

KNOW THE DIOCESES IN 2020

DIOCESE of WILCANNIA-FORBES

In 1887 parts of the territories of the dioceses of Armidale, Bathurst and Goulburn were excised to establish the new Diocese of Wilcannia. In 1917 it was renamed the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes. Its geographical area is 414,398 square kilometres, covering 52% of the State of NSW.¹ The diocese is one of 9 suffragan dioceses of the ecclesiastical Province of Sydney. When the previous bishop resigned in 2009, proposals to split the diocese were put to the Holy See, due to a diminished Catholic population and a shortage of priests. In 2013 the Holy See determined that the diocese should continue in its integrity and appointed a new bishop in 2014.

Demographics: At the 2016 Census 107,511 persons (including 26,770 Aboriginal) lived in the diocese, with 29,264 self-identified Catholics (27.2% of total). Since the 2001 Census (118,168 and 35,815 (30.3%)), the general population has decreased by 9%, while the Catholic population has decreased by 18.3%. In 2016 the diocese ranked 25th in Catholic population with the median age of Catholics at 40 years. Australia is the birthplace of 91.4% of all Catholics, including 4,097 indigenous Australians (14% of all Catholics), while the biggest groups born outside Australia are from the Philippines (1.2%), Italy (0.7%), and UK - excluding N. Ireland - (0.6%).

Bishop: The current bishop is Columba Macbeth-Green OSPPE, born in Australia in 1968, ordained a priest for the Order of St Paul the First Hermit (Pauline Fathers) in 1974, and ordained a bishop in 2014. He was installed as the 7th bishop of Wilcannia-Forbes in 2014. His most recent *Quinquennial Report* was prepared for his June 2019 *ad limina* visit. It has not been made public.

Structure and Governance: The diocese has 20 parishes organised into 3 deaneries. It is one of 17 dioceses with less than 30 parishes. Ten parishes have a full-time resident priest (50%), while 10 share a priest. The diocese has a diocesan finance council, council of priests and a social justice committee. The first ever diocesan pastoral council was recently established and held its first meeting in November 2020. The diocese does not have a pastoral plan or vision statement, and the last and only diocesan synod was held in 1890. Each parish has a parish pastoral council.

Priests and Deacons: The diocese has 29 priests, including the bishop²: 23 diocesan and 6 religious. In November 2020 just 17 were active in parish ministry: 11 diocesan and 6 religious. Another, not in a parish, works as Vicar General. Of those in parishes, 5 are Australian-born and 12 overseas-born (including 4 in India, 3 in Africa, 1 in Philippines, 1 in Chile, and 1 Poland). Nine priests live in retirement, 1 works outside the diocese and 1 is on leave. The diocese has no permanent deacons. Two seminarians (from Brazil and India) were recently ordained to the priesthood, and 2 Kenyan-born seminarians are in formation at Good Shepherd seminary in Sydney. There has been a major turnover of priests in parish ministry in the last 10 years and within 5 years the diocese will be overwhelmingly reliant on overseas-born priests. If only the 17 priests actively ministering in parishes are counted, there are an estimated 1,721 Catholics per priest in the diocese.

Lay ministers and officials: Thirteen lay persons hold senior positions in the diocesan curia: 7 men, 5 women and 1 religious sister, including 2 who are also employed in parish pastoral ministry. The presence of lay religious brothers and sisters has been in significant decline since 2001: brothers down 85% to just 2, and sisters down 63% to 18 (from 48 in 2001). Three congregations of religious sisters reside in the diocese, including a contemplative order of Carmelites recently arrived (2019) from the USA. Together, there are 22 consecrated sisters and brothers resident in the diocese.³

¹ This is a similar geographic area to Iraq (438,317 sq. km)

² This data supplied by the diocese in *A Snapshot of our Diocese Wilcannia-Forbes November 2020*. It states that there are 29 priests in the diocese with 20 'active' - 11 incardinated and 9 not incardinated. Two priests were ordained in October 2020: 1 from India and 1 from Brazil.

³ Updated information supplied by the diocese in *A Snapshot of our Diocese Wilcannia-Forbes November 2020*
Catholics For Renewal 10 December 2020, catholicsforrenewal.org.au

Mass attendance and liturgy: In 2006 an average 3,519 Catholics attended Mass regularly (10.5%). In 2016 the average was 2,275 (7.8%) – down 35.4%. The diocese has a Liturgical Commission and the Traditional Latin Mass is regularly celebrated by the bishop and other priests of the diocese.

Seminary and Seminarians: The Regional Seminary of the Good Shepherd in Sydney serves the diocese. Two seminarians (from Brazil and India) were ordained in October 2020 and 2 others are in formation.

Pastoral ministries: The diocese has an active Youth Ministry with 9 parish youth groups. Two pastoral workers (1 lay woman and 1 religious sister) minister in the diocese and the Knights of the Southern Cross, Legion of Mary, and St Vincent de Paul Society are active.

Plenary Council: The bishop asked all parishes and schools to connect with the first phase of the Council and a total of 327 persons – 49 as individuals (69% women and 29% men) and 278 in 11 groups – responded to the Plenary Council’s Listening and Dialogue phase. They identified the priority issues for the Council as: greater Inclusion of all; being a witness in society; care for neighbour; greater involvement of laity; fighting for human rights issues; ending mandatory celibacy and allowing priests to marry; ordination of women; a greater role for women; making Mass appealing to youth and children; stronger parish communities; and sharing the faith with others. The bishop was the only person selected from the diocese for the Discernment and Writing Groups and 4 persons have been called to participate in the Council sessions: 2 clerics (bishop and vicar general) and 2 lay persons (Hugo Chis (a seminarian) and Mrs Cassandra Auld).

Education: The diocese has 19 Catholic schools: 18 primary and 1 secondary. They educate 2,631 students: 1,916 primary and 750 secondary. There are 340 indigenous students enrolled in the primary schools – 13% of all enrolments. Thirteen of the 19 school principals are women. The Catholic Education Office (CEO) is responsible to the diocesan bishop and committed to providing the highest quality education for students in its rural and remote schools, which work in partnership with each other and the CEO. Catholic education for indigenous students has always been a high priority in Western NSW and the CEO assumed responsibility for education in remote communities in 1989. The school curriculum includes Aboriginal perspectives for all students and many of its guiding principles align with the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Education Strategy 2015*.⁴ An Aboriginal Education Support Officer is employed to provide cultural knowledge, to support the Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) throughout the diocese, to engage with parents, and to work with Aboriginal communities. In 2018 government grants to the NSW Catholic Schools System totalled \$2.64 billion, and of this the Wilcannia-Forbes diocese received \$36.53 million⁵. In 2020 each student in the diocese’s Catholic schools received annual funding of around \$20K, the most of any diocese.⁶

Health and Welfare Services: The incidence of homelessness, domestic violence, and unemployment in the diocese is high, and in recent years the effects of droughts and floods have been devastating. Welfare services are supplied predominantly by CatholicCare which has offices in 12 centres throughout the diocese. They include support for families, especially those affected by domestic violence, drought, and mental health, relationship and financial counselling, assistance with accommodation and housing, and programs for youth and indigenous communities, including an Aboriginal Men’s Centre. Some 44% of clients and 32% of staff identify as Aboriginal. During the COVID-19 pandemic CatholicCare has had a 42% increase in demand for its services. Government grants for 2018 totalled \$9.3 million.⁷ St Vincent de Paul Society also provides support services and Catholic Healthcare and Southern Cross Care provide a range of aged care services and residential facilities including a nursing home and hostel for war veterans.

Finances: The diocese is registered with the Charities Commission (ACNC) as The Trustees of the Roman Catholic Church for the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, together with the Catholic Education Office, CatholicCare, and several parish schools. As a ‘Basic Religious Charity’ they are not required to answer the financial questions in the Annual Information Statement, submit annual financial reports, or comply with any

⁴ https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/natsi_educationstrategy_v3.pdf

⁵ *Catholic Schools NSW 2018 Annual Report*; [https://acncpubfilesprodstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public/012dcfbb-38af-e811-a962-000d3ad24a0d-a5d82e28-a9fd-4789-8726-d8d941912e6b-Financial%20Report-25c5b136-5a58-ea11-a811-000d3acae853-1_13856_WF_Catholic_Education_2018_AFS_&_Mgt_Report_\(13856\).pdf](https://acncpubfilesprodstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public/012dcfbb-38af-e811-a962-000d3ad24a0d-a5d82e28-a9fd-4789-8726-d8d941912e6b-Financial%20Report-25c5b136-5a58-ea11-a811-000d3acae853-1_13856_WF_Catholic_Education_2018_AFS_&_Mgt_Report_(13856).pdf) (cf. p. 15)

⁶ <https://www.csnsw.catholic.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ABC-rebuttal-020920.pdf>

⁷ https://ccwf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018-2019AnnualReport_final.pdf

Governance Standards. The diocese does not publish an annual financial report for its own activities. Each parish has a finance council.

Communications: The diocese has a website with basic information and a Facebook page with frequent updates. It also publishes 3 limited circulation newsletters: *Beacon of Hope* to priests, *Cultivating Liturgy* to lay liturgical ministers, and *The Signpost* to rural and remote families. None of the parishes have websites.

Safeguarding and Child Sexual Abuse: The Royal Commission's statistical report did not include the diocese as a significant setting of abuse. However, in its June 2017 *Analysis of Claims* report it notes 10 claims were made against the Diocese, with 5 payments made for a total of \$146,754 (average \$29,350 per payment).⁸ Several cases of sexual abuse at the Marist Brothers Red Bend College at Forbes were also reported.⁹ While there is a National Committee for Professional Standards, NSW/ACT has a Director of Professional Standards with a designed safeguarding officer in the diocese. The practice of the diocese is to report all allegations of sexual abuse to the police. The diocese, with 67 other diocesan entities, is a registered participant in the National Redress Scheme as part of Australian Catholic Redress Limited.¹⁰

Table 1: Statistical data for Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2019

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2019	Change 2001 to 2019
Total Population (at Census)	118,168	110,857	108,550	107,511		-9.0%*
Catholic Population (at Census) (% of Total)	35,815 (30.3%)	33,423 (30.1%)	32,554 (30.0%)	29,264 (27.2%)		-18.3%* (-3.1%)
Number of Parishes	20	20	20	20	20	No change
Diocesan priests	12	22	22	18	20	+ 66.7%
Religious priests	4	7	4	6	6	+ 50%
Total Priests	16	29	26	24	26	+ 62.5%
Priests in active parish ministry			17(65.4%)		16 (66.7%)	--5.9%**
- Australian-born			15 (88.2%)		8 (50%)	--46.7%**
- Overseas-born			2 (11.8%)		8 (50%)	+300%**
Parishes with full-time resident priest			13 (65%)		9 (45%)	- 30.8%**
Catholics per priest in parish ministry			1915		1829 (est)	
Permanent deacons	0	0	0	0	0	No change
Religious Sisters	48	32	32	24	16	-66.7%
Religious Brothers	13	6	3	5	2	-84.6%
Diocesan Seminararians	0	1	0	3	2	+200%
Diocesan Pastoral Council in operation		No	No	No	No	
Last Diocesan Synod (Diocesan Assembly)	1890	1890	1890	1890	1890	
Diocesan Pastoral Plan in place					No	
Catholic schools	22	20	19	19	19	-13.6%
Students in Catholic schools	3,230	2,512	2,698	2,719	2,631	-18.5%
Hospitals	0	0	0	0	0	No change
Nursing & Convalescence Homes	7	6	6	0	0	No change
Regular Mass attenders (% of all Catholics)	n/a	3,519 (10.5%)	2,747 (8.4%)	2,275 (7.8%)		-35.4%*** (-2.7%)

Sources: *Official Catholic Directory* for 2002/03, 2007/08, 2012/13, 2016/17, 2020/21. Data is accurate at 31 December of the previous year, namely, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2019; ACBC, PRO, *Mass Attendance in Australia*, September 2008; ACBC, PRO, *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment*, December 2013; ACBC, NCP, 2016 *National Count of Attendance – National Summary*, Pastoral Research Online, Edition 44, April 2019. Notes: * Change from 2001 to 2016; ** Change from 2011-2019; *** Change from 2006 to 2016

Sources:

Wilcannia-Forbes diocesan website: <http://www.wf.catholic.org.au/>

A Snapshot of our Diocese Wilcannia-Forbes November 2020 (pdf file supplied to the author by the diocese)

ACBC, NCP, *Diocesan Social Profile, Based on 2016 Australian Census: Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes*, Canberra, September 2019.

https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Wilcannia-Forbes_2016-Diocesan-Profile.pdf

ACBC, NCP, *Final Report for Phase I: Listening and Dialogue A Report to the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes*, Canberra, January 2020.

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Diocesan-Final-Report-Phase-1-Wilcannia-Forbes.pdf>

⁸ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Analysis of Claims of Child Sexual Abuse Made with Respect to Catholic Church Institutions*, June 2017. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/CARC.0050.025.0001.pdf>

⁹ <http://brokenrites.org.au/drupal/search/node/red%20bend>

¹⁰ https://www.nationalredress.gov.au/institutions/search?search_api_views_fulltext=catholic+diocese+of+wilcannia-forbes

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Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Proportion of Priests and non-ordained religious subject to a claim of child sexual abuse, 1950-2020*, June 2017 (revised version) :

<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/CARC.0050.025.0283.pdf>

Charities Commission: <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/topic-guides/basic-religious-charities>

Text and table prepared by Peter J Wilkinson (December 2020)

Note: The draft profile of the diocese was forwarded to Bishop Macbeth-Green with an invitation to correct any errors and to provide advice of any recent changes made or future plans being contemplated in relation to the recommendations in *The Light from the Southern Cross*. The response received noted some content requiring correction and update and this has been undertaken.