

# The Women of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

*At the Women as Church Conference hosted by the BBI-TAITE in October 2020, Mrs Louise Zavone and Dr Trudy Dantis presented on the topic of “Women of the Australian Bishops Conference”. Trudy and Louise wanted to make people aware of the many and varied leadership positions that women hold within the structures of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. As well, they wanted to provide details of how the changes in the participation of women through the various roles that have developed within the structure of the Bishops Conference over the last 10 years. What follows is a summation of their presentation.*

## **1. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference**

Our presentation began by acknowledging that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is a permanent assembly of all the bishops of Australia and its aim is to provide an opportunity for the bishops to work together for common pastoral ends. The Second Vatican Council considered the establishment of Conferences to be of the utmost importance so that bishops of the same nation or region could unite in a single assembly and meet at regular intervals (*Christus Dominus* 38), recognising that bishops are often unable to discharge their office fittingly and fruitfully unless they work closely with other bishops, and so Episcopal Conferences exist in most countries around the world.

The ability of the bishops to come together regularly allows for collegiality and also provides a means by which they can collaborate in meeting the needs of their respective dioceses so as to “promote not just the ‘common good’ which earthly governments seek, but the greater good – the salvation of souls – which the Church offers to all” (Beal, 2000, p. 591). We all know how fruitful it can be when we gather together within any community or organisation, and it is the same for our bishops.

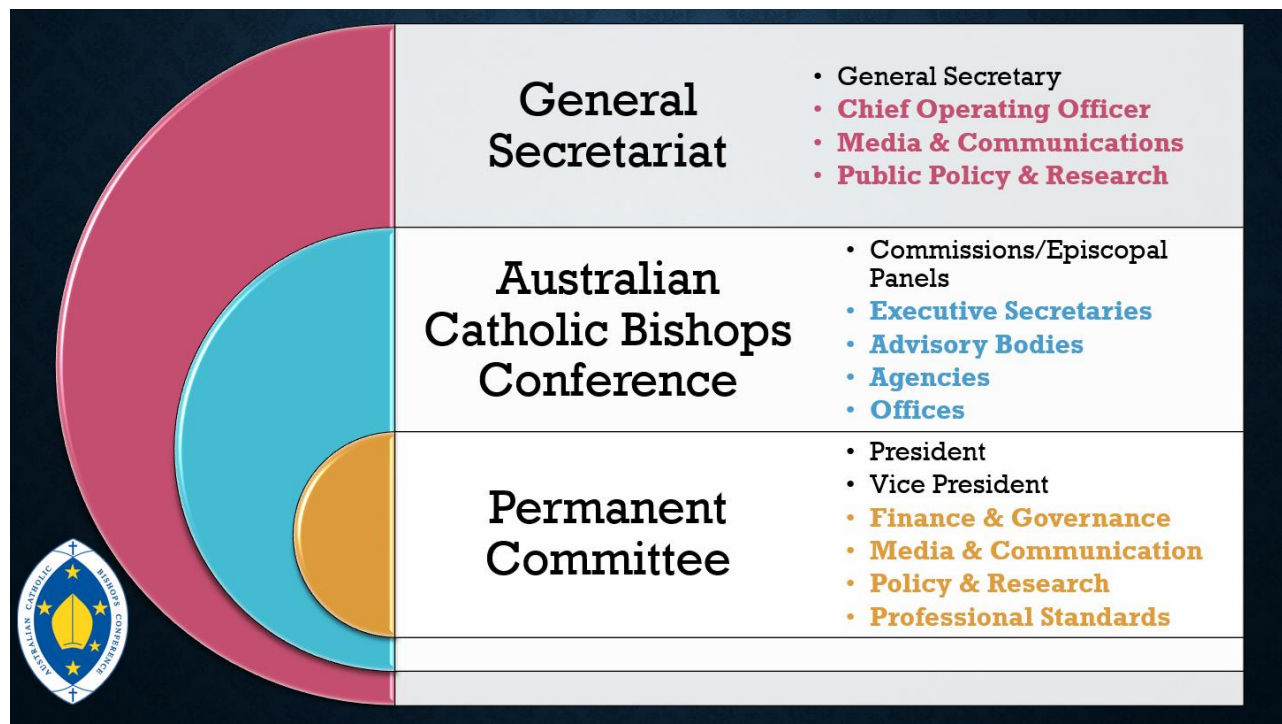
Vatican II provided specific requirements for Conferences, as set out by Pope Paul VI in the 1965 document *Christus Dominus*, the decree concerning the pastoral office of Bishops in the Church and also in the *Code of Canon Law*. The Conference of the Bishops therefore is like a council in which the bishops of a given nation or territory jointly exercise their pastoral office to promote the greater good; where the members of the episcopal conference are all local Ordinaries of every rite - excluding vicar generals - and coadjutors, auxiliaries and other titular bishops who perform a special work entrusted to them by the Apostolic See or the episcopal conference. In Australia, this equates to 28 Diocesan Bishops, three Ordinariates/Prelatures, five Eastern Catholic Bishops and (currently) five Auxiliary Bishops.

Each episcopal conference is required to draft its own statutes for recognition by the Apostolic See. In these statutes, among other things, offices are established, for example, a permanent board of bishops, episcopal commissions and a general secretariat.

According to the statutes of the Conference, the Bishops come together for two plenary meetings each year, in May and November. The President, currently Archbishop Mark Coleridge, presides over these meetings of the Conference as well as the meetings of the Permanent Committee (c. 452). The Conference is supported by the General Secretary, currently Fr Stephen Hackett MSC. The President is required to present the minutes of each plenary meeting to the Holy See and any general decrees that may have been issued (c. 456). The Apostolic Nuncio, the Pope’s Ambassador to Australia, is also invited to speak with the Bishops at each of the Plenary Meetings. The

Conference has nine Commissions and two Episcopal Panels which deal with a particular area of Church life as set out by a specific mandate. There is a scheduled structure of meetings during the course of the year, reporting to each plenary meeting of the Conference.

The graphic below represents the general structure of the Conference which is supported by the General Secretariat and its staff: General Secretary, Chief Operating Officer and the Media & Communications Team and the Public Policy and Research Teams. The positions represented in colour on this graphic are positions held by lay men and women.



Every three years, the Bishops are elected to one or two Commissions or Episcopal Panels, and each of these is supported by an Executive Secretary, advisory bodies, agencies and offices as required. It is important to note here that these advisory bodies can and do change. One current example is the Plenary Council and the Plenary Executive Committee which have both been formed for a limited time. The Conference has a Permanent Committee, which is the Executive and Standing Committee of the Conference and deals with matters specifically delegated to it by the plenary meeting, as well as with matters that need to be dealt with before Conference can meet again.

You may be aware that over the past 12 months, the bishops have had to make a number of very difficult decisions due to limited finances being available. This has resulted in a number of employees receiving redundancies, offices closing and some Councils being dissolved. As with all things in the current economic and pandemic environment, the Conference is trying to look at new ways of carrying out these works in difficult circumstances.

## 2. *The place of women in the Catholic Church*

At our presentation to the Women as Church Conference, before we looked at women working within the Bishops Conference, we highlighted some general statistics on Catholic women in Australia and the role of women in the Church. In 2016, Catholic women made up 23.4 per cent of the total female population in Australia. The greatest change within this group over the last 20 years has been the rise in the levels of education. Twenty years ago, an almost equal proportion of Catholic men and women aged 15 and over had a university degree (9.8 % of men and 9.6 % of women). In 2016, the percentage of women with a university degree (23%) far surpassed that of men (17%). The rise in education levels has had an impact on the occupation sector. In 2016, 61 per cent of Catholic women were employed or seeking work. Of those who

were employed, more than one in three were managers or professionals. This group includes those who work as marketing and production managers, education and health service managers, retail managers, school principals and schoolteachers, IT professionals and so on.

For many decades now, women have made up the majority of those attending Mass and participating in parish ministries. Data from the 2016 National Church Life Survey shows that women hold 65 per cent of all leadership and ministry roles in parishes. These roles include lectors, special ministers of the Eucharist, leaders of prayer, youth or discussion groups, members of parish councils and so on. Overall, a greater percentage of women (42%) than men (38%) have a leadership role in the parish. Recent data from Catholic dioceses reveal that significant percentages of women also have roles as chairs (56%) and members (45%) of pastoral councils and as members of safeguarding councils (49%).<sup>1</sup>

The contribution of women is not only limited to voluntary roles in parishes. Within the Church, there are over 3000 organisations that employ over 220,000 people, and over 77 per cent of these roles are occupied by women.<sup>2</sup> This is significant when compared with Australian society in general, where females make up only 46 per cent of the Australian workforce.

Across all the sectors, the presence of women is largely seen in education, health and aged care. But dioceses and parishes remain places where women contribute significantly. Around 78 per cent of all those employed in this sector are women. Overall, within all Church organisations, women contribute not only through administrative roles but also as professionals, where 61 per cent of all professional roles are held by women.

The data for the Bishops Conference comes from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) Public Report, submitted by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. In 2020 overall, there were more women than men employed by the Conference in managerial and non-managerial roles. Within managerial roles, the report reveals that there were more women than men working as heads of businesses or CEOs, and as office executives or general managers. In non-managerial roles, nearly all employees were professionals or administrative workers.

An analysis of the WGEA data over five years from 2016 to 2020 shows that the proportion of men and women in managerial roles varied over time. Overall, however, a greater proportion of women than men were employed in the organisation.<sup>3</sup> It is important to remember that the figures in the report are only for those employed by the Conference. There are several women who serve in advisory capacities as volunteers in Councils, Commissions and other advisory bodies who are not represented in these figures.

### **3. Roles that women have within the ACBC**

So, how do the women of the Catholic Church fit into the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference? The following table shows the 79 roles that are held by women within the Conference, as chairs, deputy chairs, CEOs, executive secretaries, executive assistants, directors, editors and members of advisory bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> Trudy Dantis and Stephen Reid. "Governance Survey in Australia 2019." in *The Light From the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*. (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2020), p. 171, 176.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Dixon, Jane McMahon, Stephen Reid, George Keryk and Annemarie Atapattu, *Our Work Matters: Catholic Church employers and employees in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> National Centre for Pastoral Research. "Women in the ACBC - Gender Equality Report" in *Pastoral Research Online Issue 51*, December 2020, p. 5. Available at: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Pastoral-Research-Online-Issue-51-December-2020.pdf>.

Employment Relations Manager, Office for Employment Relations	Executive Secretary, Bishops Commission for Social Justice	Chair of the Media Working Group Against Euthanasia Member of the Australian Catholic Media Council	Officer for the National Centre for Evangelisation Catholic Enquiry Centre	Delegate to the Catholic Biblical Federation	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Christian Unity & Religious Relations with Jews	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Public Engagement	Executive Director, National Catholic Education Commission	Editor, Cath News, Media and Communications Department	Member, National Liturgical Architecture & Art Council
Member, Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research	Member, Canon Law Reference Group	Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research	Research Assistant, National Centre for Pastoral Research	Member, Canon Law Reference Group	Member, CathNews Editorial Board	Member, National Catholic Education Commission	Member, CathNews Editorial Board	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Christian Unity & Religious Relations with Jews	Member, National Liturgical Council
Executive Secretary, Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity & Ministry & Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples	Archivist, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference	Chair, National Liturgical Music Council	Director Corporate Services and Executive Secretary, Catholic Social Services Australia	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Christian Unity & Religious Relations with Jews	Chair, Australian Catholic Council for Life, Marriage and Family	Member, National Catholic Education Commission	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Public Engagement	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research & National Liturgical Council	Member, Plenary Council Executive Committee
Chair, Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research	Disability Projects Officer	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Christian Unity & Religious Relations with Jews	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Christian Unity & Religious Relations with Jews	Executive Assistant to the General Secretary	Deputy Chair, National Catholic Education Commission	Member, Australian Catholic Media Council	Chief Executive Officer, Caritas Australia	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Christian Unity & Religious Relations with Jews	Member, Plenary Council Executive Committee
National Director, Apostleship of the Sea	Digital Strategy Manager, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference + Member, National Liturgical Architecture & Art Council	Chief Executive Officer, Catholic Social Services Australia	Member of the Healthcare Working Group Against Euthanasia	Member, National Catholic Education Commission	Member, National Catholic Education Commission	Media and Communications Officer, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference	Member, Australian Catholic Media Council	Facilitator, National Plenary council	Member, Plenary Council Executive Committee
Executive Assistant to the Plenary Council Facilitator	Deputy Director, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office	Social Justice Officer, Office for Social Justice	Member of the Politics & Law Working Group Against Euthanasia & Member of the Australian Catholic Council for Public Engagement	Chair, Australian Catholic Media Council & CathNews Editorial Board	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Life, Marriage and Family	Member of the Politics & Law Working Group Against Euthanasia	Member, Australian Catholic Council for Life, Marriage and Family	Executive Secretary, Bishops Commission for Life, Family & Public Engagement + Bishops Commission for Christian Unity & Inter-religious Dialogue	Member, Plenary Council Executive Committee
Member, National Liturgical Architecture & Art Council	Member, National Liturgical Council	Member, National Liturgical Council	Member, National Liturgical Council	Member, National Liturgical Music Council	Member, National Liturgical Music Council	Member, National Liturgical Music Council	7 Members of National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council	Chair, Catholic Social Service Australia Board	Member, Plenary Council Executive Committee +3

The roles highlighted in blue in the table represent the roles that are funded by the Conference and the ones in white include voluntary roles and other roles that are funded by sources other than the Conference, such as Kirsty Robertson, the CEO of Caritas Australia, Jacinta Collins, the Executive Director of the National Catholic Education Commission and Dr Ursula Stephens, the CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia.

The faces of the women who take on these roles of leadership with the Conference are shown below. Here are 79 women who exercise leadership, direct agendas and influence the workings of the Conference. These are women who live and work as equal disciples with all members of the Church, including the bishops. They are women who make a difference in our Church! And just in comparison, there are 52 men (both lay and religious and not including the bishops) who are also involved in similar roles with the Conference.





One of the roles within the Conference is the role of the executive secretary. There are currently six executive secretaries; five of these positions are full-time positions held by women and there is one man who works part-time. These five women are married, have families and the youngest, Lana Turvey-Collins, recently become a new mum!

The major responsibilities for all of the executive secretaries are to maintain the mandates and operating principles of the Commissions and their advisory bodies; provide secretariat support to the Commissions via meetings, agenda papers, reports and minutes; manage the finances of the Commissions; develop and maintain working relationships with advisory bodies, agencies and offices; and manage projects that the commission has initiated. The role of the executive secretary is one of planning and collaboration between the bishops and the members of the advisory bodies to the Commission, as well as various offices and agencies. In this role, the executive secretary is required to be aware of many different agendas and issues that relate to the different Councils and the Commission, keeping everyone on track so that they can meet regularly and provide reports for the May and November Plenary Meetings.

The Bishop Delegate for marriage and family, Bishop Michael Kennedy, was asked to write a few words about his view of the contribution of women to the Conference. He said that over the past eight years that he has been a bishop, all of the Commissions that he has been involved in, bar one, have had a woman as the executive secretary. Each has been a professional with a specific skill set and expertise. As well as getting the job done, each truly cooperate with the bishops in the work of their Commission in pursuing the mission of the Church. He said that he listens to their contributions and seeks and heeds their advice, and he sees them as collaborators, as do the other bishops.

“I am glad that the bishops have recognised the authentic contribution these women bring to the Church. Quite frankly, without them, the ACBC and the Commissions would be a shadow of themselves”.

It may also surprise some to know that 47 per cent of the key advisors to the Bishops Conference are women.

#### **4. *Women making a significant contribution to the work of the ACBC***

So, let us look at some of the women who have made and continue to make significant contributions to the work of the Conference.

**Mrs Debra Vermeer** is the Chair of the Australian Catholic Media Council. This council has six members, four of whom are women. Debra reflected that women are integral to the story of the Conference's Communications Office.

The office was established in the 1980s, thanks to a wonderful woman, Mary Newport, who was an extremely distinguished public servant and trailblazer for women, having served in the press offices of prime ministers going back to Sir Robert Menzies. In 1988, she resigned from the Commonwealth Public Service to become the first national media officer for the Conference, where she worked until 1995.

Mary first had to convince the bishops of the need for such an office, which she did, and the Church in Australia has much to thank her for. After Mary



retired, Jackie Brady took over the role of Communications Officer at the ACBC, followed by Debra and then Beth Doherty, Aoife Connors and finally, three years ago, the first man in the job, Gavin Abraham.

Debra says, “I’m proud of the role women have taken in working with our bishops to bring the Gospel voice into the public domain. And I’m thankful for the opportunities I’ve been given to be a part of that”.



**Mrs Trish Mowbray** is the Disability Project Officer for the Conference and she has been in this role for 12 years. In her reflection, Trish states very clearly that she has not been alone in this work!

In 2006 the Australian Catholic Disability Council was established which, unfortunately due to severe financial constraints, was disestablished along with many other councils at the end of 2019. The Council’s membership was mostly women living with disability or working with people with disability. The Council membership did include men, but the women outnumbered the men.

Trish acknowledges the women with whom she has worked saying that, together, they made significant changes to attitudes and policies of the Church over the last 12 years. She says, that “together we forged the current rough path of inclusion for people with disability in the hope that we all might, in the future, continue to work together to smooth that road out.” Trish believes that she has been a mere instrument in amplifying their voice to Church leadership.

The women Trish acknowledges include Ms Michele Castagna OAM, who was one of the founding women and the inaugural Chair of the Council. Dr Lisa Bridle is an advocate and parent who questions common social responses to disability, including the development of prenatal testing technologies. Sr Helen Merrin OP, who has been actively involved in teaching roles at St Lucy’s School for the Blind, held leadership positions in L’Arche Sydney and is a passionate Dominican sister. Sr Myree Harris is a fierce defender of people with mental illness and the homeless. Laura Frogley is a primary school teacher passionate about mini Vinnies and the rights of people with disability. Mrs Anna Chandler, whose passion for the full inclusion of deaf and hard of hearing people in the school and parish settings, is remarkable.



Trish says that the list does not end there. She also acknowledges the many deaf women who assisted and supported her in learning Auslan, the deaf women who lead their deaf Catholic community to a deeper understanding of Church teachings, her young deaf/blind friend, a woman in her 20s, who travels the world to advocate for deaf/blind young people and whose faith is so strong and hope so great that Trish can only dream about!

**Miss Olivia Lee** is the executive assistant for the facilitation team of the Plenary Council. As a 20-something young migrant Fijian-Chinese woman working at a national level for the Catholic Church in Australia through the Plenary Council, Olivia reflected that “equality” was the third word introduced into her vocabulary, after “mama” and “dad”.

Olivia reflects: “I was raised with equality as a core principle in my life perhaps not so much because of the above aspects of my identity that I have mentioned, but because my dad was an amputee due to a childhood bone cancer and my brother is blind in his left eye because of a violent altercation. So, being the daughter and sister of persons who have need, specific healing and acceptance has made me seek and notice equality – most of all in the sense of living and working in a way that is consistently kind and welcoming to all.



“In seeking this equality for who I am and those whose blood I share, I have found acceptance and understanding in many spaces in the world, but only in the Church have I found these things together with love. It is this love and respect of my being, as well as a courage to trust in my youth and talents, that have shaped my growth into a disciple of God.”

Olivia believes her contributions to the whole people of God, particularly through her work in the Plenary Council, are valuable because of her life experiences that make her aware of the person who is at the fringe of the Church and the society at large – and also aware of the beauty that the “outside” has. Perhaps most importantly for Olivia is that she believes the biggest contribution she can make to the people of God through her life and her work is the joy she brings and intentionally tries to resonate all the time.

**Ms Jane Bashiruddin** is the Employment Relations Manager for the Conference. Jane commenced work with the Conference in 2009 as reporting to the Director of the Office for Employment Relations, who was also a woman. This was her first experience of employment in the Catholic sector and she was amazed to find out just how extensive the work of the Catholic Church was – something that she did not know even though she had been a regular church-goer all of her life. Jane reflected that even at that time, there were a number of women in leadership positions within Conference agencies, and that this has fortunately been an upward trend.



The Bishops Conference currently employs more women than men, with 18 per cent of women in leadership and key management positions and men in 17 per cent of these positions. The Conference has tried to make it easier for women to balance work with family life by offering paid parental leave and flexible work arrangements, whether for being there for their children or for caring for elderly parents. It goes without saying that the same benefits have also been available to male members of our workforce.

“I feel that my role with the Conference is to facilitate others to do the good work of the Church. Our employment practices are underpinned by Catholic Social Teaching – the dignity of meaningful work, solidarity, working for the common good and maintaining a balance between the rights of the individual and the needs of our agencies. For me it is particularly satisfying to see our workers, regardless of gender, do well in their work and reach their true potential. We are all equal in the eyes of God.”

**Ms Jenny Brinkworth** is the Chair of the Media Working Group Against Euthanasia, a member of the Australian Catholic Media Council and is also a member of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Council Media Committee. Jenny is also the director of communications for the Archdiocese of Adelaide, the editor of *The Southern Cross* and the former president of the Australasian Catholic Press Association.



“Through my roles on national groups convened by the ACBC, and my involvement in significant Church issues as director of communications for the Adelaide Archdiocese, I have been given the opportunity to use my skills and experience in media and communications to contribute to the life of the Catholic Church.

“It has been extremely rewarding to have input into discussions and decision-making on challenges facing the Church and to take a ‘big picture’ perspective on issues being dealt with on a daily basis at a local level.

“I have always felt that my opinions and contributions are highly valued and have never considered gender to be an impediment to my voice being heard.

“My motivation for being a journalist was always the desire to make a difference to people’s lives and in my role at the Church I have been privileged to combine this goal with living out my Catholic faith and sharing the stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary work as disciples of God.

“The bishops I have worked with over the years have always been very supportive and have given me the confidence and capacity to provide advice.

“Another factor contributing to a positive experience in exercising leadership has been being part of a strong network of highly professional Catholic media and communications practitioners. The support of my peers has been very important, particularly at the more demanding times.

“With a background in strategic communications advice in the private sector, I have appreciated the chance to use my skills across a range of issues at a national level. While limited resources are often an impediment to implementation of these strategies, I believe there is a commitment amongst Church leadership to seeking innovative ways of fulfilling our mission in the world today.”

## **5. Pope Francis and the mission of the laity**

Pope Francis wrote in a foreword to the recently published book, *Symphony of Ministries* by Bishop Fabio Febene, that “The time is now. The mission of the laity is not a privilege of a few and it involves total dedication.” Pope Francis stresses the importance of “the co-responsibility of the laity in the building up of the Church,” as highlighted in St John Paul II’s 1988 exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, mentioning that at the recent synods on the family, young people and the Amazon he has



recommended new lay ministries “for a more synodal and outgoing Church” and he has asked every bishop to conduct a careful discernment of which ministries are needed for his territory. He also warned Church leaders against the temptation to “clericalise” the laity and said it was vital to recognise lay people’s specific vocation.

Archbishop Coleridge, the President of the Bishops Conference and Archbishop of Brisbane, has listened to these words of the Holy Father and has acted upon them, inviting a lay woman in 2019 to the Council of Priests in Brisbane, a first for the Australian Church. Archbishop Coleridge said he was convinced women needed a bigger decision-making role in the Church. He said: “It is up to other dioceses to make their own decision, but I find it hard to see how any diocese wouldn’t benefit from having women more closely and consistently involved in its decision-making processes.”

The Archbishop invited Ms Cathy Uechtritz to join him, his Vicar-General and 20 priests and deacons on the council. This key decision-making body represents the clergy in the diocese and advises the Bishop. Cathy commented: “The Archbishop introduced me and said the reason Cathy is here is because she is a woman and a wife and a mother and a grandmother and everything people sitting around this table have no idea about.”



Two women who have very significant roles within the Vatican include Dr Linda Ghisoni and Dr Gabriella Gambino who were both nominated in 2017 by Pope Francis as Under-Secretaries of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life. Gabriella is married with five children and has a PhD in bioethics. She is the author of numerous publications (monographs, curatorships and essays) and has dedicated herself, in particular, to the themes of human life, marriage and the family. Linda is married with two daughters. Among her many roles and qualifications is a doctorate in canon law.

In the Pope's Prayer intention video for [October 2020: Women in Leadership Roles in the Church - YouTube](#) , Linda reflects on how Pope Francis promotes greater integration of the lay faithful, especially women, in the positions of responsibility of the Church.

*In the October 2020 video dedicated to the mission of the laity in the Church, the Holy Father begins by talking about baptism. This is very important because it allows us to understand that the wish to have a greater participation of lay people - and in particular of women - in instances of responsibility in the Church, should not be misunderstood, as if it were exhausted in a sociological operation or in an appeal to worry about guaranteeing pink quotas for an equitable division of power between women and men, between lay people and clerics. Not therefore a claim to space to obtain functions. In fact, if we become aware of the meaning of our baptism, we understand our place in the Church, which, to be such, cannot renounce the specific contribution of the laity, of women, which are, by vocation, a constitutive part of it.*

Sometimes we think that women are “invisible” in the Church and their voices are not being heard, so we hope that though this brief insight we have been able to express how women are contributing their gifts, their skills and their experiences and that women in our Church have something to say that is valued by our bishops. This is a good news story and a sign of hope in our Church.

**Words:**

Dr Trudy Dantis

Director

National Centre for Pastoral Research



Mrs Louise Zavone

Executive Secretary Bishops Commission for Life, Family &  
Public Engagement

Bishops Commission for Christian Unity & Inter-religious  
Dialogue

Episcopal Panel for Canon Law

Episcopal Panel for Doctrine & Morals



**Images:** Supplied