversary of priesthood.



Frank Devoy,
Director,
Office for Clergy Life and Ministry

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