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Embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the life of the Catholic Church

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Romans 15:7

*“You are no longer to be treated as foreigners in your own land, for you are fellow citizens
with the Holy people of God”*

Ephesians 2:

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Overview

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council has developed the following recommendations in the hope that the Catholic Church in Australia will more resemble the Church that Jesus Christ wants her to be in relation to Australia's first people.

In the lead up to the 2020 Plenary, the document will provide some guidance for Dioceses, Parishes and Catholic Organisations to implement a best practice model when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It will also provide evidence based experience for the future mission of the Church as identified in the Plenary.

NATSICC has taken a national perspective in compiling the recommendations and as such has used a broad approach which will lend itself to variation to meet the cultural requirements of local Traditional Custodians and Dioceses.

The document has several facets, each of which is designed to promote reconciliation, mutual respect and bring Jesus into the lives of Australia's first people in a culturally appropriate way.

Embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture will add diversity to the way in which the Church proclaims Jesus Christ in multicultural Australia today.

Cultural Awareness Training to be undertaken by Clergy, Religious and lay workers

Developing the knowledge of Clergy, Religious and Lay workers in the Catholic Church on the Culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to enable more effective and appropriate Ministry

Why?

Those involved in Pastoral Ministry with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples require a level of knowledge to be able to effectively communicate and facilitate positive outcomes for Australia's first people. An insight to the gift of culture and the challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will enable the Clergy, Religious and lay worker to engage more authentically and proclaim the work of God more effectively.

How?

- Develop and promote an Online Cultural Awareness Course that is endorsed by the BCRATSIP
 - The participant will discover, from Colonisation to the present time how the pain and loss of Land, Culture, Family and Dignity have left lingering connotations, that, in some cases, has resulted in a trans-generational loss of identity.
 - Provide practical advice on culturally appropriate engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
 - Encourage new and foreign Priests to undertake the course
 - Negotiate with stakeholders to encourage the adoption of the training as part of their organisations structure and staff training
 - Work with communities and Dioceses to develop modules to assist the learning process. Future modules may include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funerals and Appointment to Ministry with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Facilitate the building of relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and ministries with mainstream Catholic groups
- Seminarians and newly arrived Priests to spend time with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as part of their training

Formation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

NATSICC calls upon the Catholic Church to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics to undertake formation training. Further, the Church is encouraged to ensure that existing retreats and courses are culturally appropriate.

Why?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the youngest and fastest growing demographic within the Catholic Church in Australia. Many communities are proud to be known as *Catholic Communities*. Building the capacity of individuals in these communities to take up leadership positions such as Deacons, Catechists and other ministries is empowering and a living embodiment of the Principle of Subsidiarity.

Women are the backbone of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and ministries and providing them with training enables them to take up formal positions in the Church.

How?

Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ensure that existing training is available and culturally appropriate for Indigenous people.

Provide NATSICC with a list of training options open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics so that a register can be created and maintained.

Encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the Catholic Church to pursue further training.

Creating a Welcoming Space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality contains symbols and rituals, that when used in a Catholic Liturgical context facilitate a welcoming environment for Indigenous peoples.

As per the Principle of Subsidiarity, Catholic organisations should seek and provide pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide perspectives and input into publications, programs and statements that affect them.

Why?

Consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the local church or wider community in the organisation of Liturgical Celebrations and the creation of documents, programs and statements is a sign of inclusiveness and demonstrates a desire for reconciliation and subsidiarity.

Liturgical Context

Traditional Elements such as a smoking ceremony, water blessing, message stick, clap sticks and didgeridoo as well as song/dance and art have been used in spiritual ceremonies by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for over 60,000 years.

NATSICC is working on ways to promote the use of these Traditional Elements in areas of Liturgical Celebration that would enhance the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples [and to support those congregations to incorporate these changes.](#)

Wider Church context

As Parishes, Schools and other Catholic Groups and Organisations take up the invitation to incorporate the use of Traditional Elements and voices in their celebrations, [publications and statements](#), the wider Church will be seen to actively engage in the inclusion and reconciliation of Australia's First Peoples.

How?

Incorporation of Traditional elements in the Liturgical space

In congregations where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics are present:

Message Stick

The message stick can be brought forward in the entrance procession – The message stick is a means of communication, and so it accompanies the Word of God that is proclaimed and received by the assembly.

The message stick can be used without an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person present – as it is a 'living and moving' symbol. In Victoria there are almost 400 message sticks.

Clapsticks and or Didgeridoo

Didgeridoo and or clapsticks can also accompany the Gospel – These elements have the ability to remind the assembly that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lived according to God's Word over many centuries.

Art, music, song and dance

The use of traditional instruments, song and dance may have various and appropriate applications in

the celebration of the Liturgy. Their application is dependent on the community in which the Mass is being celebrated and the consultation between the Priest and Traditional Custodians.

Examples:

- Didgeridoo and or clapsticks can accompany the choir, or be used in times of reflection.
- Dance can be incorporated into the entrance and gift processions.
- Songs in Traditional language may be used
- Artwork such as painting/designs can be placed around the church, used to decorate the altar and candles. The amalgamation of Traditional and western artwork transforms the church into a living symbol of contemporary society and forms a tangible representation of Reconciliation.

Cultural smoking and water ceremonies

Cultural smoking and water ceremonies can be used as part of the penitential rite and significant life events e.g. Funerals.

These elements have been used in purification and healing rituals.

Note: Cultural Smoking and Water Ceremonies can only be conducted in by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In congregations where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics are not present:

Prayers of Intercession - Remember Australia's first people in your petitions to God

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork and /symbols (as per above) can be displayed in the Church

Acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as part of the Mass

Creating pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints and input into relevant programs, publications, celebrations and statements

- Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in media releases and statements
- Seek Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input into the design and implementation of programs
- Include a 'standing' article or column in organisational publications
- Include statements of acknowledgement on all websites, emails and statements
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Celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday

Every Parish in Australia should dedicate at least one Mass to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the first Sunday in July – **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday**.

[Catholic Organisations should celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday and NAIDOC week with staff and stakeholders.](#)

Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians

NATSICC recommends that the Traditional Custodians of the land on which the Church, School, Parish or organisation stands be Acknowledged in a prominent and appropriate manner. Verbal acknowledgement prior to meetings and Mass is also encouraged.

Why?

The practice of inclusion forms an important part of rebuilding the relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non Indigenous Australians. The erection of a plaque or sign at the Church is a symbol of welcome for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and an acknowledgment that there is an understanding of Australia's past.

Some Parishioners may see the acknowledgement as exclusionary due to the reference of 'Traditional Owners' or 'Custodians' of Country. It must be emphasised that these terms have differing connotations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as explained by Professor Mick Dodson –

“For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains.”

How?

Acknowledgement plaques to be placed at the entrance of the Church

Acknowledgements to be placed on Catholic websites and printed documents. This will help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel welcome in the Catholic Church

Create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics to share their stories

The Catholic Church to acknowledge the history and stories of its relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Inclusion and consultation

NATSICC calls upon the Catholic Church to unearth and discover the genius and gifts that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people possess through inclusion on committees, boards and decision-making bodies.

Why?

The 2014 the NATSICC Parish Survey identified that in Parishes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people present in the congregation, over 40% stated that those people were active in Parish life and serving the community. This is an example of the community spirit and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics and the willingness to become involved and serve the Catholic Community.

Consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the local church or wider community in the organisation of Liturgical Celebrations, and invitations to participate on Parish Councils and other groups, will demonstrate authentic inclusiveness and build on efforts to bring about reconciliation.

Empowering people and building their capacity to serve is the foundation of Subsidiary. In the spirit of solidarity, we should all work together as God's people.

How?

Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in discussions on issues that affect them

Place an emphasis on including local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on boards

Hold Mass, meetings and consultations in communities