



Voices of the Church in the Pacific

From February 5-10, people from Church communities around the Pacific met in Fiji for a week of prayer and reflection on issues facing us in our region. The celebration began on February 5 with Mass in Sacred Heart Cathedral in Suva.

On a warm Sunday morning, the cathedral was full to overflowing with local parishioners and visitors from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Samoa and other islands of the Pacific. The opening procession included servers and readers in traditional Fijian dress as well as bishops from all the countries of our part of the world. The main celebrant was Cardinal Michael Czerny who had come from Rome, where he leads the department that focusses on Integral Human Development. He was welcomed with a garland of flowers and entered the church to the sound of drums and strong singing from the choir and the whole congregation. Songs in Fijian and English filled the cathedral throughout the Mass and there were prayers in some of the many languages of the Pacific. That opening ceremony on Sunday morning began what was to be a week of rich sharing, in song and conversation.

The meeting in Fiji was really two meetings in one. It was an assembly of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania. Such assemblies are held every four years, focussing on issues of common concern to the Church throughout the region. The Fiji meeting was also part of the international Synod process, initiated by Pope Francis, inviting the Church throughout the world to reflect on how we can become a more “synodal” Church, a Church in which all the members, including bishops and the whole community, walk together as pilgrims on our way to God’s kingdom.

The major regional challenge that we discussed was one that affects all the countries of Oceania, namely, the care of the oceans. The major task we undertook in regard to the international Synod was formulating a response to a document that had been developed from meetings of Church communities around the world.

Before our discussion of environmental issues, we had the opportunity to visit some nearby sites that showed the impact of rising sea levels and the harmful effects some mining operations can have on a local community.

A visit to Togoru Village brought home the reality of rising sea levels. The advancing waters have claimed over fifty metres of land. The Togoru cemetery is now under water. The local people have planted mangroves and built walls to slow down shore erosion but the damage to the coastline and people’s lives continues.

A visit to Nakavu Village showed the impact of the extraction of river gravel. The mining operation has contaminated the water to a point where it is no longer suitable for bathing and cleaning. Silt covers the shore and fish have disappeared from the river.

Following the visits to these local sites, we began our discussion of environmental issues, particularly as these are felt in Oceania. Our conversations were enriched by presentations from Jacqui Remond, an Australian who is a member of the Vatican Ecology Taskforce at the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, and from Dr Joeli Vietayaki, a Fijian who teaches Marine Studies at the University of the South Pacific. We also had the benefit of reflections from a theological group chaired by Dr Sandie Cornish and including scholars from Australia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand.

Many people in this region are facing an uncertain future because of rising sea levels and more frequent, severe storms. The threat is compounded by exploitation of natural resources and pollution of the environment. We recognised the need to care for our island nations, ranging from our large island of Australia to the many small islands of the Pacific. Our Christian faith encourages us to take whatever actions we can to preserve and nurture the land and ocean that make up our common home. We can also help by being advocates for those who are feeling severe impacts of harmful environmental practices but find it hard to have their voices heard.

On the Tuesday afternoon of the meeting we heard from Sister Nathalie Becquart, a French religious sister who is a member of the Rome-based team assisting the Church around the world to take part in the Synod called by Pope Francis. On her way to Fiji, Sister Nathalie had visited Australia, with talks in Melbourne, Adelaide and Parramatta. In each place, she had spoken about a “spirituality of synodality” which she explained as “one of journeying together, of being Church on the move.” As an example of the spirit of synodality, she referred to the encounter between Jesus and the apostles on the road to Emmaus.

“To embody a spirituality of synodality is really to follow the synodal style of Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Jesus goes to meet them where they are. He begins by asking a question. He didn’t begin by teaching them all the catechism, but just by walking and being with them – just with his presence, listening to them, he starts to dialogue. And through this process of listening to them, he reaches something very deep within them. And so, at the end, the disciples ask Jesus to stay with them. Jesus didn’t impose himself, but he enlivened in them this deep desire. And then this encounter led the disciples to a path of conversion.”

During the week in Fiji we took some further steps on the road of the Synod. We recalled the earlier stage of consultations at the local level around the world, when people in each parish and each diocese were invited to share their observations on how we are already walking together as a Church community and how we might develop this walking together further in the years ahead. In September last year, some 30 people from six continents met in Frascati, near Rome, to consider what people around the world had been saying about being a synodal Church. Our task in Fiji was to respond to the document that had been produced in Frascati. Before our meeting, a group from around Oceania had met in Melbourne to prepare a draft response.

In building on this draft, we confirmed that various points made by people around the world resonated with what people had said in Oceania, for example, in highlighting our common Baptism as the source of our common identity as Christians and members of the family of the Church. Another element that resonated with us was the desire to encourage more young people to participate in the life of the Church community. We also shared the hope expressed by people around the world that the experience of being involved in Synod discussions and prayer would promote a greater sense of community among us and a greater sense of our common mission to spread the peace and joy of Christ.

In finalising the document, we noted that the text reflects the voices of the People of God in Oceania and that it includes a pastoral reflection by the bishops of Oceania on what they have heard from their people. If we list the headings in the document, we see that the text covers a wide range of issues: Baptism and Sacraments, Inclusion, Church Teaching, Authority and Decision-Making, The Challenge of Mission, Ecological Crisis, Inculturation and Localisation, Women, Young People, Formation.

The document from Oceania will be published soon and will be sent to the Synod Secretariat in Rome as a contribution from our part of the world to the ongoing process of the worldwide Synod, leading to the international assembly of the Synod to be held in Rome in October this year. In this way, the voices of the Church throughout the world will be enriched by the voices of the Church in the Pacific.

I was delighted to take part in the assembly in Fiji. I learnt from the conversations among the delegates and I was inspired by the vibrant faith of the local people who welcomed us so warmly and celebrated liturgies with us throughout the week.

Bishop Paul Bird CSSR