

Background Paper**Author:****Terry Fewtrell****Diocesan Pastoral Councils:
A Canberra-Goulburn review
and a brief national overview****Summary**

A Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) is not new to the Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese. In fact, the Archdiocese has been a leader in this field. The facts speak for themselves:

- The Archdiocese has had a DPC for 37 of the past 55 years;
- Four of the last six Archbishops have established and led a DPC;
- The periods where there has been no DPC have been during the terms of Archbishops Cahill ('67 – '78) and Prowse (2013 ->);
- During the term of Archbishop Carroll (1983 – 2006), the structure and work of the DPC was large and ambitious - its output significant in terms of relevance and quality. There was enthusiastic and supportive engagement by the Catholic community; and
- Effective representation of laity and clergy is not achieved simply by size and numbers, but by building effective linkages between key groups and transparent engagement.

Status of DPCs in Australian Dioceses

Latest available information reveals that only seven of Australia's 28 dioceses currently have operating DPCs (Ballarat, Bathurst, Maitland-Newcastle, Parramatta, Rockhampton, Toowoomba, and Wilcannia-Forbes). A further two (Adelaide and Wollongong) have committed to establishing them during 2021.

In previous years, several dioceses (including Canberra-Goulburn) have had operating DPCs, but these have been discontinued. In part this has resulted from the departure/death of a bishop (when disbandment is required by Canon Law) and from a drift away from the ecclesiology of Vatican II, towards a more traditionalist and clericalist approach.

Origins in Vatican II

The development of DPCs followed the theology and ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. The vision of the church as the People of God was based on shared baptismal responsibilities and roles of all believers (ordained and non-ordained). The *Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church* (Chapter 2, Section 27) states, "It is highly desirable that in each diocese a pastoral council be established...in which ...clergy, religious and lay people will participate. The function of this council will be to investigate and to weigh matters which bear on the pastoral activity...". Such Councils were considered key instruments in making real the principle of shared leadership in the mission of the church.

Canon Law

Notwithstanding these theological and ecclesiological endorsements, the 1983 Code of Canon Law states that a finance council is mandatory, but the establishment of a DPC is *at*

the discretion of the local bishop. Essentially it empowers the bishop to determine the need and act on it accordingly. The conclusion to be drawn from current statistics is that most Australian bishops have effectively declined the opportunity to establish a DPC.

The Australian Church Administration Handbook (Revised 2018) states: “The (diocesan) council’s function is to study and weigh up those matters that affect the pastoral works of the diocese and propose pastoral recommendations”. Significantly it references Canon 511, noting: ‘The field of activity for the pastoral council is materially circumscribed by pastoral affairs within the diocesan territory. *The pastoral council has no competence in those pastoral problems involving the exercise of governance* (my emphasis), for which the bishop has at his disposal the advice of the council of priests...’.

This raises doubt, if not confusion, regarding the relevance of lay involvement in a DPC in relation to governance matters. It also sits uncomfortably with Pope Francis’ emphasis on Synodality and the specific recommendations of the recent report of the Light from the Southern Cross on governance, commissioned by the Australian Bishops.

The Canberra-Goulburn Experience

The first DPC in Canberra-Goulburn was formed by †Eris O’Brien in October 1966, a mere 10 months after the conclusion of Vatican II. Initially the council comprised 27 members, broadly 1/3 priests, 1/3 religious and 1/3 laity. †Thomas Cahill succeeded †O’Brien in 1967 but did not appoint a DPC during his 11-year tenure. In 1979 †Edward Clancy was appointed Archbishop and shortly after established a 25-member council, which was re-constituted in 1981 to consist of around 30 members, still with a broad 1/3rd split, with care taken to include priest representatives from 12 parishes across all deaneries and areas of the Archdiocese.

†Francis Carroll succeeded †Clancy and was thoroughly imbued with the spirit and teachings of Vatican II. Having established a DPC in his previous diocese of Wagga Wagga, he was keen to establish a form of consultative/administrative council. He consulted widely to identify the needs of the church in Canberra-Goulburn and announced an Archdiocesan Pastoral Assembly would be held in May 1984 to consider the matter.

Questionnaires were sent to all parishes and organisations in the Archdiocese. The survey results helped frame the agenda for the one-day session, which was attended by 770 people from throughout the Archdiocese. It was the start of a journey of engagement, sharing, discernment and hope, in which the Archbishop sought to bring life and consultative expression to the shared baptismal responsibilities of the region’s Catholics.

He told the Assembly: “I believe that I and our particular church needs such a (Archdiocesan Pastoral) Council”. He spoke of the theology underpinning its role and how it might function. He outlined various models for how it could operate. He provided a theological reflection on the meaning of being Church and outlined the roles, rights and responsibilities of the baptised as individuals, and collectively as the People of God. In his homily he spoke of his own vulnerabilities and fears for the course on which he was embarking and inviting the people to share. He spoke openly of the “tensions” that can be involved in representative

structures and shared decision making. But he was not deterred by uncertainties and doubts. He was committed to the spirit of the Vatican Council in ways that foreshadowed the Synodality of Pope Francis.

Archbishop Carroll acknowledged the archdiocese consists of a “widely incongruous social mix of Federal Capital and traditional rural towns”. He outlined three possible structures, each with different approaches for representation of laity, religious, clergy and various archdiocesan organisations and bodies. These ranged in size from 30 members, 100, to approximately 190 members. He asked parishes and communities to discuss all options and indicate their preferred approach. Feedback indicated a preference for a larger council and †Carroll subsequently announced that the council would consist of two people from each parish plus members of religious orders, ethnic communities, lay organisations, priests, church organisations, youth and about 10 people appointed by the Archbishop.

This size of council required significant organisational support. It was soon decided to select from the council about 12 members to serve as a secretariat which would meet every 4 – 6 weeks, with the full council meeting twice yearly for 2 days. The ambitions of the council led to a period of extraordinary engagement across the archdiocese that resulted in a catalogue of issue-focussed meetings/reports, 3 Diocesan Assemblies and 2 Diocesan Synods.

The intense organisational effort was complicated further by the establishment of an Archdiocesan Pastoral Planning Committee, initially to lead implementation of the 1989 Synod decisions, the most significant of which was a decree that all parishes should have a Parish Pastoral Council. During the 1990s pressure grew for a review and rationalisation of structures and functions and a realistic assessment was made preparatory to reducing the size of the DPC. †Carroll recognised the weaknesses in the structure, particularly ‘the absence of the clergy both numerically and as active participants ...which reduced the sense of “ownership” of the Council by numbers of the clergy’. There was also a shared view that the regimen of meetings was becoming burdensome. Implementation of a smaller reconstituted DPC was delayed till after the 2004 Synod. Archbishop Carroll retired in 2006.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge (2006 – 2012) established a DPC in 2007, consisting of around 20 members and while meeting twice in 2007, appeared not to have been continually active. In April 2011 † Coleridge announced the formation of a reconstituted DPC, which seemingly had a further reduced membership of around 15. This DPC lapsed on his appointment as Archbishop of Brisbane and his replacement by Archbishop Christopher Prowse. No further DPC has been established in the archdiocese.

Sources:

Archdiocesan Pastoral Assembly Report 26 May 1984

Diocesan Synod 1989 – Coming home in Christ; Diocesan Synod 2004- Called to be ‘One in Christ Jesus’; *From Ganmain to Rome and Back Archbishop Frank Carroll, Kevin Lawlor, 2019 Church Administration Handbook 2008 and 2018 editions; Archdiocesan Website*

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