

## CHAPTER 15

# DEVELOPMENT OF THE FEDERATION OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCES OF OCEANIA

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### **Introduction**

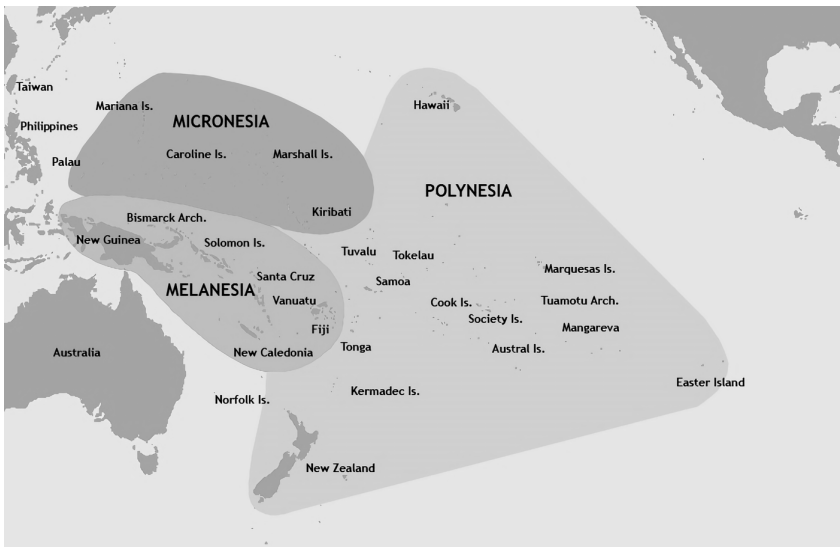
Growth of the Catholic Church in Oceania closely followed the nineteenth century colonial expansion in the region. Changes of political control brought about a change in church personnel with their different approaches and varied access to resources. Following the three exploratory voyages of Captain James Cook between 1768 and 1779, British influence remained strong in the South Pacific; however, in the nineteenth century Catholic missionaries were predominantly French. After the Second World War, the position of the Catholic Church in many parts of the Pacific was strongly influenced by the movement from colonialism to independence and the establishment of the local church. This chapter documents some important moments in the development of the church focusing on the organisation of Bishops' Conferences, and the establishment of a body that would allow the Church to have a united voice on common issues, and facilitate cooperation of the Catholic development organisations resulting in the founding of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences for Oceania. The term Pacific refers to the Islands of the Pacific Ocean (sometimes grouped in three culture areas as Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia). The term Oceania in this paper refers not only to the Pacific Islands, but also to Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

### **Oceania and the Second Vatican Council**

Twenty-seven bishops and vicars apostolic from the Pacific region, five bishops from New Zealand and thirty-five bishops from Australia attended

the Second Vatican Council (1963-65). Bishops from Oceania were only 2% of bishops in the council hall, having little influence as a group (Wiltgen 1991, 13). Unlike some of the Bishops' Conferences from Europe, meetings by the bishops from Oceania during the Second Vatican Council were informal and there is little evidence of a common stand by the bishops from the region. In fact the region is diverse covering almost one third of the earth's surface.

Today the Pacific Islands comprise twenty-five nations with varying political status reflecting colonial history from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: independent nations (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Aotearoa New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu), a US state (Hawaii), a US territory (American Samoa, Guam), Free Association with USA (Marshall Islands), US Commonwealth (Northern Mariana Islands), Free Association with New Zealand (Cook Islands, Niue), New Zealand dependency (Tokelau), Federated States of Micronesia, (Palau), Territory of France (Wallis and Futuna, New Caledonia, French Polynesia). Rapa Nui is a dependency of Chile; Pitcairn Island a British Dependency; and West Papua is a state of Indonesia. The complex varied political status of these nations reflects the weaving of a long history of global impact on the region.



Map of Pacific Culture Areas (Commons Wikipedia.org)

The interventions of the Bishops reflect practicalities of life in Oceania. For example, Bishop Martin from New Caledonia wanted more recognition of the languages of the region in the liturgy and to have better adaptation of the rites of the sacraments and sacramentals to the customs and mentality of the indigenous people (Paunga 2006, 73). Bishop Lemay of the North Solomons called for the Council not to be confined by scholastic reasoning but to be open to all people of good will, whether within the Catholic Church or not (92). Pacific theologian Mikaele Paunga notes how the interventions and written observations of the Oceania bishops “clearly indicate their awareness that the Church is being sent to the contemporary world. It takes into account how people live and experience life in their cultural, socio-political and economic contexts” (117). Four themes from the Council supported by the Oceania bishops come through strongly: firstly, recognition of the indispensable ministry of the laity; secondly, ecumenism requiring poverty of spirit and humility on behalf of the Catholic church; thirdly, inculturation, which links with the fourth—dialogue with the totality of life of people.

The years immediately following the Council saw vast changes in the life of the Church in Oceania. One of the foremost of these was localization with priests, bishops and religious born in the region. Australia and New Zealand became less reliant on clergy from Ireland. In the Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, Louis Vangeke had been trained under the Jesuits in Madagascar before being ordained and later becoming bishop among his own people in Papua (Garrett 1997, 168). The first Bishop of Samoa, Pio Taofinu’u was ordained bishop in 1968 (and cardinal in 1973). Gregory Singkai was ordained bishop in the North Solomons in 1974, Petero Mataca bishop in Fiji in 1974, and Paul Mea of Kiribati became bishop just before independence in 1979. This move to having indigenous bishops helped bring a new sense of identity to Church in Oceania.

Reference is made to Bishops because they attended Vatican II and had the responsibility for instigating reforms following the Council. However, essential to the life of the local church were religious sisters who provided invaluable service particularly in health, education and training of catechists. Initially, sisters came as foreign missionaries, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly after Vatican II their presence rapidly became localized at all levels. At the local level, church leadership has come from catechists and people exercising other lay ministries

## **Bishops Conferences**

The Catholic Church in Oceania has formed the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO), established to provide a forum where the members can share their interests and concerns and plan for common pastoral action. The FCBCO is made up of the four Bishops Conferences of Australia (ACBC), New Zealand (NZCBC), Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (CBCPNG/SI), and the Episcopal Conference of the Pacific (CEPAC). The first meeting of the bishops of the region was during the visit of Pope Paul VI to Australia in 1970. The bishops discussed the concept of forming an official body in 1979 after seven bishops from various parts of Oceania were guests of the Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops Conferences (FABC) when they attended the Bishops' Institute for Social Action in the Philippines. Seeing how effective the FABC had become, they agreed among themselves that a similar federation of the four Bishops' Conferences in the Oceania region should be formed.

Little happened until the joint meeting of the four Conferences in May 1985 in Sydney, attended by seventy-seven bishops from the region, who agreed to the establishment of the FCBCO in principle. They also agreed that their development agencies, working together as the Pacific Partnership for Human Development (PPHD), would be responsible to the Federation.

In an address to the FCBCO assembly in Rabaul in 2002, Cardinal Williams of New Zealand wove together strands of life of the Church that encouraged the establishment of the FCBCO (Williams, 2002). He refers to a common history, the incarnation of the Word in the Pacific context, doing things together that would financially not be possible for some of the Conferences, and having a united voice on common issues such as environmental concerns and issues surrounding migration and transmigration. A particularly significant strand was the practical matter of the cooperation of the Catholic development organisations and of the Catholic communication agencies. This required a direct link with a formal episcopal body for effective development in the region

### **The FCBCO promoting the teaching of Vatican II**

Documentation from the FCBCO indicates that the bishops were attentive particularly to *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on Church in the modern World), and Pope Paul VI's post-conciliar encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Evangelization in the Modern World), emphasizing

that the world is the concern of the church in what amounts to a new understanding of the role of the Church in history (Murphy 1975). Some of the bishops were also inspired by the 1971 Synod of Bishops which reminded them that it was time for the church to interpret the signs of the age and proclaim prophetically a better and more human future when confronted with ingrained structures of injustice. The Catholic Bishops of the Pacific declared that they were “prepared to become actively involved in helping the peoples of the South Pacific in their struggle for national identity, legitimate self-determination, true freedom and real independence” (CEPAC, 1973). Work for human development was seen as an integral part of the Church’s role. If Latin America would speak of Liberation Theology, in the Pacific it was a theology of Integral Human Development, including justice and peace. Integral Human Development became the principal object of the Pacific Partnership for Human Development initiated in 1972 and formally established by the Joint Bishops’ Conference of Oceania meeting in Sydney in 1985.

The FCBCO was not organised with a permanent secretariat. The location of the secretariat changes every four years to the Bishops’ Conference that will host the next combined meeting. It was the Pacific Partnership for Human Development associated with FCBCO that functioned with a more established secretariat. The close relationship of PPHD and FCBCO may be seen in the way that, in 1989, the executive secretary of the PPHD wrote and asked for the inclusion of the PPHD report on the agenda of the Joint Bishops’ Conference in Sydney in 1990. For some time it was considered a Commission of the Federation. The PPHD was designed to complement similar forums for development at government levels in the region, and it emerged as an important, if at times controversial body for involvement of the church in global issues such as human rights, indigenous peoples, HIV and AIDS, and models of development. Membership included not only representatives of the Bishops of the region but also the Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement (France), Australian Catholic Relief, Catholic Office for Social Justice Aotearoa New Zealand, Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD) (England), Broederlijk Delen (Belgium), Trocaire (Ireland), and the Canadian Catholic Organisation for Development and Peace. The PPHD used training methods such as immersion programs, people exchanges and ecumenical collaboration to co-ordinate programs and actions of education, animation and conscientization to serve human development needs in the Pacific region.

Unfortunately, by the mid 1990s, differing views on the meaning of development caused friction in the body when the Australian and New Zealand delegates refused to support funding arrangements for school buildings, and representatives from the Pacific Islands felt they were not trusted and were misunderstood. The Pacific Bishops wanted a true partnership of equals rather than a donor-receiver relationship. The PPHD was officially dissolved in 1996; the Pacific Bishops deciding to establish their own local development agencies with bilateral funding arrangements. It had proved difficult to obtain agreement on the status of PPD: whether it should be a commission of the Federation, or an autonomous organization. A third option was that, with the proposed establishment of the Caritas Oceania region within Caritas Internationalis, that PPHD should cease to exist. The difference of opinion illustrates a gap between two relatively affluent countries (Australia and New Zealand) and the other countries of the Pacific Islands, most of which are struggling to provide basic services for their people. The dissolution of PPHD helped relieve tensions stemming from differing priorities for development, but it also weakened the web of regional influence of the FCBCO. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Pacific (CEPAC) became a full member of the Pacific Council of Churches, and found there, support for increasing impatience of Pacific Islanders with what they perceive as the left-overs of European colonialism and the oppressive roles of local elites.

### **A Synod for Oceania**

The 1998 Synod for Oceania was another special moment of identity for the Catholic Church in the region covered by the FCBCO. Oceania was recognized by Church authorities in Rome as a region with its own identity. The original Roman plan in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000 envisaged only four regional synods. Oceania was to be subsumed under Asia. However, the appeal of the Oceania Cardinals for a specifically Oceania Synod was supported by the 1995 Consistory of Cardinals and accepted by Pope John Paul II (Williams, 2005).

In November 1998, the Catholic bishops of Oceania, from Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, travelled to Rome to attend the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Oceania. In a way it was like the fruits of centuries of mission returning now to Rome to witness their coming of age as Church. There had been Synods before this—for the bishops of Africa, Asia and America; and Synod for Europe was in the final stages of preparation; however, this

Synod for Oceania was special in a number of aspects: it was the shortest in duration, and the smallest of the Synods in terms of numbers—with 117 members, plus the Pope, 19 auditors and 14 additional personnel. This was the only Synod in which all the bishops of the region had been invited. In fact, all except three of the bishops from the region participated. Most of the bishops already knew one another, many having met at the FCBCO assembly in Auckland in 1994. The impressive opening mass in St Peter's Basilica included dancing and music from the Pacific, notably Samoa. Talk circulated that some Roman officials were rather critical of tattooed Samoan men in traditional dress dancing in the Basilica. Perhaps it is symbolic of a cultural gulf when sights that are quite 'normal' in the Pacific appear so scandalous to some members of the Roman Curia.

Talks presented by the bishops during the first week were pastorally oriented and very frank and powered by the experience of culture, context and practice (Gibbs 2006, 160-181). For example, in his presentation referring to the shortage of priests, felt acutely on some islands, Bishop Kiapseni of Kavieng, PNG said that it seems the community's right to celebrate the Eucharist has become a rare privilege and that celebrations of the Word with Holy Communion distributed by a catechist or non-ordained brother or sister are no substitute for the celebration of the Eucharist (Kiapseni 1998, 10). In his speech at the presentation of *Ecclesia in Oceania*, Cardinal Williams, from New Zealand (with many years of experience in Samoa) noted that communion, inculturation and a renewed proclamation of the Gospel in ways appropriate for the peoples of Oceania were the key themes and insights which emerged from the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Oceania (Williams 2001, 10).

### **Directions for the Federation**

As one who lives in Papua New Guinea but who travels occasionally to the Pacific and to New Zealand and Australia, I am struck by the cultural and socio-economic diversity of the region. New Zealand and particularly Australia are relatively affluent nations with efficient modern infrastructure. Most of the other nations are so-called 'developing' countries with modest infrastructure, some resource-rich like Papua New Guinea, others environmentally vulnerable such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshal Islands. There is an even greater contrast in the public image of the Church with clergy sexual abuse scandals ruining the moral authority of the Catholic Church in New Zealand and Australia, while the Church retains a relatively high social and moral status in the CEPAC and PNG/SI

territories. These different contexts affect the profile of the Church in the public sphere and bring diversity to the concerns of the churches of the FCBCO.

Topics of conversation at the Federation Assemblies since the Synod for Oceania reflect that diversity. At the assembly in Rabaul, PNG in 2002 topics included the post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*, priests in politics and unlawful arms in Solomon Islands. Four years later, in Suva, Fiji, there were sessions on pastoral care of people in remote areas, the life-giving gospel as an alternative to secular ideologies, HIV and AIDS, and climate change. In 2010 in Sydney, topics included sacraments, the canonization of Australian sister Mary McKillop, challenges and fruits of World Youth Day, and a workshop with the migration and refugee office. At the assembly in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2014, the Bishops reflected on topics such as Australian immigration policy and detention centres, pastoral planning and earthquakes, reading the signs of Fiji times, and responses to preparatory documents for the extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. At the most recent assembly in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, 2018, topics included human rights, refugees, climate change, and sea-bed mining. Meetings in almost twenty years since the Synod for Oceania reveal a desire on the part of the Bishops to pursue a practical inductive pastoral theology responding to issues in the world around them, whether it be evaluating world youth day in Australia, earthquakes in New Zealand, or military coups in Fiji.

The environment and climate change has emerged as a key issue across the region covered by FCBCO. Campaigns in the 1980s against nuclear testing in the Pacific helped raise environmental awareness during the 1980s. Even climate change sceptics like Australian Cardinal George Pell did not distract the concern of the Bishops for the environment at the Suva Assembly in 2006. The recent papal encyclical *Laudato Si* has inspired new interest in all regions of the Federation, particularly for low-lying countries like Kiribati, concerned for their very existence. The effects of logging and mining concern the Church in places like Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. 'Eco-news' figures in diocesan newsletters in New Zealand, with children at Catholic schools being taught to care for nearby streams. People now question the use of plastic containers for Holy Oils at the Chrism Mass. Environmental issues and climate change provide a concern for which all four Bishops conferences in the Federation can cooperate in promoting the social teaching of the Church.



Cardinal Williams has pointed out how it is not just for practical reasons that the Bishops come together. They come together for “a journey intended to be travelled together in communion, in unity of faith and unity of love” (Williams 2002). The formation of the FCBCO has meant that Oceania is recognized as a region in its own right and not simply as an appendage of Asia. It remains to be seen how the Church in Oceania will play an effective public role, witnessing to communion amidst diversity, in a region where the people are custodians of almost one third of the earth’s surface.

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Williams' behalf by Archbishop John Dew at the Synod on the Eucharist.

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### **Abbreviations**

ACBC: Catholic Bishops Conference of Australia

CAFOD: Catholic Fund for Overseas Development

CEPAC: Catholic Bishops Conference of the Pacific

FABC: Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops Conferences

FCBCO: Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania

NZCBC: New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference

PPHD: Pacific Partnership for Human Development

**Key words:** Pacific, Oceania, Catholic Church, Integral Human Development, FCBCO, CEPAC, NZCBC, ACBC, PPHD