

Oceania bishops invite all to world-first online conference addressing care of oceans

The future of nations and people in the Oceania region will be at the forefront of a world-first global online conference being held later this month.

The online public event, hosted by Australian Catholic University (ACU) and supported by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, will bring together the Bishops of Oceania with experts from the region for a synodal conference towards the General Assembly of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO) in February 2023.

The Bishops of Oceania, representing cardinals, archbishops and bishops in the Conferences of Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands, meet as the FCBCO every four years. Their next Assembly will be held in the Archdiocese of Suva, Fiji, from 5 to 10 February 2023.

The FCBCO Preparatory Event *Our Ocean Home*, being held from November 28 to 30, will feature a welcome address from FCBCO President Archbishop Peter Loy Chong of Suva, who has previously called for a Synod on the ocean, as well as powerful insights from theologians, scientists, and First Nations people from the Asia-Pacific region, including international environmentalist Dr Jeremy Hills, Fijian personality Ratu Manoa Rasigatale, and ACU Senior Lecturer Dr Sandie Cornish, for a synodal dialogue about the impacts of climate change in Oceania.

“In the spirit of synodality modelled by Pope Francis, and inspired by the experiences of what many cultures in the Pacific Ocean known as *vei-talanoa*, we invite consecrated and lay women and men, young people, ecumenical networks, and ecclesial regional networks from all over the world to this historic conference,” Archbishop Chong said.

“The Bishops of Oceania are determined to engage in dialogue with you about the overwhelming crises facing our oceans, and the impact that is having on the world, in particular, my brothers and sisters in the Oceania region.”

Held over three days and through consecutive online sessions, registered participants will have the opportunity to hear from varying diverse experts each day, before joining break-out groups of up to 10 people for reflection and dialogue with a guiding question.

New York-based artist Angela Manno will also present her iconography of threatened and endangered species as part of each session's prayer reflection.

Ms Remond, an Australian consultant to the Vatican's Ecology Taskforce and one of the ACU-based organisers of the FCBCO Preparatory Event, said it was vital for dialogue and a synodal approach to inform decision making processes and to open new pathways for ecclesial leadership at a local, regional, and global level both in and outside the Church.

“The nations and peoples of the Oceania region are facing some of the world's greatest inequities and uncertainties,” Ms Remond said.

“Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, security and extractive economic agendas have fashioned an inflection point on future survival. The decisions we make today will determine the region's tomorrow.

“This conference will bring together the church in Oceania with a regional assembly of experts for dialogue as envisaged by the global synodal process.”

The oceans cover 70 per cent of Earth's surface and are home to up to 80 per cent of all life in the world. The oceans capture 90 per cent of additional heat generated from greenhouse gas emissions and are a vital buffer against the impacts of climate change.

Conference line-up:

Archbishop Peter Loy Chong – FCBCO President and third Catholic Archbishop of Suva

Jacqui Remond – Lead, Integral Ecology, Australian Catholic University, Co-founder Laudato Si' Movement and member of the Suva Secretariat.

Dr Sandie Cornish – Senior Lecturer, School of Theology, ACU. Member of the Oceania Taskforce for the Continental Stage of the Synod, member of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development and Chair, Suva Secretariat.

Tevita Naikasowalu – Member of the Working Group for Pacific Human Rights Defends Network, focusing on Indigenous Peoples and the Environment and Ecology. Coordinator for Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation for the Columban Mission Society in Fiji under the Oceania region

Ratu Manoa Rasigatale – Former Fijian politician and television personality

Rev. Faaimata Havea Hiliau – Moderator of the NSW and ACT Synod, Uniting Church, and supporter of the Laudato Si' Action Platform

Petero Qaloibau – Fijian father who was among 10 families behind an unsuccessful landmark climate change lawsuit, the People's Climate Case, against the European Union

Br Timothy Graham OH – Provincial Leader of the Hospitaller Order of St John of God Oceania Province

Maria Tiimon Chi-Fang – Pacific Outreach Officer for Pacific Calling Partnership, an initiative of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education, raising awareness of the impact of climate change on low-lying islands in the Pacific

Tita Kara – Delegate at the 2022 UN Ocean Conference

Rev. James Bhagwan – Ordained Minister of the Methodist Church of Fiji and General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches since 2018.

Amy Echeverria – Global Coordinator, Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, Columban Mission Society

Sr Malia Keiti Ann Kanongataa, Sisters of Our Lady of Nazareth – Sr Kanongataa works in the Catholic Diocese of Tonga and Niue. She is the founder and Director of the Catholic Theological Institute for the Laity, and co-founder of the Association of Pacific Women and Theology. She is a strong advocate for enhancing practical theology in Oceania.

Lucy Gooch-Tonga – Young Tongan-Australian poet and co-founder of YEmpower Australia

Dr Joeli Veitayaki – Fiji-based Associate Professor of Marine Studies at the University of the South Pacific's School of Agriculture, Geography, Environment, Ocean, and Natural Science Marine Studies. He is also Director for the International Ocean Institute Pacific Islands based at the USP, is Co-Chair of the Korea-South Pacific Ocean Forum (KSPOFF) and a member of the Panel of Experts for a Sustainable Ocean Economy assembled by the World Resource Institute in support of the High-Level Panel on the Sustainable Ocean Economy.

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