



The River Above

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The Quarterly Newsletter of the River Above Asia Oceania Ecclesial Network (RAOEN)

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<https://www.raoen.org/>

For peoples, oceans and forests

Ocean Synodality

Pedro Walpole SJ, Network Coordinator - RAOEN

From February 5–11, there was a reflective gathering of over 60 bishops from the Pacific Islands, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, and Australia. Their usual episcopal gathering is every four years. There were three themes discussed from very different perspectives: synodality, mission, and the ocean. This was also an occasion to reflect on the emerging Oceania Document for the Continental Stage for a synodal Church. It



was a rich experience in collegiality and dialogue. They listened to the climate realities and local disasters, enabling them to write a statement calling for action to care for the oceans, the only statement of its kind.

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of peoples and learning from their ancestral stories about deep relationships with land, sea and sky, the vanua. We have celebrated with communities and received the hope of young people and families with their dreams for a flourishing future with the oceans.

“The unique face of Oceania has called us together for deeper ecological conversion and to respond from the heart. Embracing



the teaching of Laudato Sí and the challenge of integral ecology, we recognise that our economic systems need to be in balance with the pulse of life. We are hearing the cry

of the land and water, we are hearing the cry of the poor, we are hearing the cry of the ocean. We are also hearing the Holy Spirit present in all these moments. As disciples of Christ, we commit ourselves to His mission to bring life to all, reconciliation and healing of all the many relationships of which we are part – with God, with our fellow human beings, with sea, earth and sky” said Bishop Anthony Randazzo, the new President of the Federation of Catholic Bishops’ Conferences of Oceania.

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Email us at raoen.network@gmail.com

RAOEN seeks to highlight the faith dimension of advocacy, in the spirit of synodality and talanoa.

The FCBCO Oceans Statement

The River Above Asia Oceania Ecclesial Network (RAOEN) shares this message from the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO) that recently held their gathering in Suva, Fiji, on 5 to 10 February 2023, reflecting on the challenges experienced by the peoples of Oceania, and how the Church can come together for the oceans and people through synodality and mission.

This Assembly of Bishops from across Oceania, held in Suva this week, is a significant experience of being Church in the world today. We have been enriched by listening to the diversity of peoples and learning from their ancestral stories about deep relationships with land, sea, and sky, the **vanua**. We have celebrated with communities and received the hope of young people and families with their dreams for a flourishing future with the oceans.

The nations and peoples of the Oceania region are facing some of the world's greatest uncertainties with growing anxiety, but with faith, hope and resilience. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, human and economic insecurity, compounded by exploitation and pollution threaten the survival of many communities. The decisions we make today will determine the region's tomorrow, and how the **vaka** (canoe) of our peoples is held by the oceans.

Our previous meeting was in Port Moresby in 2018. Since then, the Bishops of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands with their communities successfully stopped deep seabed mining. Yet deep sea mining is still being considered in some communities of the Pacific which would adversely affect fish and marine life. People continue to face mining of sands with heavy metals, deforestation and the enormity of the climate crisis in fires, floods, coral bleaching, droughts and extreme temperatures across the region.

A Preparatory Event was held in November 2022. This online event (<https://fcbco.org/the-general-assembly2023/>) offered people in Oceania the opportunity to participate openly in the process towards this Assembly in Suva. It brought together decision makers of the Church across

oceans with an 'international assembly of experts' as envisaged by the global synodal process.

One of the most inspiring engagements in Suva was the call to climate action through an artistic presentation by the local community that related the historical suffering during a colonial period, the concerns of losing local livelihoods, resources and lands and having to migrate. This event called **Tagi** (to lament) and was sung in traditional powerful forms of multiple intonations involving all generations from the local community who have roles and responsibilities including Chiefs. This helped us to understand more fully the historical injustices and contemporary economic greed causing ecological damage to life and livelihoods.

"The synodal path to which Pope Francis has called the whole church means a church of hospitality, encounter and dialogue with the realities of peoples' lives in Oceania today. We came together to learn and this has been a time of grace and deep conversion. We see our purpose of working together to care for oceans through synodality and mission as an essential dimension of preaching the Gospel" said Bishop Anthony Randazzo, President of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania.

"The unique face of Oceania has called us together for deeper ecological conversion and to respond from the heart. Embracing the teaching of Laudato Sí and the challenge of integral ecology, we recognise that our economic systems need to be in balance with the pulse of life.

We are hearing the cry of the land and water, we are hearing the cry of the poor, we are hearing the cry of the ocean. We are also hearing the Holy Spirit present in all these moments. As disciples of Christ, we commit ourselves to His mission to bring life to all, reconciliation and healing of all the many relationships of which we are part – with God, with our fellow human beings, with sea, earth and sky," said Bishop Anthony.

This week has been a kairos moment and the bishops have been strengthened by the synodal process to lift up their voices for our region and affirm their deepening commitment to our ocean home. 10 February 2023, FCBCO, Suva



Representatives from Oceania's four Bishops' Conferences gather in Melbourne to reflect on and respond to the Global Synod on Synodality's Working Document for the Continental Stage.



Archbishop Peter Loy Chong of the Archdiocese of Suva and Immediate Past President of FCBCO presents Bishop Anthony Randazzo, Bishop of Broken Bay as the newly-appointed President.



Voices from the Assembly

Listening to the Cries of the Ocean

For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission



Msgr. Gerry Burns
Archdiocese of Wellington

Standing beside a river where gravel extraction was taking place and standing on the seashore where coastal erosion is in full swing were moments of meditation about what climate change and human action are doing to our common home.

These were part of the exposure/reflection moments for the bishops of Oceania from 5-10 February at their 4-yearly assembly. The assembly was considering the response of the Oceania region to the continental stage of the global synod on synodality. As part of that listening and conversation process it was also listening to the voices of the

earth, sea and sky and Christ's presence in the these elements and the people who lives depend on them.

The question of care of the earth came through in various ways, from Cardinal Czerny's homily at the opening Mass to the voices of young and old during a dramatic presentation of lament ('Tagi') that the bishops attended one evening. The site visits helped them reflect on the varying aspects of 'development' and the impact on local communities.

The gravel mining site involved river displacement, access to food resources and the spiritual connections to local animals and plants. The coastal erosion site – which had meant that a local cemetery was now several metres out to sea – involved a regular loss of 1.5metres of land each year through king tides and the influence of a nearby river being dammed.

While the business sessions meant the bishops had to work through documents carefully there was also time for prayer, including a sacramental

reconciliation service for the bishops and all attending. Its theme was about the healing and reconciling of the various ecologies of which we are part, the ecology of human communities, the ecology of creation of which we are a part and the economy/ecology of salvation (the grace of Christ). The assembly worked on the relationship of all three with a deeper realization they are not separate.



One of the great joys of assisting the bishops in preparing the Assembly for the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania was convening a group of theologians from our region to prepare a series of reflections on the three themes for this Assembly - Care for the Oceans; Becoming a More Synodal Church; and Formation for Mission. Our group was composed of women and men of clergy, religious and laity, people from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Aotearoa and New Zealand, and Australia.

And our theological disciplines included Scripture, practical theology, systematic theology, and Catholic social teaching. We were able to offer the bishops something of the flavor of the theology that comes from this region itself to help them in their reflection together. One of the important things that the bishops are doing in this Assembly is taking the time to reflect together theologically.



Do you see the hunger in our people? We wish that this more work done in encouraging our lay people to do theology. And it's good. As I say, it's beginning to see some fruits and so of coming. Local theologians need to come and and do theology from our perspective here from the Pacific. So we pray that we continue that spirit and hopefully more theologians come up as well as good faith-based people and witness of God's kingdom among us.



I have come to learn a new way of thinking about the church, what the church is now going towards, namely synodality, to work together, the clergy and the laity work together for this same mission to proclaim the good news. And I am very, very happy to do that, to be with them in learning that. And so it is also my hope that when I go back, I will do my best to spread that important message.





*Bishop Francis Meli,
Diocese of Vanimo, Papua New Guinea*



*Bishop Rolando Santos CM
Diocese of Alotau-Sideia, Papua New Guinea*

The highlight of the week can be summed up in four words "It's a great event" for meeting different bishops from different conferences and also from different places in Oceania. The second is it's a week of fraternity. We meet with one another and also share experiences and also our joys, hardships, and there is a moment of solidarity that we get strength from one another. And the sharing is very fruitful because we learn from one another.

The best way of caring for this earth is through the mission of evangelization. And the most important entity that we need to address is the environment of the family and community, which directly affects the lives of our children, of our people. It is so important to evangelize the family. So we know that that Pope Francis always says that each and every Christian is an evangelizer, each and every parent. The whole family should be a family that evangelizes.



*Bishop Ryan Jimenez,
Diocese of Chalan Kanoa, Mariana Islands*

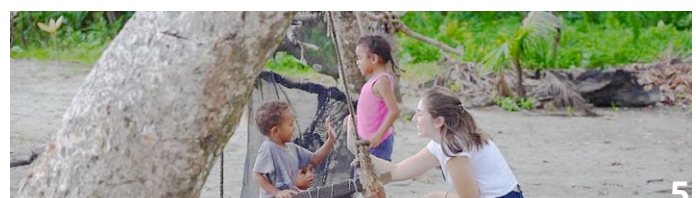


*Sr. Nathalie Becquart XMCJ
Undersecretary of the Holy See's Synod of
Bishops General Secretariat*

The presentation on the formation and mission really struck me the most, especially those two recommendations that was given by the Speaker on the simplification of church structure and intercultural dialog. That strikes a chord with me, especially when the speaker mentioned about the presence of migrant workers. So I think of my own context of ministry where a lot of people involved in the church are migrant workers.

The Church of Oceania through the experience here as where we listened deeply to the voice of the poor, to the cry of the earth, the cry of the ocean, to the cry of the people, and is trying to answer this call of God to continue to be a church close to the people in this context, to care for creation, to emphasize formation, for mission, and to become more and more a synodal church so we can really contemplate such was my experience here, the work of the spirit blowing on the ocean and through the heart of the people gathered here in Suva.

While intercultural ministry is not just pure recognition of the variety of cultures and all the multi-cultural presence in a parish, but really giving them a voice. So my hope is that we will be able to take this insight with us and really put it into practice. If we truly, truly want a church that is representative of all cultures, then they should also be represented in all aspects of ministry, especially in the parish councils in our parishes.



Hearing the Cries of the Youth through *Tagi*

One of the enriching experiences during the assembly was a presentation of the local community on the historical injustices, their cries over the loss of life and livelihood due to the impacts of a changing climate. The community presented *Tagi* (to lament), that also included stories of injustices from their history of colonialism brought by the sugar industry in the 1800s to the 1900s.

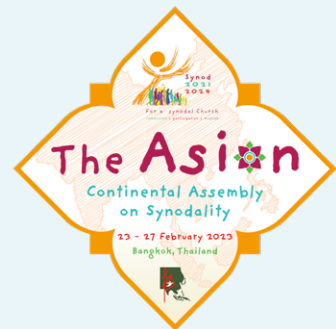
Archbishop Peter explained: "This performance addresses the vulnerability of island people. We are vulnerable to climate change and also to the power of industries and multi-national corporations. We are very vulnerable because these companies come with big money and take away something that is very close to us: the land, sea, and all of Creation. This is deeply rooted in a history of colonialism and injustices on the lives and livelihood of our people."

He composed the final song of the group to express "our cry to the world so that the world will listen," Archbishop Peter continued. "It has the power to invite and enable people to participate in the struggles of the most vulnerable. Jesus himself chose to be vulnerable, and through his passion was able to capture the world. Our hope is that through this performance, you will hear our *Tagi* and take this with you wherever you go. Take our *Tagi* – our tears – back to the world, so the world can hear the cries of the people in the peripheries front and center."



A presentation of the local community on the historical injustices, and the cries of the people, the oceans and islands they inhabit

The Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality held in Bangkok, Thailand, gathered representatives from 29 countries. Discussions were around several themes, such as synodality, decision-making, vocations to the priesthood, the role of young people, religious conflicts, and clericalism, with the aim of fostering communitarian growth. Trusting the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, Asian Church leaders journeyed together in the synodal process, embracing a culture of encounter.



Chrisma Bangaoil, a lay missionary and teacher at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, spoke to Radio Veritas Asia on Synodality. The concept of Synodality puts flesh and comes alive in her brief description. Synodality is doing missions, being with people, listening to them, walking and serving with them. It is about people.

"Synodality is first, putting eyes into mission, putting ears and not only that, we also put hands and feet into mission... Synodality will remain a concept if we don't take the path that Jesus took."

Watch the full video [here](#).

Asian Voices on Synod is an initiative of Radio Veritas Asia, a media platform of the Catholic Church in Asia, and the FABC Office of Social Communications (FAC-OSC)

RAOEN Resources



RAOEN's call for support during the FABC 50 General Conference

[\(https://www.raoen.org/2022/11/16/raoens-call-for-support-at-fabc50/\)](https://www.raoen.org/2022/11/16/raoens-call-for-support-at-fabc50/)

During the recent 50th General Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC), RAOEN shared about its emerging purpose and its initial efforts in responding to the call for reconciliation in the Oceania and Asia biome – its people, its lands, its oceans. All who were gathered during the Assembly were also invited to share RAOEN with those who could help effect change.

RAOEN at FCBCO Suva Assembly 2023: Engaging the indigenous and their relation with all life

[\(https://www.raoen.org/2023/02/09/raoen-at-fcbco-suva-assembly-2023-engaging-the-indigenous-and-their-relation-with-all-life/\)](https://www.raoen.org/2023/02/09/raoen-at-fcbco-suva-assembly-2023-engaging-the-indigenous-and-their-relation-with-all-life/)

During the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania 2023 Assembly in Suva Fiji, RAOEN shared about its purpose in engaging the Indigenous and Local People in the Oceania-Asia biome, and their relation with all life and territory. All who were present in the Assembly were also invited to join RAOEN's call for reconciliation through the work of the Church in connecting deeply with the stories of local communities – the relationships with culture and their land, and how faith is expressed in their daily lives

Listening to Indigenous Peoples and talking as Church from where we are: RAOEN's review of the 23 synod reports

[\(https://www.raoen.org/2022/12/15/listening-to-indigenous-peoples-and-talking-as-church-from-where-we-are/\)](https://www.raoen.org/2022/12/15/listening-to-indigenous-peoples-and-talking-as-church-from-where-we-are/)

RAOEN shared its reflection and review of on the responses gathered from 23 synod synthesis reports of bishops' conferences in Oceania and Asia, and highlighting the voices and experiences of Indigenous Communities, how the Church seeks to engage, and the proposals for change.

Oceania, Asia, and the River Above

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8qPkM-1lyo>

Oceania and Asia comprise of diverse geographical biomes, from Himalaya, the Ganges on through the Indian sub-continent, the Mekong basin and connected lands, on to the tropical forests and waters of archipelagos, islands, and atolls that are all intricately woven into the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

The winds and the water of the Pacific move always west to Asia, affecting all seasons and all lives. Every farmer and fisher work according to the sky. This is how oceans, forests and peoples are intricately linked. In a sense, Oceania and Asia form one giant biome.

UPCOMING EVENTS & CONFERENCES

RAOEN seeks to highlight the faith dimension of advocacy, in the spirit of synodality and talanoa.

MARCH

World Wildlife Day [3rd]

To celebrate and raise awareness of the world's wild animals and plants

UN Water Conference [22-24th]

Midterm Comprehensive Review of Implementation of the UN Decade for Action on Water and Sanitation (2018-2028) at the UN Headquarters in New York

Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development [27-30th]

SDGs under review in 2023 6 - 7 - 9 - 11 - 17.

A chance to accelerate the 2030 Agenda and the presentation of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in Bangkok, Thailand

28th Annual Session of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) [16th-31st]

Debates over deep-sea mining (for minerals to aid in the energy transition) and protecting the Ocean's little-understood ecosystems will take center stage in Jamaica.

APRIL

Earth Day [22nd]

www.earthday.org theme this year is "Invest in our Planet"

UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) [17-28th]

The theme for this 22nd session of the UNPFII is "Indigenous Peoples, human health, planetary and territorial health and climate change: a rights-based approach. The session will take place in-person only.

MAY

International Day of Biological Diversity 2023 [22nd]

This year's theme is "From Agreement to Action: Build Back Biodiversity"

Plastic Pollution INC-2 [29th May - 2nd June]

The 2nd intergovernmental negotiations meeting to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris

JUNE

World Environment Day [5th]

2023 is the 50th anniversary of the World Environment Day. For this year, the spotlight is on solutions to plastic pollution.

World Oceans Day [8th]

The UN designated June 8th as World Oceans Day. For this year's celebration, it's time to put the ocean first - Planet Ocean: Tides are Changing

UN Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea [5-9th]

The 23rd meeting of the consultative process will focus on the theme, "New Maritime Technologies: Challenges and Opportunities

Sustainable Ocean Initiative Workshop [5-9th]

A Convention on Biological Diversity Workshop on ocean-related capacity-building needs for the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework



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