News
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Village children pass the time in front of a home next to a flooding sea wall at high tide July 15, 2022, in Serua Village, Fiji. As the community runs out of ways to adapt to the rising Pacific Ocean, the 80 villagers face the painful decision whether to move. (CNS/Reuters/Loren Elliott)



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When dozens of Catholic bishops from Oceania gathered in Suva, Fiji, earlier this month, plans to hold a prayer service next to the ocean were derailed by stormy weather, offering a natural illustration of how the very location of the meeting underscored one of the region's most urgent concerns: the environmental crisis.

"The very fact that the meeting was held in one of these small nations in the Pacific, Fiji, which is being affected in certain areas by climate change, was really helpful in raising the awareness on how climate change is so real and therefore calling for global response," said Cardinal Soane Patita Paini Mafi of Tonga.

While the Feb. 5-10 meeting had three official themes — care for the oceans; becoming a more synodal church; and formation for mission — the meeting's concluding statement offered a unanimous consensus that "the ecological crisis is an existential threat for our people and communities" and the church must respond.

"It is therefore one of our hopes from this meeting in Suva that our voices from these small island nations in Oceania are in unison in heralding one common message of hearing the cry from Mother Earth and pay heed to save our one planet and common home," Mafi told Earthbeat.



Bishops from Oceania gather Feb. 5-10 in Suva, Fiji. (Susan Pascoe)

Today, those cries are legion: Rapidly rising sea levels have triggered a wave of climate refugees seeking new homelands due to a number of small pacific islands becoming uninhabitable. An increase in cyclones has wreaked havoc on the region's economies and led to tremendous loss of lives and culture, and climate-induced migration has threatened new conflicts on land and at sea.

But for the organizers of the meeting, it wasn't enough to just talk about the threats posed by climate change. It had to be witnessed.

At the urging of Suva Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, two official tours were organized to view the effects of climate change in nearby Togoru village, where a local cemetery was underwater, and to assess the way the extractive industry had begun to destroy the local environment in Mau village.

"We can all read the statistics, we all understand but when you see it firsthand and when you see the faces of the local people and the worry lines etched into their faces and you hear their quite rational concerns for the futures, that somehow deeply marks your response," said Susan Pascoe, who has held a number of senior roles in both the Australian government and church and participated in the Suva meeting.

"It moves beyond the intellectual and it moves somehow into your value system and your core beliefs," Pascoe added.

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In addition to the visits, members of various environmentally vulnerable communities in Fiji prepared a two-hour presentation with music, stories and dance, meant to both introduce their local culture and also spotlight the ways the climate crisis threatens their existence.

Cardinal Mafi, whose own homeland of Tonga was rocked by a volcano eruption last year that left the entire island under a blanket of ash and effectively cut off from communication with the rest of the world, said the performances showcased "the cries of the low-lying Oceania islands and its peoples so that hopefully the world hears and responds."



Environmentally vulnerable communities in Fiji present music, stories and dance to the Catholic bishops of Oceania during their Feb. 5-10 meeting in Suva, Fiji. (Susan Pascoe)

"They are desperate, they can see that the sea levels are rising," Pascoe told Earthbeat, adding that the locals could sense that there was "a power base in their midst" that could and should advocate on their behalf.

According to Bishop Michael Dooley of Dunedin, New Zealand, there is a "growing awareness" among Catholics that ecological concerns should be a priority issue for believers. Dooley, who was a member of the executive committee that planned the meeting, said that Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" was "prophetic" in this regard and that it has helped build momentum among church leaders to elevate the ecological crisis.

Every four years the bishops from around Oceania meet together and as planning took shape for the 2023 gathering, Dunedin said the "ocean was at the forefront of our minds."

This concern, he said, dovetailed with the church's ongoing synod process, where the bishops' drafted their response to the working document of the continental phase of the synod during their meetings in Fiji.



A tropical storm in Fiji, Jan. 18, 2012 (Wikimedia Commons/Simon_sees, CC BY 2.0)

Fr. Gerard Burns of the Archdiocese of Wellington, New Zealand, who also took part in the meetings, said that based on his observations of the assembly, even if a bishop had not previously been a vocal supporter of *Laudato Si*', the extreme weather events that the region has experienced in recent years led to real unity

among the bishops as they discussed the church's response to caring for creation.

"Everyone realizes what is being talked about here," Burns told EarthBeat, citing a final statement from the gathering that calls for a "deeper ecological conversion."

Jesuit Cardinal Michael Czerny, who heads the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, addressed the Oceania bishops during the gathering, where he told them to rely on the synod process to navigate the way forward.

"Think of the poor who suffer the worst consequences of pollution, and the companies that pollute but employ the population," said Czerny on Feb. 5. "A pastor is pastor to all. How should he shepherd? How to navigate such treacherous waters? Only a synodal process can help us discern and walk together."

By the conclusion of the meeting, Pascoe said she believed the Oceania bishops had "absolute episcopal solidarity across the region" and that as the synod process advances, she hopes their regional concerns are communicated to the universal church so that they, too, can join together in solidarity.

"What happens in Oceania," warned Pascoe, "can happen anywhere."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.