



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry

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21 September 2023

Dr Bulent Hass Dellal AO
Chair
Multicultural Framework Review

Dear Dr Dellal

Submission to the Multicultural Framework Review

This submission from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (the Conference), as prepared by the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry (the Commission), is made to contribute to this review into Australia's multicultural framework.

More than one in five Australians identify as Catholic. The Catholic Church and its agencies contribute in various ways across the spectrum of Australian society. As an integral part of its core mission, the Church seeks to assist people to experience the fullness of life. It is concerned with all that impacts on human dignity and wellbeing for the common good.

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 several commissions established by the Conference to address important issues both within the Church and in the broader Australian community. The Commission has the responsibility for commenting on migration, refugees and the active participation of all the baptised in the life of the Church.

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

The Australian Catholic Church is one of Australia's most culturally diverse institutions and has worshippers from all over the world. The Church serves as a natural connecting point for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to celebrate their faith with other Australians while simultaneously maintaining a connection to their culturally unique practice of faith.

The Church also contributes to cultural integration through its chaplaincy services, which provide culturally and linguistically diverse peoples with access to resources and necessary support, and through facilitating masses and services in different languages and with different cultural customs.

The Australian Catholic Church's experience with fostering cultural diversity highlights two main areas of necessary reform for our multicultural frameworks. The arrival of migrants from countries where religious freedom is limited or threatened highlights the importance of safeguarding religious freedom in Australia. Additionally, ensuring the integration of migrants into the community also requires better treatment of people during the immigration process.

A Multicultural Church

The Catholic Church is blessed to be a global and culturally diverse church that has always testified, as St. Paul did to the people of first-century Greece, that "There is no room for distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free."¹

Catholic social teaching advocates for building fraternity between people of diverse cultural heritages. This approach to multiculturalism promotes the preservation of local cultures and honours the heritage of people from all backgrounds. In the words of Pope Francis, this approach to multiculturalism will help us to "communicate with each other, to discover the gifts of each person, to promote that which unites us, and to regard our differences as an opportunity to grow in mutual respect."²

The Church in Australia has always been characterised by its strong multicultural and migrant composition. Much of the Church has its foundations in Irish immigration in the 18th and 19th centuries. Since then, the Church has grown into one of Australia's most ethnically diverse organisations. The National Church Life Survey observed in 2021 that the Catholic Church had the highest number of people born in other countries of any Christian

¹ Colossians 3:11a

² Francis, 6 June 2015, 'Apostolic Journey to Sarajevo: Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting at the Franciscan International Study Centre', https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/june/documents/papa-francesco_20150606_sarajevo-incontro-ecumenico.html

denomination.³ The same survey found that more than half of all Catholic parishes in Australia have multicultural congregations.⁴

The Church places particular emphasis on celebrating and integrating the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians into the Catholic Church. There are more than 135,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics in Australia, meaning that more than one in six First Nations peoples identify as Catholic. Today, the Church's commitment to the celebration of First Nations cultures is seen in our participation in reconciliation projects, the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and language into Catholic religious services and the celebration of the annual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday, which commemorates First Nations peoples in the Catholic Church.

In this year's annual Social Justice Statement Australia's Catholic bishops have called on the nation to seek "a new engagement" with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For people with backgrounds in other cultures, the Catholic Church may act as a natural connection point for them to celebrate the faith that binds them to people from all over the world while also keeping a connection with their heritage. The Church in Australia helps to facilitate this by conducting masses and services in 44 languages across the country for an average of more than 64,000 people every weekend.⁵ Many dioceses also host annual multicultural masses to celebrate the diverse cultures of the Catholics in their community. Additionally, the Church celebrates the World Day of Migrants and Refugees annually on the last Sunday of September. This celebration aims to embrace diversity and promote inclusion.

Research compiled by the National Centre for Pastoral Research shows that 21.4 per cent of Catholics in Australia were born in another country and that more than one million Australian Catholics speak a language other than English at home.⁶ Nearly 100,000 Catholics arrived from non-English speaking countries between 2018 and 2021, which is more than one in seven of all migrants from non-English speaking countries recorded in that time.⁷ Recent arrivals to Australia among Catholics predominantly come from the Middle East and South America, especially Colombia (36 per cent of recent arrivals), Brazil (28 per cent) and

³ Adam Wesselinoff, 7 October 2023, 'Twice as multicultural', *Catholic Weekly*, <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/twice-as-multicultural/>

⁴ Adam Wesselinoff, 7 October 2023, 'Twice as multicultural', *Catholic Weekly*, <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/twice-as-multicultural/>

⁵ Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid and Marilyn Chee, 2020, 'The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2016', *National Centre for Pastoral Research*, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Mass-attendance-in-Australia-2016-Revised-July-2021.pdf>

⁶ Prepared by the ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research from ABS data, 2023, *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia*, p. 3. <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2021-Social-Profile-of-the-Catholic-Community-in-Australia-R.pdf>

⁷ Prepared by the ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research from ABS data, 2023, *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia*, p. 5. <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2021-Social-Profile-of-the-Catholic-Community-in-Australia-R.pdf>

Argentina (16 per cent).⁸ The multicultural composition of the Church is also evident in the Church's clergy, as 36 per cent of priests in Australia were born in another country.⁹

Through the Eastern Catholic churches, the Catholic Church also provides a particular ministry to people who share heritage in other cultures. By preserving their distinctive cultural legacy, with liturgies in languages other than English and ancient traditions unique to their churches, these churches express the unique diversity of the Catholic faith. Eastern Catholic Churches with prominence in Australia include the Maronite Church (originating in Lebanon), the Chaldean Church (Iraq), the Ukrainian Catholic Church, the Syro-Malabar Church (India), the Coptic Catholic Church (Egypt) and the Melkite Church (Syria), among others.

Migrant Chaplaincy Services

The Church plays a crucial role in cultural integration through its migrant chaplaincy services. The Archdiocese of Sydney works closely with new arrivals, particularly from Middle Eastern countries, and provides pastoral assistance for elderly members of earlier migration communities. The Archdiocese of Brisbane has full-time or part-time chaplaincy programs with at least ten cultural communities.

Catholic communities also strongly contribute to the integration and support of migrants and refugees. For example, Catholic Care's Refugee Hub in Newcastle sponsors language support programs as well as several workshops on diverse topics such as legal management, financial management, driver training and basic safety.¹⁰ The Dignity Project from the Diocese of Toowoomba helps asylum seekers within the diocese with Department of Home Affairs forms.¹¹ Catholic Care's All Saints of Africa Community Drop-In Centre in Blacktown offers supports that range from connecting migrants to financial counsellors to helping children of migrants with their homework.¹² Other supports include programs that sponsor refugee families to build social networks, help migrants with access to health resources and

⁸ Prepared by the ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research from ABS data, 2023, Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia', p. 17. <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2021-Social-Profile-of-the-Catholic-Community-in-Australia-R.pdf>

⁹ Ruth Powell, Nicole Hancock, Miriam Pepper, and Sam Sterland, 2018 'A demographic profile of senior clergy in local churches: Catholic Church in Australia', *National Church Life Survey*, 2016 National Church Life Survey Local Church Leaders Report, p.7, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/NCLS2016LocalChurchClergyDemographics-TA000000res.pdf>

¹⁰ Elizabeth Symington, 1 May 2023, 'Community encouraged to 'pitch in' and support CatholicCare's Refugee Hub', *MN News*, <https://mnnews.today/social-services/2023/community-encouraged-to-pitch-in-and-support-catholiccare-s-refugee-hub/>

¹¹ *Toowoomba Social Justice Commission Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba*, 2020, 'The Dignity Project', <https://www.socialjusticetoowoomba.com/the-dignity-project>

¹² CatholicCare Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains, 25 June 2021, 'Refugee Week 20 – 26 June: Agnes shares her story', <https://catholiccarewsbm.org.au/article/refugee-week-20-26-june-agnes-shares-her-story/>

provide support to resolve employment, financial stress and accommodation issues.¹³ Pastoral support and chaplaincy services are also available to people who feel more comfortable speaking other languages.

Similar supports for both temporary and permanent migrants are integrated into Catholic parishes, schools, healthcare and social services, and have been for many decades. In many cases, these supports are the fruit of the hospitality and love of a parish community. For example, in Brisbane, parishioners organised a prayer vigil and letter-writing campaign to support a Sri Lankan immigrant and much loved parishioner who was about to be deported and separated from his family in Australia.¹⁴ Also, in Port Augusta, the All Saints Parish Pastoral Council held a community event with seasonal workers to share fellowship with people separated from their families over the Covid pandemic.¹⁵ These examples demonstrate how migrants and refugees have found homes and supportive networks within their local parishes.¹⁶

Multiculturalism and Religious Freedom

Within the Catholic Church, a growing number of members are migrants to Australia from countries where religious freedom is limited or threatened. Several reports have documented across the world the increasing rates of vilification, discrimination and violence against people because of their religious belief.¹⁷ Their experience informs all Australians about the preciousness of religious freedom and that its guarantee is essential to a truly multicultural society.

For example, many international assessments have stated that the treatment of Christians in Iraq qualifies as genocide under the United Nations criteria.¹⁸ The Christian population that remain make up 0.4 per cent of the Iraqi population¹⁹, with some estimates holding that the

¹³ Joe Higgins, 30 September 2022, 'Brisbane parishes, schools and Church agencies invited to sponsor a refugee family in new outreach initiative', *The Catholic Leader*, <https://catholicleader.com.au/news/qld/brisbane-parishes-schools-and-church-agencies-invited-to-sponsor-a-refugee-family-in-new-outreach-initiative/>

¹⁴ *The Catholic Leader*, 28 March 2023, 'Urgent Campaign to Keep Family Together', <https://catholicleader.com.au/news/campaign-to-keep-family-together/>

¹⁵ *National Centre for Evangelisation*, 3 April 2023, 'Seasonal workers bringing life to our communities', <https://nce.catholic.org.au/the-bridge/the-bridge/seasonal-workers-bringing-life-to-our-communities>

¹⁶ *The Record*, 11 May 2023, 'Local appeal directly helps Ukrainian families', <https://therecord.com.au/news/local/local-appeal-directly-helps-ukrainian-families/>

¹⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>

¹⁸ Philip Mountstephen, 2019, Bishop of Truro's Independent Review For The Foreign Secretary Of FCO Support For Persecuted Christians: Final Report and Recommendations, p. 16, <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/storage/2019/07/final-report-and-recommendations.pdf>

¹⁹ T.M. Johnson and G.A. Zurlo ed. *World Christian Database*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill), Accessed 18 August 2023.

number of Christians in the country has declined by over 80 per cent.²⁰ A report commissioned by the United Kingdom government in 2019 concluded that “the overwhelming majority (80 per cent) of persecuted religious believers are Christians” who suffer “routine discrimination in education, employment and social life up to genocidal attacks against Christian communities.”²¹

This example is especially relevant to Australia's cultural composition because almost 93,000 Australians, including more than 36,000 Catholics, were born in Iraq.²² Migrants from Iraq are also more likely to have arrived in Australia recently as more than 28,000 people have arrived in Australia from Iraq since 2016²³ and more than one in six of all Catholics who have migrated to Australia since 2018 were born in Iraq.²⁴

The arrival of migrants from Iraq highlights an important reason why religious freedom should be safeguarded. Protection for religious freedom, thereby ensuring that people can celebrate their faith in peace, is essential for people to feel at home in Australia. Australian Governments have still not fully recognised the religious freedom rights pronounced in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which says, in part, that “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”²⁵

Migrant and Refugee Policies

Although it is not the purpose of this review to consider “immigration or visa processes, applications, timeframes, outcomes or review”, a complete review of Australia’s multicultural policies would also examine the critical incidences and procedures that affect people as they arrive in Australia. Many migrants and refugees involved in the Church’s migrant chaplaincy network report increased anxiety and depression involved in the Visa processing experience. These experiences are often their first of Australia and may have a lasting effect on their integration into Australia’s community.

²⁰ U.S. Department of State. (2019), *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq*, Office of International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/>

²¹ Philip Mountstephen, 2019, Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review For The Foreign Secretary Of FCO Support For Persecuted Christians: Final Report and Recommendations, p. 22, <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/storage/2019/07/final-report-and-recommendations.pdf>

²² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), *People in Australia who were born in Iraq*, https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/4204_AUS

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), *People in Australia who were born in Iraq*, https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/4204_AUS

²⁴ Prepared by the ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research from ABS data, 2023, *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia*, p. 17. <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2021-Social-Profile-of-the-Catholic-Community-in-Australia-R.pdf>

²⁵ UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, Article 18 (1), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

More can be done to show more compassion and hospitality in the migration process. One of the most significant reforms will be to adopt, as part of a multicultural framework, a commitment to speeding up visa processing and increasing access to support networks that help migrants integrate into the community.

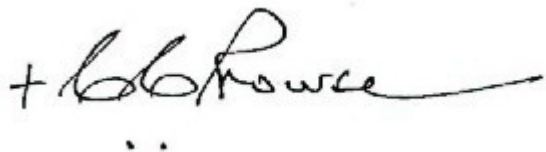
Conclusion

The Australian Catholic Church contributes significantly to multiculturalism in Australia through its multilingual church services, dedicated chaplaincy services and support for the many Catholics from culturally diverse backgrounds. Doing this makes the Church one of the community's forefront leaders in pursuing a more multicultural Australia.

There needs to be reform in Australia's policies to ensure religious freedom and better treatment of people as they migrate to Australia.

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 on 02 6201 9863 or at policy@catholic.org.au

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Prowse", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first name.

Archbishop Christopher Prowse

Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn

Chair of the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry