

Pilgrims of Hope: Transformed through Sacrament and Song

The National Liturgy and Music Conference recently took place in Adelaide from 1 to 3 October, with more than 350 pilgrims participating from across Australia and the South Pacific.

As part of the ongoing partnership between the National Liturgical Council (NLC) of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Australian Pastoral Musicians Network (APMN), the *Pilgrims of Hope – Transformed through Sacrament and Song* conference offered inspiring and rigorous keynote sessions led by Rita Ferrone, Fr Ricky Manalo CSP and Fr Richard Leonard SJ.

Each of the keynote speakers offered an informed perspective on the central place of liturgy in the Church's mission, on how music serves as a vital expression of the Church's sacred rites across cultures, and on the ways liturgy and liturgical music celebrate a countercultural hope anchored in the risen Christ.

The rest of the conference program offered something for everyone across the rich and diverse ministries of the Catholic Church in the Pacific region. A range of breakout sessions presented by practitioners from across Australia and Fiji offered outstanding formation opportunities. Delegates were able to benefit from sessions on the meaning of baptism in the life of a Catholic Christian, the RCIA, sacred music for funerals, walking with and mentoring young people on the journey of faith, liturgical art and architecture, the role of music in a synodal church, instrumental and vocal liturgical music masterclasses, preaching, intercultural song in liturgy, liturgical music composition, linking liturgy in Catholic schools and parishes, singing as sacrament with children, Gregorian chant, the daily prayer of the Church, and evangelisation through worship.

Daily morning prayers, evening prayer, a night of praise and worship music, and the conference Mass highlighted sacred music from Australian composers and also included well-known music from the tradition of the universal Catholic Church. This ensured the 'full, conscious and active participation' in song of the assembled conference-goers, and made for uplifting and beautiful times of prayer. Other highlights included the *Morning Sing* sessions with Dr Anthony Young from Brisbane, and the conference dinner where people could connect socially and further share ideas and good practice.

Dr Philip Matthias, director of music at St Patrick's Cathedral, was a first-time presenter at the 2025 conference. His well-received 'Song of this Land' session explored how listening to First Nations and other cultural communities helps us to further embrace our vast and shared Australian heritage. Philip was encouraged by the experience and the response, describing the conference as 'excellent' and saying he was "looking forward to the next one in two years' time!"

"It was terrific to see such a range of people across diverse ministries all coming together, sharing their skills and in conversation," he said. "It's quite an art form to bring

people across sectors and ministries together in this way, and the conference allowed that to happen in a good spirit.”

International keynote presenter Rita Ferrone, an award-winning writer and speaker on liturgy and renewal in the Church, has written extensively on the centrality of the Paschal Mystery to the Church’s liturgy after the Second Vatican Council, and of the way Christ’s self-emptying, life-transforming love becomes the paradigm of the whole Christian life, experienced every Sunday in Eucharist and in all the sacraments. It was a theme picked up by Rita in her keynote, and by several other presenters at the conference.

Rita was struck by the “warm welcome, enthusiastic engagement and sharing of the gifts of the local Church” she experienced over the course of the conference, describing her time in Adelaide as a “spirited and grace-filled three days” and “a keenly hope-filled experience”. She reflected that the conference’s themes of hope and transformation were “lived out in our company, and amplified in real time”.

She particularly welcomed the opportunity the conference gave her to spend time with two prominent Australian formators in liturgy, Archbishop of Adelaide, Patrick O'Regan and Fr Tom Elich of Brisbane.

Rita also expressed her gratitude and congratulations to conference co-directors, NLC chair, Dr Clare Schwantes and APMN chair, Michael Mangan who led a committed and dynamic national executive volunteer team.

Recovering the centrality of the Eucharist in the Catholic tradition was another recurring theme of the conference, with an emphasis on increasing the understanding of how various forms of prayer and music can nourish and lead us back to the liturgy as ‘source and summit’ of the Christian life.

This reorientation from the ‘me’ of personal and devotional prayer and music to the ‘we’ of corporate liturgy helps us to see that the Body of Christ *together* is the primary living symbol and sign of Christ alive and active in the world. This ‘we’ of corporate liturgy has implications for the texts of Christ-centred sacred music used in the liturgy, inviting us to choose music that reflects both Catholic Christian theology and the relevant liturgical season, day, moment and action (such as a Gospel acclamation or Communion procession). Transformed disciples are fed and sustained by liturgy each week and sent out on mission into the world.

The APMN Life Membership Award for 2025 deservedly went to the prolific and talented Br Michael Herry FMS from Melbourne, who for many years has offered his music free of charge on his [Marist Music website](#).

The APMN also offers generous scholarships to support the formation of emerging young liturgical musicians. These were awarded to Dorothy Nguyen and Sally Ryan from Adelaide, Simon MacFarlane from Hobart, and Brendan Moloney from Melbourne. Brendan was initially supported to begin his music ministry journey by the late Rev Dr

Bill Jordan, former parish priest of St Brendan's Catholic Parish in Flemington where Brendan now works as music minister. It was a special grace for Brendan to receive the award named after Fr Bill at the 2025 conference.

The NLC also launched its comprehensive new website at the conference, helping to address the significant formation and training needs of people across different dioceses in Australia. The [freely accessible website](#) – a hub for liturgy and liturgical music formation and resources across Australia – is endorsed by the ACBC and will continue to grow as new resources are added.

The conference was hosted and generously supported by the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide and Catholic Education South Australia, with great support also given by Business Events Adelaide. Other sponsors included Australia's Willow Publishing, Liturgical Song, Liturgy Help, QuackStudios, the Australian Piano Warehouse, Liturgy Brisbane and Liturgy Publications.

Learn more about what was offered at the conference [here](#).

Find out how to become a member of the APMN [here](#).