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Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge has signaled that the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia will offer Catholic Church backing for an Indigenous voice in the nation's constitution.

"One very particular outcome I am certainly hoping for is that the Plenary Council will offer a very clear public endorsement of the Uluru Statement From the Heart — I think that would be symbolic, and powerfully symbolic," Archbishop Coleridge, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, said Oct. 5.

"I think the need is enormous, and I think this issue of an awakening to the reality of our Indigenous peoples is not only at the heart of the nation in ways that are not

always recognized, I think it is also close to the heart of this Plenary Council."

In late September, Archbishop Coleridge endorsed the Uluru Statement on behalf of the Brisbane Archdiocese.

One of the key demands in the statement is for a national referendum on whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should have a voice to parliament enshrined in the Australian Constitution. This would not mean a third chamber, but rather an advisory body to parliament that would give Indigenous people a say on the policies and laws that impact their lives.

On the third day of the Oct. 3-10 Plenary Council assembly, Indigenous Catholic Toni Janke said the historic gathering is already showing signs that the church can "bridge the gap" with First Nations people.

Janke is one of the 278 members of the council meeting virtually and has been participating in a small group praying, discussing and reflecting on the question, "How might the church in Australia open in new ways to Indigenous ways of being Christian in spirituality, theology, liturgy and missionary discipleship?"

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"I think there was a real sense of hope. People spoke about working together, walking together, the need for the church to really look at new ways of engaging with First Nations families and communities," said Janke, who works across southeast Queensland providing support through Centacare Family and Relationship Services.

"Probably the biggest thing that came out of the discussions was the need for the church on a broader level to look at things like the Uluru Statement From the Heart," she said. "But also there were a number of discussions around the smaller things that could be done in different diocese and parishes."

Some Catholic communities have already committed to reconciliation action plans, introducing protocols such as the traditional Acknowledgment of and Welcome to Country, and encouraging Indigenous people to share their culture and understanding of country.

The Plenary Council had an Aboriginal Welcome to Country before its opening Mass, and each day, the plenary has a traditional Acknowledgment of Country, an opportunity for anyone to show respect for the country's traditional owners and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Australia.

"As a church, we'd like people working together in meaningful ways that address and heal some of the past relationships, in the past, I guess, trauma that people have suffered over the years," Janke said, adding, "We have a beautiful, rich culture that is in excess of 60,000 years old and a lot to teach, not just the church, but the community at large."

Archbishop Coleridge said he was in favor of all dioceses across Australia introducing reconciliation action plans.

"I might even put that forward to the Plenary Council before the week's end," he said.

Somewhat like a national synod, a plenary council is called to consult on issues facing the church in a specific country; but, unlike a synod, it can issue decrees that, once approved by the Vatican, are binding on the church in that country.

The Plenary Council was being held virtually because of the pandemic, although some areas of Australia were allowed to gather in small groups. The same delegates will meet again — they hope in person — July 4-9.