



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service

20 December 2022

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water
PO Box 6021
Canberra ACT 2600
CCEEW@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into plastic pollution in Australia's oceans and waterways

This submission from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (the Conference) as prepared by the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service (the Commission) is made to contribute to the Inquiry into plastic pollution in Australia's oceans and waterways.

The Catholic community is the largest religious group in Australia with more than one in five Australians identifying as Catholic. The Church provides Australia's largest non-government grouping of hospitals, aged care and community care services, providing approximately 10 per cent of healthcare services in Australia. It provides social services and support to more than 450,000 people across Australia each year. It has more than 1750 schools enrolling more than 785,000 Australian students.

The Conference is a permanent institution of the Catholic Church in Australia and the instrumentality used by the Australian Catholic Bishops to act nationally and address issues of national significance.

The Commission is one of a number of commissions established by the Conference to address important issues both within the Church and in the broader Australian community. The Commission has responsibility for commenting on integral ecology.

The Conference seeks to participate in public debate by making reasoned arguments that can be considered by all people of goodwill.

In their 2021-22 Social Justice Statement "Cry of the Earth Cry of the Poor", Australia's Catholic bishops said that "the suffering of our rivers and waterways, our groundwater, reefs and oceans, is plain to see."¹

In February, Australian bishops will meet in Suva with other bishops in the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania to discuss our ocean home, the mistreatment of which is of great concern for the Church and for the local people.

¹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Cry of the Earth Cry of the Poor*. Social Justice Statement 2021-22. Page 7.

Over the last four years the Catholic Church in Australia has participated in the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, which is a national decision-making body to establish priorities and directions for the Church in this country. One of the resolutions of the Council was that:

“by 2024, each Catholic parish, diocese, eparchy, educational institution or organisation commits to joining the Laudato Si’ Platform [which sets seven goals to provide guidance on urgent and immediate actions to take in the care of our common home]; and by 2030 either develops its own or participates in an established Laudato Si’ Action Plan which includes the following elements:

- a. a public commitment;
- b. a governance model, processes and procedures;
- c. a mechanism for listening to the ecological wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, developed in partnership with Aboriginal Catholic Ministry and diocesan justice, ecology and peace bodies where these exist;
- d. regular reporting on progress towards and accountability for defined goals and objectives; and
- e. co-construction of those goals and objectives with the people they are meant to support and serve.”

This is a major commitment by the Church in Australia to take tangible action to ingrain a deeper, more integral ecology in the life of the Church and Catholics throughout Australia.

The Conference appreciates the opportunity to make a submission.

The Australian Catholic Church, oceans and waterways

The environment, the oceans and waterways and plastic pollution have been a concern for the Church for many years.

More than twenty years ago, Pope John Paul II said that the “governments and people of Oceania” have a “... special responsibility to assume on behalf of all humanity stewardship of the Pacific Ocean, containing over one half of the earth’s total supply of water. The continued health of this and other oceans is critical for the welfare of people not only in Oceania but in every part of the world.”²

Pope Francis has sounded a warning over plastic pollution, saying “we cannot allow our seas and oceans to be littered by endless fields of floating plastic.”³ He re-emphasised this message only last year.⁴

Pietro Cardinal Parolin, Secretary of State for the Holy See, conveying the greetings of Pope Francis to the Fourth International Conference on Our Ocean, an Ocean for Life, wrote “we cannot

² Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*. 22 November 2001. #31.

³ 'Endless fields of floating plastic': Pope urges action on plastic in the ocean. *SBS News*, 2 September 2018. See: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/endless-fields-of-floating-plastic-pope-urges-action-on-plastic-in-the-ocean/l9s9ji673>

⁴ Pope Francis: Don't throw plastic in the sea! By Linda Bordoni, *Vatican News*, 11 July 2021. See: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-07/pope-angelus-appeal-sea-sunday-oceans-pollution.html>

pretend to ignore the problems of ocean pollution resulting, for example, from plastic and micro-plastics that enter the food chain and cause grave consequences for the health of marine and human life.”⁵

Saving the environment needs a moral culture

The problem of plastic pollution reveals a much broader cultural problem that must be addressed before real change can happen.

Care for the environment is more than just a practice but reflects a moral view that includes respect for people but also recognises that concern for others must be linked through an integral ecology with concern for the natural world and the interconnection of all living things.⁶

We see a deterioration in the environment when we have an ethical or moral degradation in the cultural models that shape our communities. For example, the environment suffers when we no longer acknowledge any needs that take precedence over desires for profit, convenience and comfort.⁷

An integral ecology means “the book of nature is one and indivisible and includes the environment, life, sexuality, family, social relationships, and other aspects.”⁸ It means that people have an obligation to protect the environment as a gift from God to us all.⁹

Unless we regard the natural environment as a marvellous gift entrusted to our care, carefully balancing that with the benefits that sustainable industry can bring to the community¹⁰ “... our attitudes will be those of the ruler, the consumer or the mere exploiter of natural resources, unable to put a limit to ... immediate interests.”¹¹

Poverty

Given the fact that many poorer countries depend on the oceans or seas for their livelihoods, any damage to the environment will disproportionately affect people who are poor. Pope Francis speaks of “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet.”¹² Care for the oceans and seas must therefore be part of Australia's commitment to foreign aid and to the human development of people beyond our shores.¹³

Access to clean drinking water is a human right. The availability of potable water is vital because it is necessary for people's survival when the local water quality is unsuitable and the poor cannot

⁵ Letter from Pietro Cardinal Parolin, Secretary of State, conveying the greetings of Pope Francis to the Fourth International Conference on Our Ocean, an Ocean for Life. 27 September 2017.

⁶ *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*. An encyclical letter on ecology and climate by Pope Francis, #5; Cichos, K et al, The protection of seas and oceans in light of international law and Catholic social teaching. In Cichos, K et al, *Sustainable Development Goals and the Catholic Church: Catholic Social Teaching and the UN's Agenda 2030*. Routledge, 2021

⁷ Cichos, K et al; *Laudato Si'*, #5, 6, 56.

⁸ *Laudato Si'*, #6.

⁹ Cichos, K et al

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*. 22 November 2001. #31.

¹¹ *Laudato Si'*, #11.

¹² *Laudato Si'*, #16.

¹³ *Laudato Si'*, #24; Cichos, K et al.

afford to buy drinking water. Lack of access to good quality drinking water is responsible for the deaths of many people in poverty every day.¹⁴

When considering plastic pollution in oceans and waterways "... a true ecological approach becomes a social approach, which must integrate environmental justice in the discussions, to hear the cry of the earth as much as the cry of the poor."¹⁵

So Pope Francis has argued "... our duty to care for the oceans as part of an integrated vision of human development."¹⁶

Conclusion

The Committee will naturally look towards reform of government policies to try to address the great problem of plastic pollution in oceans and waterways. Policies are necessary. But addressing the problem of pollution ultimately requires a change of culture that safeguards the earth's delicate balance and create healthy conditions for life to flourish. For this reason, Pope Francis warns that "a technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress."¹⁷ Hence, it is important to envision a new economy that shifts away from consumption and exploitation of the environment. Unless people recognise that their needs are secondary to the common good and unless they recognise the integral ecology in which we live, the problems of pollution will continue. Environmental degradation will continue to impact disproportionately on the poor.

I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have. I can be contacted via Mr Jeremy Stuparich, Deputy General Secretary at the Conference [REDACTED]
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Yours faithfully

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Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv
Chair, Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service
Bishop of Parramatta

¹⁴ Laudato Si', #28-30.

¹⁵ Laudato Si', #49.

¹⁶ Laudato Si', #41.

¹⁷ Laudato Si', #194.