

## DIOCESE of WAGGA WAGGA

The Diocese of Wagga Wagga, excised from the Diocese of Goulburn, was established in 1917. Its geographical area is 62,160 square kilometres.<sup>1</sup> It is part of the ecclesiastical Province of Sydney and a suffragan diocese of the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Sydney.

**Demographics:** At the 2016 Census 205,325 persons lived in the diocese, with 60,674 self-identified Catholics (29.6% of total). Since the 2001 Census (187,750 and 62,493 (33.3%)) the general population has increased by 9% and Catholic population decreased by 3%. In 2016 the diocese ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in Catholic population with the median age of Catholics at 39 years. Australia is the birthplace of 89.2% of all Catholics, including 2,333 indigenous Australians (3.8% of all Catholics), while the largest Catholic groups born outside Australia are from Italy (2.2%), Philippines (1.4%), and UK (0.8%).

**Bishop:** The new and 6<sup>th</sup> bishop is Mark Edwards OMI, PhD, born in Indonesia in 1959, ordained a priest of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in 1986, and ordained a bishop in 2014. Previously an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, he was installed in Wagga on 22 July 2020, after the diocese had been without a bishop for almost 4 years. He has said he has not come with a particular vision for the diocese, but will spend his first year listening and learning, and will leave as many important decisions as possible for later. He has also expressed confidence in the Plenary Council process.<sup>2</sup>

**Structure and Governance:** The diocese has 31 parishes (31 in 2001).<sup>3</sup> Twenty-one (68%) have a full-time resident priest, while 10 share a priest. There is a diocesan financial council, a council of priests, and diocesan consultors. The diocese does not have diocesan pastoral council or a diocesan pastoral plan. Only 2 diocesan synods have ever been convened, in 1942 and 1952. Parish pastoral councils were encouraged by the previous bishop, and most of the large parishes have one.

**Priests and Deacons:** The diocese has 57 priests, including the bishop: 51 diocesan and 6 religious.<sup>4</sup> Just 39 work in parish ministry: 24 diocesan and 5 religious. Thirty were born in Australia and 9 born overseas (4 in Africa, 2 in Vietnam and 1 each in Italy, India and Indonesia). Seven priests live in retirement, 6 are working outside the diocese, 2 are 'on leave', and 3 work in the diocesan seminary. There has not been a significant turnover of priests during the past decade. The diocese has 1 permanent deacon who ministers in the diocesan seminary. Eleven seminarians are currently preparing for the diocesan priesthood. If only the 39 priests actively ministering in parishes are counted, there is an estimated average 1,555 Catholics per priest.

**Lay ministers and officials:** Seventy-three religious sisters and 7 religious brothers reside in the diocese. The religious sisters provide predominantly health and welfare services. None of the religious sisters and no lay men or women minister in parishes as pastoral associates. Six lay women and 6 lay men hold senior positions in the diocesan curia.

**Mass attendance:** In 2006 an average 9,395 Catholics attended Mass regularly (14.9%). In 2016 the average was 7,274 (12.0%), a decrease of 22.6%.

**Seminary and Seminarians:** The diocese has its own diocesan seminary, Vianney College, established by Bishop Brennan in 1992. Its first graduate was ordained to the priesthood in 1993. Since then another 55 candidates have been ordained, as well as 2 to the permanent diaconate. Most (31) seminarians have been ordained for the Wagga diocese, but others for the Lismore, Armidale, Melbourne, Hamilton (NZ), Sandhurst, Wilcannia-Forbes, Sydney, and Port Pirie dioceses. The Pauline Fathers and the Confraternity of Christ the Priest, which has a House of Studies (San Isidore) in the diocese, also use Vianney College for their formation programs. Currently, there are 25 seminarians at Vianney College preparing for clerical life: 16 diocesan (11 for Wagga Diocese) and 9 religious. The majority are overseas-born. Since 1998 Vianney College has been

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<sup>1</sup> This is a similar geographic area to Norway (62,045 sq. Km.)

<sup>2</sup> *Together*, August 2020 edition, p. 2

<sup>3</sup> The Summary in the *Official Directory for 2020/21* gives a figure of 32, which differs from the diocesan data and the website data.

<sup>4</sup> The *Official Directory* gives figures of 52 diocesan and 5 religious.

affiliated to the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome, from which its students can gain a bachelor's degree in theology.

**Pastoral ministries:** The diocese provides a variety of welfare services through its Centacare Family Services, while other welfare and health services are provided by the Little Company of Mary and Sisters of Mercy (2 hospitals, nursing homes, day-care, and home and disability assistance), St Vincent de Paul, Catholic Healthcare, and other organisations. A diocesan youth worker is also employed.

**Plenary Council:** One priest from the diocese was selected for the Discernment and Writing Groups, and 6 persons have been called to participate in the Council sessions: the bishop, vicar-general, seminary rector, 1 female religious superior, and 2 lay persons (Edmund Brown and Wendy Cattell). A total of 1,718 persons from the diocese – 251 as individuals (60% women) and 1,467 in 73 groups – responded to the Plenary Council's Listening and Dialogue phase and identified their top 10 priority issues for the Council as: greater inclusion of all, fighting for human rights issues, care for neighbour, greater focus on Jesus Christ, greater emphasis on prayer and sacraments (especially the Rosary), inclusion of the divorced and remarried, ending clericalism, allowing priests to marry, greater role for women, and sharing the faith with others.

**Education:** The diocese has 31 Catholic schools: 26 primary and 5 secondary. They educate 8,526 students: 4,735 primary and 3,791 secondary. Nineteen of the 37 school principals and co-principles are lay women. Besides Vianney College and San Isidore House of Studies, there is a Catholic residential college, St Francis College, on the Charles Sturt University campus in Wagga.

**Communications:** The diocese has a dedicated website and the diocesan monthly magazine *Together* is published online and in hard copy (bi-monthly and online only during COVID-19).

**Finances:** The diocese is registered with the Charities Commission (ACNC) as The Roman Catholic Church for the Diocese of Wagga Wagga. As a 'Basic Religious Charity' it is not required to answer the financial questions in the Annual Information Statement, submit annual financial reports, or comply with any Governance Standards. It is also registered as The Diocesan Provident Fund (with 2 employees), but has not provided any financial statements. The diocese does not publish an annual financial report for its own activities.

**Safeguarding and Child Sexual Abuse:** The Royal Commission's statistical reports do not include the diocese as a significant setting of abuse, but its June 2017 *Analysis of Claims* report records the diocese as having 17 claims made against it, and paying 5 claims for a total of \$710,067 (average \$142,013 per payment).<sup>5</sup> The diocese employs a Professional Standards and Safeguarding Officer. The diocese, with 96 other diocesan entities, is a registered participant in the National Redress Scheme as part of Australian Catholic Redress Limited.

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<sup>5</sup> 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, pp. 187  
<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/CARC.0050.025.0001.pdf>

**Table 1: Statistical data for Wagga Wagga Diocese: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2019**

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2019	Change 2001-2019
Total Population (at Census)	187,750	192,662	196,956	205,325		+9.4%**
Catholic Population (at Census) (%)	62,493 (33.3%)	63,218 (32.8%)	63,572 (32.3%)	60,674 (29.6%)		-2.9%**
Number of Parishes	31	31	31	32	32	+3.2%
Diocesan priests	57	55	62	51	52	-8.8%
Religious priests	8	5	4	5	5	-37.5%
Total Priests	65	60	66	56	57	-12.3%
Priests in active parish ministry			35		39	+11.4%
- Australian-born			30		29	-3.3%***
- Overseas-born			5 (14%)		10 (27%)	+50%
Parishes with full-time resident priest			23 (74%)		21 (66%)	-8.7%
Catholics per priest in parish ministry			1816		1555 (est)	
Permanent deacons	0	0	1	1	1	+100%
Religious Sisters	123	97	93	79	73	-40.7%
Religious Brothers	4	6	4	7	7	+75%
Diocesan Seminarians	18*	8*	15*	11	8	-55.6%
Diocesan Pastoral Council in operation		No	No	No	No	
Last Diocesan Synod (Diocesan Assembly)	1952	1952	1952	1952	1952	
Diocesan Pastoral Plan in place					No	
Catholic schools	34	32	32	32	31	-8.8%
Students in Catholic schools	8,637	8,596	8,397	8,640	8,526	-1.3%
Hospitals	2	2	2	1	1	-50%
Nursing, Convalescence and Aged Homes	9	10	10	7	7	-22.2%
Regular Mass attendees (% of all Catholics)	n/a	9,395 (14.9%)	7,817 (12.3%)	7,274 (12.0%)		-22.6%****

Source: *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 – A Critical Moment*, 2013; ACBC, NCPR, *2016 National Count of Attendance- National Summary*, 2019. Note: \* The seminarians were from several dioceses. \*\* 2001-2016 (latest Census data). \*\*\* 2011-2019. \*\*\*\* 2006-2016

## Sources:

Wagga Wagga Diocese website: <https://www.wagga.catholic.org.au/Parishes.aspx>

Vianney College Seminary: <http://www.vianneycollege.org.au/>

General data: *The Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia*, 2020-2021 (data accurate at 31 December 2019)

Diocesan Profile: ACBC, NCPR, *Diocesan Social Profile, Based on 2016 Australian Census: Diocese of Wagga Wagga*, Canberra, September 2019. [https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Wagga-Wagga\\_2016-Diocesan-Profile.pdf](https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Wagga-Wagga_2016-Diocesan-Profile.pdf)

Mass attendance: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Pastoral-Research-Online-Edition-44-April-2019.pdf#page=2>

Plenary Council: ACBC, NCPR, *Final Report for Phase I: Listening and Dialogue: A Report to the Diocese of Wagga Wagga*, Canberra, January 2020: <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Diocesan-Final-Report-Phase-1-Wagga-Wagga.pdf>

Child Sexual Abuse: 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)

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

IAG/GRPT Report: *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*, Canberra, 2020 Appendix: Governance in Australia Survey 2019 Report

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, pp. 187

<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/CARC.0050.025.0001.pdf>

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

Note: The draft profile of the diocese was forwarded to Bishop Edwards with an invitation to correct any errors and to advise of any recent changes made or future plans being contemplated in relation to the recommendations in *The Light from the Southern Cross*. He did not respond to the invitation.