

As I take some time out to reflect on the year that was, I realise that 2014 was a year of highs and lows for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC).

Many wonderful occasions have taken place throughout the year and the guidance of the Holy Spirit can certainly be seen through the dedicated work of our agencies, bishops commissions, councils and at the Secretariat.

Pope Francis asked us to be missionary disciples. In our work at the Bishops Conference we are called to take part in this new missionary 'going forth'. Reflecting on the work carried out by the Conference and its staff over the past year, I think of the joy that Pope Francis refers to and which I have seen. Amid busy times with pressing obligations, the Conference and staff have worked with hearts full of faith.

The Catholic Church in Australia hosted numerous informative and evangelising events this year including, the Pastoral Research Conference, Proclaim 2014 and the Youth Ministry Convention to highlight a few. On that note, great strides are being made in youth ministry across the country led by the newly established ACBC Office for Youth through the support of the Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life.

As 2014 draws to a close, we continue to celebrate 50 years of love and compassion at Caritas Australia. For over half a century, Caritas Australia's volunteers and supporters have walked hand-in-hand with the world's poorest communities, acknowledging that the poor are rich in the eyes of Jesus.

Our annual social justice statement focused on sport, an issue that appealed to many. The statement entitled 'A Crown for Australia: Striving for the best in our sporting nation' sparked discussion and debate across the country. It was a momentous year for the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council as the organisation published 'Building Bridges', a collection of social justice statements from 1988 to 2013. The tradition of annual social justice statements is one of which all Catholics in Australia can be proud.

During 2014, the redevelopment of our website came to fruition. This is a significant repository of information representing what is happening across the Catholic Church in Australia.

Over the course of 2014, we have seen a change in leadership at Catholic Social Services, Australia and our associate Catholic Health Australia. We also welcomed new executive secretaries to a number of bishops' commissions. We

wish Bruce Ryan well in retirement and our best wishes go to Sr Elizabeth Delaney in her new role with the National Council of Churches in Australia.

One of the great advances for the Catholic Church in Australia this year is the appointment of five new bishops. The Conference warmly welcomed the new Bishop of Rockhampton, Michael McCarthy, Bishop of Wilcannia–Forbes Columba Macbeth–Green, new Auxiliary Bishops of Melbourne Mark Edwards and Terry Curtin and most recently the new Bishop of Sale, Patrick O’Regan. We are blessed to have such talented and pastoral men leading our dioceses.

We gathered to congratulate our brother bishop Anthony Fisher during his episcopal installation as Archbishop of Sydney. Soon after, we congratulated Bishop Peter Comensoli as he becomes a shepherd to the people of Broken Bay.

With joy and hope for our Universal Church, we welcomed the appointment of Cardinal George Pell to the newly created Secretariat of the Economy at the Holy See.

This year brought the formal establishment of the Syro–Malabar Eparchy in Australia. A process we have been working towards over the past few years to provide pastoral care and sacramental programs for Syro–Malabar Catholics most of whom originated in India but are now living in Australia.

During the Conference plenary meetings, held at the tomb of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop in May and November, we held a number of pastoral discussions on issues of concern like parish life today, aboriginal constitutional issues, same sex marriage and euthanasia.

Sadly in 2014, we farewelled five of our much loved bishops who will always be in our prayers. The passing of Bishop Michael Putney is a great loss to the Universal Church, and he leaves us with many rich and inspiring memories.

In July, Bishop Emeritus of Broome John Jobst S.A.C., was laid to eternal rest. During August, we laid Archbishop Emeritus of Sydney Cardinal Edward Clancy to rest and Bishop Emeritus of Darwin Edmund John Collins, M.S.C.. In recent weeks, I celebrated the funeral Mass of Bishop Emeritus of Sale Jeremiah Coffey. May they rest in peace.

The Catholic Church in Australia joined with a number of religious and State leaders to host a National Day of Mourning for the victims of MH17. The service,

held at St Patrick's Cathedral Melbourne, was a timely reminder of the precious and fleeting nature of life.

The Australian Catholic Bishops have continued to fully cooperate with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. We are working jointly with Catholic Religious Australia through the Truth, Justice and Healing Council to allow the Church to speak with one voice. We are mindful of words to "trust in the Holy Spirit" to guide us in our decision making and to serve our people wisely. We pray that the outcomes of the Royal Commission will be reached with openness, courage and humility.

Finally, representing the Australian Catholic Bishops at the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was both an interesting and challenging experience.

The Australian Bishops will continue to pray for families everywhere, in particular reflecting on how we can bring people who are broken closer to Christ and the Church.

In his concluding address to the Synod Fathers, the Holy Father was encouraging and inclusive: "The Holy Father described our Church as one that has the doors wide open to receive the needy, the penitent, and not only the just or those who believe they are perfect!"

May I wish you and your families a happy and holy Christmas. Thank you to all who work so tirelessly for our Church throughout Australia. I pray that 2015 will bring you many blessings of hope, health and happiness.

God bless,

Archbishop Hart

President

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference