

1993

# Recognition: The Way Forward

AN ISSUES PAPER FROM THE AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE COUNCIL

## A welcome ...

This document is a discussion about Aboriginal people. It has been written from an Aboriginal Catholic person's viewpoint.

In order to recognise people and their situation we need to make contact with and talk to each other.

There are two indigenous peoples in Australia, the Aborigines and the Torres Strait Islanders. Comment is not made in regard to Torres Strait Islanders' experience, as the writer is an Aboriginal. The Torres Strait Islander people's story is yet to be heard! Quotes from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have been used in order to make known that people *have* been discussing the many issues in regard to the indigenous peoples of this land.

Did you know that 1993 has been declared the United Nations International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples? The theme for the year is *Indigenous Peoples: a New Partnership*.

So, here we are once again being reminded after 205 years that there needs to be a better understanding with the indigenous peoples of Australia (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) and to enter into a new form of partnership or relationship.

In numerous discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in preparation for this statement, many comments were made expressing disappointment in the Churches. Most of the disappointment was in the fact that, 'here is another document being written about us again!'

'Why do we need another book? Why don't they read what's written already?' I was constantly asked and told that there were many documents produced by Churches, Christians and governments et cetera, and that we must be the most written-about people in Australia. Given these comments, I had to ask myself, 'Who reads the many statements and books and what do they do about what they read?'

The challenge to recognise what is already there is a just challenge.

## What has been written?

What have Aborigines and others been saying? Have we really taken note of what we were told? Is it time now to reflect on what has been said already?

Ms Vicky Walker, an Aboriginal Catholic, reminded us in 1993 that:

When Jesus told the story of the parable of the sower, he was also explaining the treatment of one another.

The seeds which fell on rocky ground, stand for those who hear the message and receive it gladly, *but* it does not sink deeply into them. They believe only for a while but when the time of testing comes, they fall away. The seeds that fell in good soil stand for those who hear the message and retain it in a listening and obedient heart, and they persist until it bears fruit. This persistence is so necessary in our society. For I believe, we cannot move forward as a nation in unity until we, the indigenous people of this land, are accorded the dignity and respect due to us, as ones who carry in our hearts the richness of an ancient and continuing culture and the history, beauty and antiquity of this land.

The seeds we plant now *must* fall on good soil.

And so, this year, *The Year of the World's Indigenous People*, we must all take the opportunity to prepare the soil so that listening hearts can hear our message.

One of the recurring issues in discussions with non-Aboriginal people is about Aboriginal Identity. Aboriginal people are always being challenged about identifying as an Aborigine.

The official definition is a person of Aboriginal descent who identifies as an Aborigine and is accepted

as such by the community in which he or she lives.

Therefore an Aborigine is not defined by race alone, but is a person who identifies and is of Aboriginal descent and is also a part of a community or people with their own history and lifestyles.

Aboriginal people believe that it is an insult and a form of oppression for anyone who does not belong to the group to say who is or is not a member. Yet Aboriginal people are constantly told who are the 'real' Aborigines and where and how they should be living.

Wesley Lanhupuy, Northern Territory parliamentarian, explains being an Aborigine as:

Aborigines – whether urban or tribal – who have spiritual awareness of themselves as Aborigines, and identify themselves as Aborigines, are Aborigines.

Maureen Watson, an Aboriginal storyteller says:

When a white Australian defines himself as 'Australian' I accept that. I don't ask what nationality his grandfather or grandmother were. Why can't they accept it when I say 'I'm an Aborigine?' Whites who say: 'You're like us' are denying me my Aboriginal birthright.

Deacon Boniface Perdijert explains it another way:

Aboriginal is Aboriginal and your culture brings you from the Aboriginal. Aborigines are proud to be Aboriginal. Don't be afraid to speak as Aborigines about the spiritual life or about the way we live as Aboriginal people and live with the European.

Brother Graeme Mundine agrees with Deacon Perdijert that the people need to identify and why it is important to know who you are and feel free to express who you are.

I think it is important for them to be able to stand up and accept they are Aboriginal. With the census, more people are saying, 'Yes, I am Aboriginal and I accept that.' That is only coming about by pride – people being able to stand up and say, 'Yes, I am Aboriginal.'

Unfortunately there are still many people who feel a sense of shame or fear in identifying as an Aborigine in Australia. Many know what the consequence is in some areas, when you identify as an Aborigine. There is a perception and attitude towards Aboriginal people, which sometimes is borne out of actions against them.

This action unfortunately can be found in recorded instances, up to and including 1993, which can be classified as racist action against Aboriginal people. Recent reports of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission highlight this. There seems to be a reaction in regard to Aborigines identifying and expressing their culture which does not seem to be the case of say Italians in expressing their culture in Australia, or a person of Irish descent celebrating St Patrick's Day.

Many Aborigines have experienced or witnessed violent verbal or physical reactions from non-Aborigines, which is peculiar to Aboriginal people in their attempt to identify and express themselves. Many non-Aboriginal people seem to be threatened by the fact that Aborigines want to be Aborigines and speak from the experience of Aboriginal people. Why is this so?

The Aboriginal speakers mentioned above, in their way, speak about the need to know that you *are* Aboriginal and that there *is* a culture, and the *right to express* that culture and lifestyle as an Aborigine is to be a true Aborigine.

The United Nations in this international year is also stating this.

## Our recognition as a people with rights ...

The title of this discussion is *Recognition: the Way Forward*. When asked what are we talking about, when we use the word recognition and how does that give us a direction, Bishop Manning of Armidale diocese replied:

To me it means attempting to understand why Aboriginal and White people after such a long time of living in proximity, know so little about each other's lives, customs, cultures, problems and animosities. From understanding will come a desire, hopefully, to cultivate those things we have in common and to rectify those which keep us apart.

Obviously the human relationship aspect must be paramount. Without deriding governments, churches and multi-cultural organisations which have attempted forms of reconciliation, I believe any real way forward will be through the peoples of Australia getting to know and understand each other.

In thinking about this I recalled that the late Kevin Gilbert, writer, poet, artist, and political activist, was also saying something similar, but putting it in terms of indigenous people's rights:

We call for a recognition of blacks as a people and hopefully the Church will support that call – that this country recognises us as a people and recognises our sovereign rights. Sovereign rights were our rights in land, the rights to our inheritance and our rights as a people.

The Aboriginal people's petition to Pope John Paul in 1986 also called for recognition as indigenous peoples with rights. The petition also gave an explanation of the background of the indigenous situation as well as a direction on how a solution could be achieved:

### **Petition to John Paul II from the World's Oldest Living Culture**

#### **Listen to our Call**

We, the Indigenous people of Australia, call for justice as owners and occupiers of this country.

The western legal fiction of Terra Nullius is used to oppress us and to justify the theft of our land.

The British colonisers pretend we did not exist as a people, with our own laws, spirituality, and culture, and therefore our land could be stolen. This fundamental lie persists.

Our being is in the land. We belong to it as it always belonged to us, but the integrity of our culture, our economy, our relationship with the land has been denied since the invasion in 1788.

Twenty years ago the Australian nation first recognised our existence as Australian citizens. Now we are counted in the Australian census. Statistics tell our story: the highest death rates, infant mortality and imprisonment rates in Australia, and the highest leprosy rates in the world. We are the dispossessed Australians, refugees in our land – the only indigenous people of a former British Colony without proper justice and recognition. Australia must not remain founded in a lie. Past violence and injustice must be reconciled. Peace and justice can only be achieved if the lie of Terra Nullius and the injustices that it continues to create are destroyed.

#### **Hear our Call**

Your Church has played a part in our dispossession and oppression. We struggle for recognition of our sovereignty and our basic rights as indigenous people. Your visit gives you the opportunity to add your voice to our 200-year struggle for peace and justice.

On behalf of our ancestors and the children still to be born, we expect you to heed our call for reconciliation and justice.

The Holy Father told the Aboriginal people:

The establishment of a new society for Aboriginal people cannot go forward without just and mutually recognised agreements with regard to these human problems, even though their causes lie in the past. The greatest value to be achieved by such agreements, which must be implemented without causing new injustices, is respect for the dignity and growth of the human person.

With all these statements being made, how come we are still wary of each other, know so little about each other, are angry with and doubtful that we can understand each other?

Aboriginal people have said things like:

I think a lot of white people have blinkers on and see Aboriginals only in one way.

I don't really expect whites to understand Aboriginal people. I don't think many will ever really accept us. But at least they should recognise us as people.

Others have said things such as:

You have got to look at the other side, too. Aboriginals are just as much at fault in some things as white people. We have made mistakes as well. I think the most important thing is that from here on in, we have to work together. For starters, we have to try to be better to one other. We have to talk to one another.

### **Understanding our cultures ...**

To recognise and respect other people's dignity through understanding culture can also be seen as a way to establish a relationship, which can be an acceptance of peace between those involved.

I hold to the position that we are made in God's Image and that our dignity derives from this and is the motivating force why we respect and hold each other in regard. Our respective cultures derive from God-inspired motives and therefore the need for respect for customs despite their being different from our own. Some of these precious customs whose loss has deprived the Aboriginal people of their dignity should be explained.

An Australian Bishop

The late Kevin Gilbert explained loss of dignity for urban Aborigines as:

We have Aboriginal bones ... that were just collected and put together. Aboriginal people can't bury them decently like they should be buried. We can't get access. Government agents and others have taken records of Aboriginal people: measured their skulls, taken their family histories, taken all the marriages that were registered, taken the artifacts and locked them away in museums and said: 'This is our Aboriginal collection.' They have effectively destroyed a lot of the Aboriginal culture. A lot of our people in various areas of the country now can't get those photos of their grandmother, they can't afford to travel to find out their family genealogies because of the disruptions and the breaking down of our culture.

The Northern Land Council, in trying to explain to the then Prime Minister in 1984 how to explain culture and relationship to land, which is central to Aboriginal people's lives, stated:

We would like to make you understand our ceremonial, spiritual and cultural attachments to our land but we can only do this by speaking in language or performing a ceremony, but politicians would not and do not understand.

Aboriginal people who still maintain their ceremonies and speak in their own languages, on land which they have access to, have difficulty in communicating the importance of culture, land and lifestyle. How difficult then, must it be for people who have been moved off the land, had violence committed against them, were denied the right to speak their own language, continue their ceremonies, have spiritual contact to their land, and for generations experienced insecurity

and non-acceptance within the general society to *now* be asked to explain what loss of dignity means to them.

The Holy Father spoke on Aboriginal people's culture and dignity. He said:

Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear.

## Listening to our history ...

How many times do Aboriginal people have to remind non-Aboriginal people that 'Australia has a Black History'? Black in the deeds that were done, black the colour of the people who suffered from these deeds and who have inhabited this land for over 40 000 years.

In trying to come to terms with Aboriginal people's history of Australia, it is Aboriginal people who have been giving some guidance to non-Aboriginals. It is interesting that all Aboriginal speakers relate history to personal growth as people.

I can sense people are getting upset because they are hearing history – history of slaughter, history of murder and how badly the Aboriginals have been treated. In some cases you might have heard it before, but not from the people themselves. The people themselves have a story to tell, just as you have a story to tell.

Brother Graeme Mundine

History is a very important thing. You might not like it ... But any time you go to your doctor, the doctor can't treat you if he doesn't know your history. Doctors use history and historians need to use the past in order to explain the present, and therefore specify some future direction.

Gordon Briscoe, Aboriginal historian

Someone spoke about the past. You need to know where you are coming from. If you don't, you are going to run off doing things which is not going to resolve these problems. The other aspect is that Aboriginal historical experiences are a part of people's lives and you must listen to their pain which is a result of their past experience. You talk about reconciliation, but you also have to understand that the Aboriginal people have to work through their pain with you. You

have to understand how the past is linked to the present. You also have to know what has to be forgiven, if you talk about asking for forgiveness. If you don't know what you are asking forgiveness for, what are you asking?

Kaye Mundine, Aboriginal Catholic

## Our rights to land ...

In many discussions the issues of discrimination and land rights are raised. Many people argue that 'land rights' is discrimination against non-Aborigines. Pope John Paul II said to the Aboriginal people in Alice Springs in 1986:

Let it not be said that *the fair and equitable recognition of Aboriginal rights to land* is discrimination. To call for the acknowledgement of the land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination. Certainly, what has been done cannot be undone. But what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow.

Given that the legal and political system for generations refused Aboriginal people the right of ownership to land, it is little wonder that Aboriginal people are upset when the reverse discrimination argument is trotted out.

In regard to land, the issue of 'terra nullius', the legal non-recognition of Aboriginal people existing in Australia prior to European settlement and their right under native title to land, has always been the central issue in the political debate. Aboriginal people have constantly referred to the term 'terra nullius' – a term which most non-Aboriginal people have never heard of, let alone understood that it is the basis of their history in Australia. In 1987 Gordon Briscoe, an Aboriginal historian, explained the situation.

In 1788, when the British unjustly and wrongfully were to claim the whole continent, 'Pre-existing Rights' held by our Aboriginal ancestors at the time of that claim have continually been denied. The possibility for that denial of those 'Pre-existing Rights' has been due to the false doctrine of 'terra nullius'. Moreover, history shows, and therefore contemporary indigenous Aboriginal people claim, that there was and still is an ensemble of 'Pre-existing Rights'

which have neither been relinquished nor ceded to in the ensuing two centuries of British colonial and Australian National Government of this continent.

The High Court, in an historic judgment in 1992, threw out the legal fiction that the land known as Australia was uninhabited and unowned at the time of the European settlement. This judgment referred to in the media as the *Mabo decision* recognises a form of native title which existed over Australia prior to European settlement.

The judgment is a symbolic victory for Aboriginal people. For *some* it may mean that they will not have to argue against 'terra nullius' or extinguishment of title to land upon its acquisition by the Crown. However Mr Sol Bellear, Deputy Chair of the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Commission, stated that:

What is clear is that the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia will not benefit in any tangible way from the Mabo decision. Governments prior to 1975, when the Racial Discrimination Act was enacted, have effectively extinguished native title over vast areas of the continent ... and that Aboriginal people could not change that.

There is still much to be clarified in regard to native title. Many legal questions are yet to be resolved which require much more discussion. It is the *right and responsibility of all* Australians to be informed and to participate in these discussions. The debate should not be left up to governments, land councils, mining or other industries.

Sol Bellear said:

Its practical implications are currently the subject of lively debate. There is no doubt the Mabo decision has given rise to uncertainty, much of it ill-informed and blatantly mischievous.

Press reports early in 1993 also reported confusion among politicians in regard to the Mabo decision, statements perhaps based on misinformation but creating ill-feeling towards Aborigines. A balanced approach is essential to show to Aboriginal people that the government of whatever persuasion, represents all Australians, and is committed to a 'fair and honest' solution to land claims. Hopefully, we can look forward to after generations of insecurity in our own country, governments as being of 'good faith' in their inescapable obligations to

now deal effectively with the land needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

There has also been comment in the media inferring that the Mabo decision is a part of the 'guilt industry', a claim which is not 'just'. Aboriginal people have a right of entitlement to legal process. This was taken up under the Mabo case. The judgment will allow for *some* Aboriginal people to claim under native title. The attachment of the tag of 'guilt industry' to such legal process, which infers that the decision is incorrect and motivated by emotions, is an insult to all Australians.

It must be remembered that Land Rights Acts in existence *now* allow Aboriginal people to claim only certain types of land under certain circumstances, according to the State or Federal Government legislation. We should also remember that these Acts are only recent and were established in our lifetime, with full knowledge of the Australian people. You are reminded also that the Acts give Aborigines control over the land that they have been granted under that Act. Aboriginal people argued the case for land rights, politically and according to the Australian system and law.

So it is frustrating when they have to continue to justify their position. The Northern Land Councils' appeal to the Prime Minister in 1984 said:

Since time began Aboriginal laws never change  
– but whiteman's law changes every time a  
Government changes or changes its mind.

In claiming land, Aboriginal people must provide evidence which is considered as relevant and fitting under the Land Rights Acts. Unfortunately, even the *few* groups that are able to have title to land restored to them must continually defend their right to that title. Members of the Northern Land Councils, when there were moves to amend the NT Land Rights Act, stated:

How long do we have to fight to protect our land and the power to control what we have at present? Government has never asked us what the land means to Aboriginal people. They are only interested in digging up our land. We went by the whiteman's law and it was given to us as the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, but now you want to change it. We do not want it changed. It is not negotiable. It is our land and we want to be able to control what happens on our land.

There is also a perceived attitude that Aboriginal people when they acquire land go to the extraordinary

lengths to keep out others, which is also believed to be unfair or unlawful. The situation is explained by the Northern Land Councils in 1991:

The right to own and control entry to private property is a fundamental aspect of Australian life.

Common law gives all Australians civil protection against trespass on their land and in many cases landowners are able to take criminal proceedings against trespassers. The Aboriginal Land Rights Act gives the same legal protection to Aboriginal landowners in the Northern Territory.

The permit system operated by the Land Councils allows Aboriginal people to have the same legal right as other Australian landowners to say who can or cannot enter their land, and to set conditions for entry.

Another perceived attitude is that Aboriginal people are anti-development; this is not so. Aborigines have a vested interest in the development of Australia. And like most Australians question what type of development and at whose expense or benefit will this occur. There are many Aboriginal communities with agreements with mining companies and with joint ventures in other industries.

The issue of Aboriginal people and land is further clouded in regard to land identified as being religious sites or sites of significance (historically or culturally) to Aboriginal people. Kaye Mundine explains the frustration of Aboriginal people in explaining sites and the gap in communication and understanding that exists:

...we have thousands and thousands of years of experience which have been handed down to Aboriginal people. It never ceases to amaze me, especially when people start talking about land claims that some people say: 'How is it, that all of a sudden you have a burial ground; or you have a sacred site; or that was a place of significance here; all of a sudden now that we are going to build something or do something!' What they have failed to realise is their own lack of knowledge of that particular land. The Aboriginal people knew it. It has been handed down over time. Many of us ... have had the experience of being taken since we were small by people in our own communities to places telling us about the history and passing on, not only

the knowledge of the place, but also the spirituality, the religious and emotional aspect of why it is important to the people.

If you sit down and talk to people about some of these sites you will start to share that understanding of what it is all about. A lot of communities are saying that if only white people would listen, they would start understanding a lot more. I say the other side of the coin is that Aboriginal people should take a lot more time to sit down and talk about it to other people.

### Our relationship with land ...

Many people have an inkling that *land* is of importance to Aborigines. The importance or relationship that Aborigines have with the land is not understood by many non-Aborigines. What is understood when Aborigines refer to 'the land is my mother' or 'my mother the land'? A number of Aboriginal people explain it in different ways:

The land is my mother. Like a human mother, the land gives us protection, enjoyment and provides for our needs – economic, social and religious. We have human relationships with the land: mother-daughter, son. When the land is taken from us or destroyed, we feel hurt because we belong to the land and we are part of it.

Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra

For the Aboriginal people, land is a dynamic motion, something creative. Land is not bound by geographical limitations placed on it by a surveyor who marks out an area and says, 'This is your plot.' Land is the generation point of existence, the maintenance of existence, the spirit from which Aboriginal existence comes.

Land is a living place made up of sky, clouds, rivers, trees, the wind, the sand and the spirit has created all these things, the spirit that planted my own spirit there, my own country.

It is something – yet it is not a thing – it is a living entity. It belongs to me, I belong to the land, I rest in it. I come from there.

Land is a notion that is most difficult to categorise in English, but it is something that

is very clear to me and to those people who belong to my group. Land provides for my physical needs and provides for my spiritual needs. It is a regeneration of stories.

New stories are sung from contemplation of the land, stories are handed down from spirit men of the past who have deposited the riches at various places – the sacred places.

The sacred places are not just simply geographically beautiful. They are holy places, even more holy than shrines, but not commercialised. They are sacred. The greatest respect is shown to them and they are used for the regeneration of history – the regeneration of Aboriginal people, the continuation of their life. Because that is where they begin and that is where they return.

Patrick Dodson

The land is my backbone ... I only stand straight, happy, proud and not ashamed about my colour because I still have land. I can paint, dance, create and sing as my ancestors did before me.

I think of land as the history of my nation. It tells of how we came into being and what system we must live. My great ancestors who live in the times of history, planned everything that we practise now. The law of history says that we must not take land, fight over land, steal land, give land and so on. My land is mine only because I came in spirit from that land, and so did my ancestors of the same land ... My land, is my foundation.

Galarrwuy Yunupingu

Our spirituality is the basis of our life and culture and that life is based on the land ... Sacred sites are not invented. Sacred sites have always been central to the life of Aboriginal people. Sacred sites are where our law and ceremony, our teachings are embodied.

God gave us our law – not in the written form as with the Jewish people, but in the form of the land and the ceremonies and stories that go with it, which are written in our hearts and minds.

Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra

## Our relationship with Church ...

Aboriginal people are bound to relationships: relationships to land, people, history, experience and all that exists.

Aboriginal people have been speaking about their relationships with the Church as members, and with the Church organisation and non-Aboriginal members.

I have been thinking a lot about the 'Old Way' (Aboriginal religion) and the 'New Way' (Christianity). Maybe in some ways the two can go together. Maybe if the two ways do not go together we are not acting right towards God and towards ourselves.

Deacon Boniface Perdjert

The late Kevin Gilbert said in 1987:

If you are Catholic, if you are Christian, there is only one yardstick. That is what you do to earn your birthright in the country and by your deeds shall you be known. No matter how much you pray, no matter how many times you go to confession or the sacraments, the ultimate record is going to come down on your level of filling your capacity and your commitments as a Catholic person.

A non-Aboriginal woman in reply to Kevin Gilbert said:

I would like to ... thank him for challenging us as Christians and Catholics for our errors. Kevin reminded us that our judgment will be based on how we have treated our fellow man and he put the stark reality before us that we have crucified Christ in crucifying the Aborigines. For our sake as well as theirs we need to face this reality. In our Christian history, this dilemma has been faced by the people of God before. Two thousand years ago, on the first Pentecost Sunday, when Saint Peter preached to the Jews and told them what they had done, it says in the Acts of these people: 'As they were listening they were moved to the depths of their hearts so that they said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter responded, "Repent!"' Further, the reading in the first letter of John, Chapter 1, says this: 'If we say we have no sin we are deluding ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins he is faithful and

just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

The point that I would like to make is that if we face these issues here, purely from a political or a social level rather than from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we won't succeed. We are Catholics, we are Christians ... I believe that we can stay here and flog ourselves all day about what we have done and end up in a state of guilt and humiliation. But if we repent we can be free and then God will show us how to be reconciled with the indigenous people and they, in turn, will know how to relate to us.

Discussion within the Aboriginal community raises many questions regarding maintaining culture and expressing that culture in the life of the Church.

Pope John Paul II said:

Do you think that your gifts are worth so little that you should no longer bother to maintain them? Share them with each other and teach them to your children. Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages must never be lost.

Do you perhaps remember those words that Paul VI spoke to the Aboriginal people during his visit to them in 1970? On that occasion he said: 'We know that you have a lifestyle proper to your own ethnic genius or culture – a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask you to renounce ... Society itself is enriched by the presence of different cultural and ethnic elements.

'For us, you and the values you represent are precious. We deeply respect your dignity and reiterate our deep affection for you.'

Many non-Aboriginal people believe that there is much to learn from Aborigines which is also important.

Personally, I would have to confess that I have much to learn of the Aboriginal people, their history, culture and religion as well as the many contemporary issues that receive so much publicity ... The issues that will be raised are of fundamental importance to Australian society, to the Church in Australia and to this (diocese) for which we have a particular responsibility. There are broad



social issues, religious issues and more particular questions of Catholic Church Ministry.

Archbishop Francis P. Carroll, in his address to the Diocesan Pastoral Council's meeting on Aboriginal issues in 1987

Discussions on the history of Church contact has brought many different viewpoints from Aborigines and non-Aborigines, each with their own experience or understanding. Many more Catholic Aborigines must tell of their story of Church experience.

Although many Aborigines speak about the Church's involvement with Aborigines from a negative point of view, we must also remember that for some groups the Church has helped them to survive. Unfortunately most of the Church's past positive work, like the government, has relied on the personality of the Church person.

Aboriginal Catholic

Pope John Paul II in his talk to the Aboriginal people in Alice Springs in 1986 said:

Among those who have loved and cared for the indigenous people we especially recall with profound gratitude all the missionaries of the Christian faith. With immense generosity they gave their lives in service to you and to your forebears. They helped to educate the Aboriginal people and offered health, and social services. Whatever their human frailty, and whatever mistakes they may have made, nothing can ever minimise the depth of their charity. Nothing can ever cancel out their greatest contributions, which was to proclaim to you Jesus Christ and to establish his Church in your midst.

## New beginnings, new hopes ...

Many Aboriginal people are saying statements are not enough, and are asking when is the Church in Australia going to acknowledge its mistakes and to rectify what has been done.

The Bishops' statement in 1988 neatly sidestepped the issue of the Church's involvement with Aborigines in the past. This of course did not allow for any reflection on what had happened and where 'we', the Church, had made mistakes.

Let us look at that statement, and see what was said and reflect on what has been done.

## Call to Action

During this year of celebration (1988) we call on governments, federal, state and local, to give urgent attention to resolving acute situations that affect Aboriginal people.

In particular we ask them to:

1. encourage Aboriginal self-management and independence,
2. involve Aboriginal people in all decisions that affect them,
3. reduce the high rates of imprisonment among Aboriginal people,
4. recognise in practical ways that Australia at the time of settlement was no 'terra nullius', that is, nobody's land. As Pope John Paul II said at Alice Springs, 'To call for the acknowledgement of the land rights of people who have not surrendered those rights is not discrimination'.

We cannot presume that Government action alone will bring about true reconciliation. It is a matter for each individual, each parish, each school and Church community.

We call on all people of good will, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to go out to one another in a spirit of love and mutual respect. In particular we ask you, our Catholic people, to be leaders of reconciliation seeking the unity in Christ that acknowledges but transcends all difference of culture, status or race.

We commit ourselves as a Church to influence the minds and hearts of the people of Australia to achieve justice and harmony and to uphold the dignity of the Aboriginal people whose ancestors settled here thousands of years before Abraham set off for the land of Canaan.

The Church and Aborigines in the Bicentenary. Pastoral Letter to the Catholic People of Australia from the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference 1988

The Bishops' pastoral letter calls on the various levels of government to follow certain courses. It also gave direction to Catholics at various levels as a call to action. This call for action unfortunately is as relevant today as it was in 1988.

Although the recent Mabo decision is addressing point four, there is still a need for much discussion to

take place before decisions are made. In Church circles, Archbishop Polding is often quoted in regard to recognising Aboriginal people's right to land. It is now time to stop quoting Archbishop Polding and use his example in meeting with governments and committees and argue the case of land rights with Aboriginal people as a matter of justice. Remember Mabo when the Murray Island people took their case to court. Which Churches supported them in their journey?

It was reported by Amnesty International in February 1993, that the high rate of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia's criminal justice system is continuing. In April 1993, the Australian Institute of Criminology reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were being held in police custody at a rate 26 times that of other Australians. Aboriginal people and concerned non-Aborigines are setting up alternative sentencing arrangements and more use of bail systems, but are we doing enough, quickly enough? There are still reports of deaths in custody and allegations of brutality and unacceptable behaviour by people in authority. Aboriginal people still believe they are receiving an unequal and disproportionate overservicing by the justice system. The call is constant in requesting a means to combat entrenched institutional racism which is experienced in the criminal justice system. The reform of the prison and legal justice system has long been the *justice call* of the Church. What are we doing as a Church community, to address this situation? There are many individual Catholics who have joined with Aborigines in assisting Aboriginal prisoners. Are you aware of them and would you support them? Have you ever asked your local parliamentarian about what happened to the families of the Aboriginal people whose deaths were investigated in the Royal Commission's inquiry?

The Federal Government explains its role in regard to social justice and indigenous people of Australia, in the 1991-92 Budget-related Paper No. 7:

The Commonwealth Government has a commitment to social justice for all Australians. 'Towards a Fairer Australia', the government's social justice strategy, has as its central objective the development of a fairer, more prosperous and more just society for every Australian ...

The historical legacy of dispossession and dispersal suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their continued acute socio-economic disadvantage place

a particular onus on the Australian community to improve the position of Australia's indigenous peoples. The extent to which Australia succeeds in this effort will play a major part in determining this country's national identity and its place in the international community in the coming years ...

The Government is determined to ensure that the move towards economic equity and independence is consistent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and cultural values. Its policies are premised on the belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures should be recognised as an integral and distinctive part of Australia's life and heritage.

The Government firmly believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have more control over their own lives. The creation of ATSIC in 1990 gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people an unprecedented role in Commonwealth decision making on matters which affect their lives and thus a greater capacity to determine their own destiny.

With the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, it was hoped that Aboriginal people would have more say in all decisions that affect them and encourage self-management and independence. Many Aboriginal people I have had discussions with complain that the Commission is becoming a bigger and more complex bureaucracy. It is difficult for the Commission to respond quickly to the needs of Aboriginal people. Instead of developing intricate tripartite arrangements with the State and Federal Governments and Aboriginal people, an easier system to fund for need and change should be developed. Remember that the finding of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was that the system failed Aboriginal people. Given the many Catholics who have education, skills and experience which could assist Aboriginal people in dealing with the bureaucracy, how many offered or became involved? We should not be leaving it all to the Governments.

If we are talking about growth, we are talking about real growth, and that means changes sometimes.

Aboriginal woman

Within the Church's education system, where are we encouraging Aboriginal people to become involved, and to develop education programs which will give them education and skills in as short as possible time to assist in addressing the many needs of the community? Does your school have a positive policy of assistance to Aboriginal students and parents? Is there a program in which you can become involved? These are the many questions and ways in which you can become involved.

The first step in getting involved is to make contact with Aboriginal people. Have you made contact with the local Aboriginal community or organisation? Do you know what their aspirations are? Have they been involved in the planning and development of the local community in general? If you don't speak to them, how will you ever know?

In April 1993, Mr Sol Bellear in speaking about the Church's place in Aboriginal history was reported in the press as saying: 'They not only aided and abetted and condoned the colonisation process – not just in Australia but all over the world.' He also said that the Churches were the 'stormtroopers of imperialism' and that the '... Churches came in and took great parcels of land in the name of God ... they're the ones that have been left off this Mabo agenda.'

Mr Bellear called for a register of Church-owned land to be established. He also called on the Vatican and the Church of England to send high-ranking representatives to meet Aboriginal people and local Church hierarchies to try to resolve the matter.

This is an issue that the Church as an organisation must address. The Church through its structure of dioceses and of religious orders, must also realise that they may in some areas be subject to 'native title' challenges.

It is acknowledged that the Church via various religious bodies has been transferring land title and facility usage to individual Aboriginal groups. However, the question is raised in regard to Church 'business', of how the Church is addressing their responsibility of ministry to Aboriginal people and the delivery of their social welfare and justice programs. The question must be in the context of two areas – development and leadership of Aboriginal people who are Catholic and the Aboriginal community at large. The Church cannot keep trotting out quotes from Archbishop Polding, who opposed the legal fiction of 'terra nullius' and pleaded for the rights of the Aboriginal inhabitants to land. Nor can the Church continue to make statements today without showing a commitment to action, action which gives Aboriginal people leadership, development and hope. The Church is not just Bishops, it is

the people who identify and act as Catholics, just as Aboriginals are those who identify and are acknowledged by the community in which they live. What are you going to do? What is your parish/community going to do? These questions must be answered now.

Aboriginal Catholics are part of the Church.  
Let us sit down and say, well what part of the Church it is.

Aboriginal woman

What do you know about Aboriginal Catholics? Aboriginal Catholics over the last 20 years have been establishing Aboriginal Catholic Ministries and Councils in each diocese. In 1992, the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference recognised the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) as an appropriate body to advise them about the concerns of indigenous peoples. The Council has members elected from communities throughout Australia. NATSICC requires support not only from the Bishops' Conference but from all members of the Catholic Church to assist Aboriginal Catholics to establish their place in the Church family. NATSICC has the responsibility to develop Aboriginal Catholics in leadership roles within the Church and the Aboriginal community. Hopefully through NATSICC the Church will at last develop a more responsive ministry team to meet the needs of Aboriginal people's spirituality and in achieving social justice for all Aboriginal people.

If Aboriginal people are going to heed the Pope's call: 'And you, the Aboriginal people of this country and its cities, must show that you are actively working for your own dignity of life. On your part, you must show that you too can walk tall and command the respect which every human being expects to receive from the rest of the human family', then the Church must make room in its structure and make available resources for Aboriginal people to develop positive action for change.

In the Church's 1978 document, *Aborigines – A Statement of Concern*, it was said that:

...What we have said presents a more immediate challenge to the Catholic community, and the bodies and institutions which form part of the structures of the Church. Their considerable resources must be available to support the struggle of Aboriginal people for land rights, restitution and compensation, self-determination, dignity and identity – whether on a national or local level. Consequently, they must stand

against those people and groups which would deny these basic rights.

Such a stance will teach us the costs of discipleship but, in the Christian mystery, these are seeds of the new and full life to which we are called as Christians.

In the social justice area, given the Church's profile in the fields of education and health service delivery which are recorded areas of need for Aborigines, what is happening? You must ask yourself, is it *accepted* policy of the diocese or religious order that Aboriginal people are given a priority or special consideration in these areas? If not, why not? How do I feel or react to putting my interest in second place to Aboriginal people's needs?

We want to move forward and we have to work together.

Aboriginal man

Where Aboriginal Catholics show their greatest disappointment in the Church is in the area of racism. In 1978 it was stated:

... while white Australians and most migrants share European origins, the Aboriginal population is culturally and racially distinct.

This gap enabled the first European settlers to ignore Aborigines as people with rights and dignity, and opened the way to the brutal expropriation of their land and the consequent destruction of their culture.

Many Aborigines today still face that same threat and the desperate plight of others is met with indifference, because similar values and attitudes based on cultural and racial differences persist among many white Australians.

The Church in this statement continued in the vein of one- and two-liners in regard to racism.

Many (Australians) are coming to terms with the multi-cultural nature of our society. But high levels of racist attitudes and behaviour, especially towards Aborigines, are still found in individuals, groups, organisations and institutions.

Aborigines – A Statement of Concern, Social Justice Sunday 1978.

In the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission's document, *The Church and Racism – Towards a More Fraternal Society*, we are told that:

the *victims of racism*, wherever they may be, must be *defended*. Acts of discrimination among persons and peoples for racist or other reasons – religious or ideological – and which lead to contempt and to the phenomenon of exclusion, must be denounced and brought to light without hesitation and strongly rejected in order to promote equitable behaviour, legislative dispositions and social structures.

The document continues:

A change of heart cannot occur without *strengthening spiritual convictions* regarding respect for other races and ethnic groups. The Church, on her part, contributes to forming consciences by clearly presenting the entire *Christian doctrine* on this subject. She particularly asks pastors, preachers, teachers and catechists to explain the true teachings of Scripture and Tradition about the origin of all people in God, their final common destiny in the Kingdom of God, the value of the precept of fraternal love, and the total incompatibility between racist exclusivism and the universal calling of all to the same salvation.

## Welcoming our presence and our contribution ...

The Church is itself caught up in institutionalised racism. Aboriginal Catholics report incidents within the Church where either members of the structure will not accept them as Aborigines or because they are Aborigines will exclude them or make assumptions about them. Many report, with emotion, being isolated in situations such as people vacating pews at Mass in order to move away from them, to being questioned whether they are really Catholic, to not being asked to participate in activities of the Church. Many who are active in ministry in the Aboriginal Catholic Council highlight Church committees and councils who make derogatory comments about Aborigines in their presence and how many will not accept that the Church should stand with Aboriginal people in their struggle for justice. Mention was made in regard to those whom Aborigines thought hindered rather than supported the work of the Aboriginal Ministry. Questions were raised as to the attitudes of many religious and clergy as

well as laity. Aboriginal people identified individuals who work within the Church as having a relationship with Aborigines rather than being representatives of the Church or being the Church in action. Of the Aboriginal Catholics spoken to, no one could recall any religious or clergy apart from those they worked closely with, making a public stand in regard to the racism practised against Aborigines.

The main criticism seems to be in that the Church is still trying to assimilate Aborigines into the non-Aboriginal society rather than in assisting Aborigines to be Catholic in their own culture. The general Aboriginal community views the Church's involvement in distant Aboriginal communities as continuing the colonial and paternalistic attitude. Whether this view is true or not, it is believed and must be addressed. With the establishment of NATSICC, hopefully this will encourage more interchange with the various Catholic communities and therefore develop identifiable Aboriginal leadership in these communities. If the Church supported this direction it would then be seen in a positive role in Aboriginal people's determination. Already religious and clergy in some areas have negotiated their role and responsibilities in communities at the direction of the Aboriginal people concerned.

Catholic people's role extends beyond the Catholic community to also being members of the wider Australian community. No matter which community we identify with we cannot identify as being *just*, if we do not work towards making changes in what we think, say and do about Aboriginal people's place in the community. Aboriginal people must also have respect and regard for the non-Aboriginal people in making decisions which also affect them in developing and making change.

A non-Aboriginal woman expresses herself as a Catholic and her feelings towards Aboriginal people as:

I feel that today, we must face an issue that we are dwelling too much in the past. That we need to know that the past has happened but that we have to repent of it and tell the Aboriginal people that we are sorry that their pain was caused by our forebears. I think we need to bring it today to the Mass, to ask God to forgive us all ... Until we repent and ask Jesus to pour His wonderful blood over all these sins and sorrows of our country we cannot have a healing.

Many Aboriginal people are not asking people to be guilty about the past, but to acknowledge what has

been done and work towards changing things that are the results of what has happened in the past. What we are asking is justice in action, not just words. The time where past and present come together and which affects our relationship is *now*. We are the generation to make the decisions, we are the ones who are responsible for now! We are the ones to commence a healing process.

Aboriginal people have often pointed out their history of contact in their local areas and where massacres have taken place. These have also been recorded in history, in personal records and legal documents. In 1988 there was a move to have the massacre sites commemorated, the same as the sites marked for the war dead, for example, town cenotaphs. These sites remind us of the many who never returned to their homeland, even in death. The present war memorial sites, give us a place where we can go to mourn for the loss of those people.

It is now acknowledged that when people experience trauma, they must be assisted in coping with the situation. We are now accepting that we failed our soldiers in the various wars. We as a community have made a move towards healing with the Vietnam veterans. When are we going to have places or sites marked so that the history of Aboriginal people can be acknowledged and that not only Aboriginal people but everyone can grieve for the people who died on this soil defending their country? The sites can be a start to the healing of all the peoples of Australia. We can make peace between ourselves and have that marked by places where we can reflect and make a commitment that never again will Australian people be involved in destroying people's lives and culture.

It can mark a new identity as *peacemakers*.

*A new partnership* between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Australia.

*A new partnership* between other indigenous peoples of the world.

I hope that this ... will not be merely a matter of words and perhaps good intentions. I hope very much that it will lead to concrete action in the future.

Archbishop Francis P. Carroll

If we are moved to such action, then I hope I will never hear remarks such as:

We have everyone saying what the issue is and what to do about it. From Aborigines, government people, Bishops and we even have the Pope. Are we waiting *now* for Christ to appear and tell us? When are we going to do it?

The late Olive Brown, Aboriginal Catholic

## Acknowledgements

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