



Listen, Learn, Love

A New Engagement with
Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Peoples

Social Justice Statement
2023-2024



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians who have walked upon and cared for this land for thousands of years. We acknowledge the continued deep spiritual attachment and relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to this country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

With Gratitude

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference thanks those who contributed to the preparation of this statement including John Lochowiak and members of NATSICC; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in the Archdioceses of Sydney, Canberra-Goulburn, Brisbane and Melbourne and in the Dioceses of Broome and Darwin; Fr. Brian McCoy SJ; Archbishop Mark Coleridge; Gavin Abraham; Jeremy Stuparich; Harrison Pocknee and Peter Arndt.

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Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

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Cover artwork by Craig Carson



Foreword

May 26 is an important date for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 1997, it marked the delivery of the *Bringing Them Home* report into the history of the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities. That policy continues to cause great trauma for members of the Stolen Generations to this day.

Twenty years later, on May 26 2017, over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders gathered together at a National Constitutional Convention at Uluru, and issued the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. It followed an unprecedented process of dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia. It recommended the enshrinement of a Voice to Parliament in the Constitution as well as Treaty and Truth-Telling.

The injustice of the policy of removing children from their families continues today and is one of many injustices that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want to be addressed. The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* proposes that its three recommendations provide a way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be involved in overcoming the injustices from which they have suffered from the beginning of colonisation.

In this year's Social Justice Statement, *Listen, Learn, Love: A New Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, we hear from members of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) who speak directly about

the history of injustice faced by the First Peoples of this country and what needs to be done to right those wrongs. Recounting the impact of loss of land and culture, the experience of racism, the forcible removal of children, high incarceration and suicide rates, alcohol abuse and domestic violence, and poor outcomes in health, employment, housing and education is very painful.

However, amidst these challenges, the strength, perseverance, and dignity demonstrated by the First Australians offer a glimmer of hope for a future where these injustices are overcome, and their voices are heard and valued, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

The way we in the Church and in society address these painful matters must change if there is to be an end to centuries of injustice. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to be welcomed from the margins into the centre so that they can lead the discussions about change and implementation of actions to bring about healing and justice.

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice is the mechanism proposed by the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* to make a start in bringing this about. While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people support the Voice which is the focus of the 2023 referendum, some oppose it and propose a different way. Many Catholic organisations have expressed their support for the Voice publicly. NATSICC has also expressed its support and have developed a website to help Catholics to understand the issues and make



an informed decision on the Voice referendum.

The Bishops of Australia encourage all Catholics and people of goodwill to study this information and to participate in the many opportunities for learning and dialogue about the referendum.

At the heart of this year’s Social Justice Statement is a call for all the People of God to embrace a new engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, an engagement which involves a commitment to listen to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers and to learn from them. This listening and learning and the actions which flow from them must be grounded in a spirit of love if there is to be a change for the better.

At the end of the Statement, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council join in calling for this spirit of love to

be evident in our approach to the Voice referendum and beyond. Love is at the heart of our Christian calling and we, in the Church, in embracing this commitment in our relationships with Australia’s First Peoples, can show our fellow Australians a better way that leads to healing and justice. Change is necessary if the hopes and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are to be realised.

We can be at the forefront of a new era in Australia’s public life. As one body in Christ, let us work together, drawing strength from the resilience and wisdom of First Australians by recognizing their experiences and collaborating across boundaries. Let us listen and learn intently and love our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers with great generosity and respect as we participate in the dialogue about the Voice referendum and other important questions which will follow in the coming years.



✠ Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB
President, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference



John Lochowiak
Chair, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this publication contains images and names of people who have since passed away. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference acknowledges the Traditional Custodians, past, present and emerging of the lands on which we live and work.





Listen, Learn, Love

In 1967, the Australian people took a momentous step in the long journey towards healing the wounds suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since the arrival of the British in 1788.

Over 90 per cent of Australians voted to change the constitution to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be counted in the census, formally recognising them as part of the Australian population, making it one of the most successful national campaigns in Australian history. The Yes case was supported by Australia's Catholic bishops.

Most of us know some of the history of injustice and mistreatment of the First Peoples of this country, but no-one knows the depths of the pain and humiliation endured by the original inhabitants of this continent better than they themselves do.

The wounds are many and there is still a need for much healing despite the significant achievement that was the overwhelming support by Australians for the 1967 referendum proposals.

By the end of 2023, all Australians will be given the chance to vote on a referendum question to formally recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this country and to enshrine in the Constitution the establishment of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference welcomes the referendum as a blessed

opportunity for the Church and, indeed, all Australians to embark on a new engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the hope that there can be healing and justice in our land.

We have come to this understanding through much listening to what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been saying and calling for over many years. This has included the powerful call of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders for the Voice, Treaty and Truth Telling in the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart, but also the concerns and hopes of the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in communities in our dioceses across Australia.

Through that listening, we have learned much about their struggle for justice and dignity. Our prayerful reflection on what we have heard and learned from them in the light of the Gospel has convinced us to make a commitment to renew our relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to accompany them in their struggle for justice.

That commitment begins with more listening in humility to them about the injustices they have suffered at the hands of those who colonised their lands and seas many years ago. It is not just historical injustices, but includes injustice that continues today. It is not just injustice at the hands of colonial and Government authorities. It is also injustice for which we in the Church are responsible.



In a spirit of love and of humility, we have chosen to take the unusual step of inviting the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) to speak directly in this Statement to Catholics in Australia and, indeed, to all Australians.

As representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics, they know much better than any of us their story of injustice and humiliation. They are in a better position than any of us to share their hopes and dreams for healing and justice in this land. As Bishops, we will respond to what we hear

from NATSICC later in this Statement. Finally, we will make a joint call with NATSICC for action.

In this time of renewal in the Church and in our country, we invite everyone to join us in walking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on this journey of healing. Let us as the people of God, Bishops and people together, listen with humility and love to what they have to say to us.



LISTEN TO THE VOICES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES

We, the members of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, are grateful for this opportunity to share some of our stories and thoughts about our peoples' situation today in Australia and in the Church.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not one people. We are many peoples with our own traditional lands and cultures. However, we are united by our belief in the Creator Spirit who brought us and all that is a part of our lands, living and non-living alike, into being.

We have a close relationship with everyone who is a part of our mob and with the lands and seas of which we are a part. We are one with our lands and seas and all the animals and plants. It has always been a central part of our tradition to care for each other and for the lands and seas.

The coming of British settlers has changed things for us dramatically, but we have never made an agreement for our lands and seas to be taken over. This has always been the land of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and it always will be. In many ways, the colonisation of our traditional lands has caused much pain and injustice for our people.

In what follows, we share some of that pain. We also share stories about our survival and our hopes for a better future.

A Broken Heart

Uncle Bevan Costello was a lifelong resident of the Cherbourg Aboriginal community. His family has given us permission to tell some of his story.

Cherbourg is a small Aboriginal community 170km northwest of Brisbane. It was originally known as Barambah. It was established following the passing of the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act by the colonial Queensland Government in 1897. It is within the boundaries of Wakka Wakka tribal country.

Seven thousand acres of the Barambah pastoral station became a mission station and local Aboriginal people were moved onto this mission station. A superintendent controlled the lives of all those living on the station.

Eventually, many Aboriginal people from different parts of Queensland were forcibly moved to the station. It became known as Cherbourg in 1932. People from over 50 tribes were sent to Cherbourg. A number of Torres Strait Islanders were also sent to Cherbourg during the Second World War.



Conditions in Cherbourg were poor. Residents were issued very basic food from the ration shed each week. The superintendent, appointed by the Government, controlled every aspect of the lives of the people in the community. People could not get married or visit family outside the station without the superintendent's permission. Those who committed small infringements were punished severely. Girls and boys often lived in very basic conditions in dormitories.

A group of staff from the Archdiocese of Brisbane's Evangelisation Brisbane team visited Cherbourg in September 2021. They had come to learn more about Cherbourg's story at the Ration Shed Museum. Uncle Bevan was their guide. The museum has an excellent collection of photographs and artefacts which tell Cherbourg's story.

At the end of the tour, Uncle Bevan shared a couple of stories about his life in Cherbourg. As a 10-year-old boy, he had tried to ride a calf, but the calf died as a result of the ride. Young Bevan was hauled before the superintendent. He was sent to the boys' dormitory and confined there for six months. His parents only found out after he was sent to the dormitory.

Uncle Bevan was fortunate to study to become a teacher. He taught in a number of schools including the Cherbourg State School and Murgon State High School. He was also chair of the local justice group and chaired the Chief Magistrate's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board. He had taken on the position of principal of an alternative school for Aboriginal children who could not fit into regular schools.

He told the tour group that he had taken stress leave because he found it difficult to cope with the suicide of 22 of his students in the previous two years. His stories deeply affected the staff who went on the tour.

Uncle's health was not the best. He had advocated for the kidney dialysis machine in the Cherbourg Hospital to be made functional again so that locals did not need to travel to Toowoomba for dialysis. He joked that he would soon need dialysis, but, two weeks after the tour, it was his heart which gave out suddenly one late night.

His sudden death shocked the local community and many others far and wide. He was only 65.

Seven months later, native title was granted to the Wakka Wakka people. It was very sad that Uncle Bevan did not live to celebrate this wonderful news.

Closing the Gap

Like Uncle Bevan, many of us have similar stories of suffering and injustice. The mistreatment by authorities over more than two centuries has left many scars. The lives of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are very different from those of other Australians. Take a look at the latest *Closing the Gap* report and you will see this reality in depressing statistics.

After Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's National Apology to Members of the Stolen Generation in 2008, Federal, State and Territory Governments agreed to take action together to improve the living standards of our people, but, for the most part, their efforts have not worked.



Here are some of the results included in the 2022 *Closing the Gap* report¹:

- The average life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males is about 71, 11 years less than other Australian males. The life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females is about 76, nine years less than for other Australian women.
- Almost 90 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies are born with a healthy birth weight, which is on target to close the gap in this area.
- Almost 97 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled in early childhood education, which is also on target to close the gap.
- Only about 34 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are assessed as being on track in all areas of development.
- About 81 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in houses that are not overcrowded, a result which is not on track to close the gap.
- Although Governments aimed to reduce the rate of imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by 15 per cent by 2031, the latest figures show a rise to a rate of over 2,200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults in prison per 100,000 inmates.
- The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in detention has greatly decreased to 23.2 children per 10,000 in detention, which is on track.
- The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care has risen in recent years to a rate of about 57 per 1,000 children in care.
- The rate of suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is about 28 out of 100,000 of all suicides, which is an increase on previous rates.
- There have been small increases in the land and sea areas over which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have legal rights or interests in recent years, but this is not on track to reach the proposed target.

There are a number of targets in the Closing the Gap Framework for which there are no new figures to allow us to measure progress. These include important areas such as increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who complete Year 12 at school and who obtain a university or TAFE qualification.

Reducing the rate of all forms of domestic violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is another.

Increasing the rate at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are spoken and increasing the access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to telephone and internet communication are two further targets for which no new figures are available.

Some of us have been fortunate. We are very proud of the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have received a good education, have a good standard of living and have done great things in their lives.



Among our people are great teachers, doctors, lawyers, artists, sportspeople and diplomats. Many of us work hard in jobs as receptionists, electricians, shop assistants, cooks and carpenters. We send our children to school and get involved in community groups. We make a great contribution to Australia.

However, there are many who miss out on opportunities for a happy family and community life and for a good education, good health and a rewarding job. The *Closing the Gap* report shows how big the problem is.

We are pleased that the Bishops Conference supported visits to communities around Australia earlier this year as part of the preparation of this Statement. The visits were arranged to hear directly from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their lives and what they want to change.

These visits have helped to strengthen understanding of the experiences and concerns of our people. It has also helped to include us more in what the Church does to support our people.

Stories of Pain and Commitment

We, in NATSICC, know all too well about the gaps between the living standards of our people and those of other Australians. We have shared in the pain of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers all our lives.

The visits to our communities gave our people a chance to share more stories about the pain we feel. Uncle Bevan Costello's heartache about the number of youth suicides in

Cherbourg is repeated in so many communities across Australia.

The rate of suicide in Cherbourg has dropped since Uncle Bevan poured out his heart to Church workers two years ago. This is because the local community banded together to learn skills to protect their young people, but still, the tragedy continues. A teenage boy in Cherbourg who was being supported by the local youth hub took his life last Christmas. Like his family, families in other communities visited are burying their children who took their own lives.

In many communities, good people are working hard to keep children in school so they can get a good education. Community-controlled organisations are running programs to help end the alcohol abuse and violence which is causing so much pain in families and in communities across Australia. Efforts are being made to provide young people with training and job opportunities.

We heard about the mother in Palumpa in the Northern Territory who has buried her daughter and son both of whom died before turning 50 due to diabetes complications. We also heard about the heartache of another mother in Palumpa whose daughter was placed in care with a white family in Darwin and refused access to her own family.

These experiences are not uncommon. Community-controlled health services do amazing work to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, but progress is slow and better funding could allow them to do much more.

Link-Up does wonderful work in reconnecting members of the Stolen Generations with their



families, but there is so much more they could do with better funding.

Caring for country has always been a part of our lives. Communities in the Kimberleys and in the Northern Territory have seen the damage that has been done to country and are campaigning strongly to stop fracking on their country.

Torres Strait Islanders are dealing with the impact on their islands of rising sea levels caused by climate change, and many are campaigning vigorously to ensure Governments take effective action to save their island homes.

Indigenous rangers in places like Minjerribah in Queensland are doing great work repairing the damage done to their country. Their efforts not only heal country, but provide healing for themselves and their people.

We are not helpless or hopeless. We know how to make programs work for our people. Too often, Governments have not been able to make things better because they leave us out of the decisions about programs and their implementation. Patrick Dodson, the Father of Reconciliation and now a Senator for Western Australia, made this point strongly and clearly in 1996²:

The track behind us is littered with the relics of policies, programs and projects that failed, that wasted taxpayers' money, that failed to deliver real outcomes to those crying out for them. They failed mainly because they did not include Indigenous people in making the decisions.

"Nothing about us without us!" is a saying which many of us share to emphasise the need for us to be at the decision-making table.

Things Need to Change in the Church Too

Our communities have been supported by many good bishops, priests, deacons, religious and lay people over many years. Improvements have been slow, but things are changing for the better. The support of Aboriginal Catholic Ministries in many dioceses is an enormous help.

The first Aboriginal Mass celebrated at the 1973 Eucharistic Congress in Melbourne was a wonderful step forward in embracing inculturation. Since then, much more has been done since then to help us to celebrate our Catholic faith with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

We also acknowledge the development of Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in growing numbers of dioceses, parishes, schools, religious congregations, organisations and agencies in the Church. This can only strengthen the Church's commitment to building relationships of trust and respect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Decree 1 of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia offers us a clear path for making the changes we want to see in the Church. The Decree accepts NATSICC's recommendations for embracing the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the life of the Church. The Decree requires all parishes, schools and eparchies to³:



- Acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which their property is situated in a prominent place;
- Enrol all staff and volunteers in the Cultural Competency in a Catholic Context course;
- Ensure that all retreats and similar opportunities are culturally appropriate; and
- Seek to appoint Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to committees, boards and commissions.

We also strongly recommend that more ministry formation opportunities be offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at all levels. We have so much to contribute to the Church and this formation is necessary for us to participate in ministry.

Treated as Inferiors

From the beginning of colonisation, our people were treated as inferiors. Many said we were a dying race⁴. There was no respect for our dignity as individuals and no respect for our culture and practices which developed over thousands of years and sustained us and the lands and seas over many centuries.

Colonial authorities and settlers, for the most part, treated us with utter contempt. We were less than human. To be blunt, their attitudes and behaviours were racist. We share this same experience with other indigenous peoples whose lands were colonised by the British in the Pacific and in North America.

That racist attitude led to so many injustices. Our traditional lands were taken from us and we were moved to other places. Many of us were killed. We were forced to abandon our own cultures and languages and to accept the ways of the white colonisers. Children were taken away from their parents and placed in orphanages, missions and foster homes. The children were often told lies such as their parents did not love them.

We were forced to work as station hands or domestic servants. We were sexually exploited and abused. Our wages were kept in a trust fund, but these funds were sometimes used by Governments to pay for hospitals and roads.⁵

We feel so much hurt and even anger at the many deaths of our people when they are in custody or when they are killed in the streets. The memory of the death of John Pat, Daniel Yock, Mulrunji Doomadgee, Kumanjayi Walker, Veronica Nelson, Cassius Turvey and Elijah Doughty stir up so much emotion in our hearts. We are still waiting for all the recommendations of the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody to be implemented.

We are reminded of the many massacres and the deep pain that our people have suffered over many years because of this violence. Whether it is racism that results in the death of our young people in the streets or unacceptable practices by police and prison officers, we feel great hurt and keep asking when it will end. We keep asking whether our black lives matter.

Our history is full of injustice. Our lands and seas are full of our blood. Nothing but a



radical change in attitudes will overcome this world of pain.

Nothing But Museum Exhibits

In 2021, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Royal Society of Tasmania delivered an apology to the Aboriginal people of Tasmania for the great hurt and trauma caused by their scientific, research and museum practices.⁶

Staff of the museum routinely dug up the remains of Aboriginal people in Lutruwita (Tasmania) and used them for scientific research, for museum displays and for trade.

It is horrifying to think that people cut up the bodies of recently deceased Aboriginal people so they could send skulls or other remains to museums overseas.

The famous Aboriginal woman, Truganini, feared that the same thing would happen to her when she died. She asked that she be buried in D'Entrecasteau Channel so that this could not happen to her remains, but this was ignored by the museum. Her skeleton was put on display for about 70 years.⁷

These practices showed no respect for the culture of Aboriginal people. They showed no respect for the dignity and feelings of the families of those whose remains were exploited. As the Museum in its apology admits, these practices were simply racist.

Our Ongoing Experience of Racism

From the beginning of colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have

suffered much injustice and humiliation because of racist attitudes and practices.

Although things have improved, we still experience racism in many ways. We often hear racist comments and abuse. They are made in social media comments. We see it in people's body language and in their actions.

We are sad to say that we still experience racism at the hands of our fellow Catholics.

All the problems we have mentioned are simply symptoms of a deeper wound, which was first opened by the racism of colonisers over two centuries ago. This first cut is the deepest wound which has never had a chance to heal because the racism that caused it has never gone away.

To heal this wound, all Australians need to listen to the truth we have to tell about this racism and the many injustices it has caused. Australians at all levels need to acknowledge this original injustice and commit to walk a different track with us to a better future.

When this wound begins to heal, we believe all the other problems from poor health to high suicide rates will begin to be fixed.

Supporting the Voice is a Start

Australians have an opportunity to begin a new chapter this year with the referendum on the Voice to Parliament. We in NATSICC know there are criticisms, even from Aboriginal people, but most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people support the referendum.

Just as the churches strongly supported the 1967 referendum⁸, we hope that Catholics, along with other people of faith, will support the Yes campaign.



It is a commitment to recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution and promoting healing and unity. It will be the next step in a process of empowering us to participate in the decisions that will make a difference for the better for our people.

Australian leaders in the Parliament will hear directly from our representatives about how Government actions will affect our people and how these Government programs could work

better. As the other elements of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* are implemented down the track, all Australians will begin to hear all the truth about our long history of pain and injustice and we will begin to have a direct say in our future in a treaty process.

We, NATSICC, feel that the referendum is too important to fail. The consequences for our people and the whole nation would be devastating.



LEARNING FROM OUR INDIGENOUS SISTERS AND BROTHERS

We, Australia's Bishops, listen to what the members of NATSICC have shared about the current plight of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We hear their pain in the face of continuing injustice. We recognise that these are very sensitive issues and re-telling stories of what has happened causes more pain and trauma. We also acknowledge their resilience in the face of centuries of injustice and their efforts to overcome these great wrongs.

The Church has not just been an observer or bystander when these injustices were committed. Often, the Church has been involved.

The Church has participated in many of the grave injustices and contributed to the racism which is at the heart of all these wrongs. For example, Church missions and orphanages took many of the children forcibly removed from their families over many years during the 20th Century⁹.

We must continue to accept responsibility for our part in the pain and suffering experienced by these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, known as the Stolen Generations, and the other injustices our sisters and brothers have endured¹⁰.

Despite this participation in great injustice, Australia's Bishops have also listened to the pain of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At times, we and the bodies we have appointed have responded with compassion and a commitment to justice.

Australia's first Archbishop, John Bede Polding, spoke powerfully to an inquiry by the NSW Legislative Council in 1845. At one point in his evidence, he put himself in the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when he declared¹¹:

I am making myself a black, putting myself in that position, and taking away all that I know except that this is my country, that my father lived by pursuing the emu, and the kangaroo, that I am driven away from my hunting grounds, that my children and tribe are subjected to the grossest barbarities.

When he was asked if he was assuming too much in thinking that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could have such feelings, he responded with power and insight:

The Aborigine will demand, 'What right have you to come here? We have not asked you to come, and you take away our lands, you drive away our means of subsistence.'



He connects the dire circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with the way colonisers took their land by force, declaring that the land was terra nullius:

... occupation by force, accompanied by murders, ill-treatment, ravishment of their women, in a word, to the conviction on their minds that the white man has come for his own advantage, without any regard to their rights.

In their 1978 Social Justice Statement, *Aboriginies. A Statement of Concern*, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, like Archbishop Polding, described concerns about the serious disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their lack of power to determine their own future¹².

The statement paid particular attention to their struggle for land rights. Responding to the hurt and sense of injustice as well as the hopes and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Commission draws on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council to express hope for a transformation in the attitude of the Church in Australia¹³:

The Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Church in the Modern World invites us to make these our own. Its opening words are 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.' The purpose of this statement is to contribute to the process whereby this ideal might become a description of the relationship between Australian Catholics and Aborigines.

Our 2006 Social Justice Statement, *The Heart of Our Country*, reflected on the meeting of Pope John Paul II with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and his message to them in 1986. Our statement ends with a call for positive action¹⁴:

As Pope John Paul II commented twenty years ago: '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.' It would seem that the remedies are well within our economic reach. The message delivered in Alice Springs continues to challenge us to positive, decisive action today.

Following the Way of Love

Having listened to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers and learned about their pain and their hopes, what is the way ahead for us in the Church in Australia if we are to take positive, decisive action to transform the current situation in our land? The prophet Amos offers us some guidance:



*Woe to those who are snugly
ensconced in Zion
and those who feel so safe on the
mountains of Samaria.
Lying on ivory beds and sprawling on
their divans,
they dine on lambs from the flock and
stall-fattened veal.
They bawl to the sound of the harp
and invent new musical instruments
like David.
They drink wine by the bowlful
and anoint themselves with finest oil,
but about the ruin of Joseph they care
not at all.
That is why they will be the first to go
into exile:
the sprawlers revelry is over.*

Amos 6:4-7

Amos is one of the late eighth-century BC prophets who mount a mighty critique of Israelite religion that was divorced from the justice which lay at the heart of God's plan for ancient Israel, which was to be the counter-society of God, that is, a community of slaves set free in a world which says "Once a slave, always a slave."

Justice was all about enshrining liberation at the heart of the counter-society that God wants to set in the world for the sake of the world's transformation.

Amos is sent as prophet from the southern kingdom to prophesy at the royal shrine of Bethel in the northern kingdom. Once he starts prophesying there, the priest of the royal shrine tells him to be quiet and go straight back to where he came from.

The eight-century BC prophets like Amos consolidate the distinctive ethical

monotheism of Israelite religion. In other words, you can't worship the real God unless you obey the liberating commands of God's Law.

When the Old Testament speaks of justice or righteousness, it means right relationship – and you can't have right relationship with God unless you have right relationship with other people...and *vice versa*.

The problem with the leaders of ancient Israel is that they thought they could go through all the motions of divine worship and still treat others, especially the poor, unjustly. In this, they were turning Israelite religion into pagan religion, which paid the gods off or kept the gods happy in order to secure divine favour but didn't worry too much about the demands of justice.

This was at a time, too, when Assyria was on the march, and the prophets were insistent that Israel's only protection against the Assyrian threat was obedience to God's Law, not stronger alliances or better weaponry.

The Amos text lashes those who live in comfort, thinking God will protect them against the Assyrian threat that was real at the time, even if they care not at all about "the ruin of Joseph", who is the younger brother sold into slavery by his brothers (Genesis 37).

In many ways, Australia can be like that – living off the fat of the land, a life of great wealth and comfort, but not caring about the ruin of the Indigenous peoples who are Joseph here, the weak and defenceless who don't matter and are even despised.

Noel Pearson is a prominent Aboriginal lawyer. He has been at the centre of many of the major debates and negotiations about



significant legislative changes in Australia for many years. In his 2022 Boyer Lecture Series, he said about his people¹⁵:

We are a much unloved people. We are, perhaps, the ethnic group Australians feel least connected to. We are not popular and we are not personally known to most Australians.

Few have met us and a small minority count us as friends; and, despite never having met any of us and knowing very little about us other than what is in the media and what W.E Stanner, whose 1968 Boyer Lecture looms large over my lectures, called folklore about us, Australians hold strong views about us, the great proportion of which is negative and unfriendly. It has ever been thus. Worse in the past, but still true today.

In his 1968 Boyer Lecture titled *After the Dreaming*, Stanner spoke about the “Great Australian Silence”. This silence by Australians generally is not only a failure to acknowledge the atrocities committed against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the past, but it is also a refusal to think about them. Stanner also called this a “cult of forgetfulness”.¹⁶

In his view, it resulted in Australian history being presented in a way that promoted negative stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and entrenched their marginalisation. As Stanner said:

To listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their cultures and histories and to learn from them can help us to see our national story differently. It can open up new pathways for healing and transformation. Our experience is that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are patient and generous despite all that happened to them.¹⁷

In the Genesis story, it was Joseph, the despised and rejected one, who saves his brothers from ruin when famine besets the land. Rather than turn his back on them, Joseph embraces his brothers with love and generosity.

What might it mean for us to befriend, even to love Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, instead of ignoring or despising them? Shouldn't the Church lead the way in that? – not patronising them or “helping” them but befriending and, above all, loving them?; not telling them what they need but listening to them in new ways, which is surely what love would demand?

A saying coined by Lilla Watson, from Gangulu country, is often quoted to describe the type of relationship Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples want from other Australians in their pursuit of justice¹⁸:

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

Love is at the heart of Jesus' message. The great commandment is to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves¹⁹.

Jesus shows us that the love that God wants is grounded in humility. It is characterised by a willingness to empty ourselves of selfish



interest so that the other becomes the centre and focus of our generosity, mercy, forgiveness and friendship.

At the Eucharistic table, Christ fashions us into a community of love entering into the world, offering this same love in abundance to all, especially those rejected and marginalised by others.

Christ identifies himself with those who are poor and marginalised. We find him in their midst. In the love and honour we offer to them, we offer love and honour to Christ himself, who loves us beyond all imagination.

This love we are invited to practise is not simply at the level of one person to another. It has a social and political nature, too. It is our mission as followers of Christ to infuse the structures of society, including its political structures, with a love that seeks to be attentive to those on the peripheries like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to learn from the wisdom that flows from their rich experience as well as from their culture and spirituality, and to accompany them on a journey to seek liberation from all that oppresses them and us.

This love is characterised by a commitment to encounter and dialogue, reciprocity, mutual accompaniment and a desire to put the other at the centre of our attention.

This is the “civilisation of love” which Pope St Paul VI spoke of on Pentecost Sunday in 1970²⁰, a notion which both Pope St John Paul II and Pope Francis have taken up on many occasions²¹.

It is an essential part of our Christian mission to infuse society with the love which Christ offers. This is a love which does not patronise or pity Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Australians. It is a love which seeks them out where they are, listens to them and learns from their great wisdom and which walks with them to a place where we are together freed from every injustice and oppression. In the current moment, this is an invaluable example that the Church can offer to all Australians as the way to reconciliation and peace in our land.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis reflects on the parable of the Good Samaritan and urges us “to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people’s troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment”.²² This is our calling in Australia today.

In the light of all we have heard and learned from our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers, we say: “We love you and commit ourselves to walking alongside you on your struggle for justice.”

In 2021, we endorsed the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, which speaks of the disempowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and of their hopes for a better future for their young people.²³ The Fifth Plenary Council of Australia also offered its support for the *Uluru Statement* in 2022.²⁴

The Voice referendum in late 2023 will be a significant moment in the struggle for justice by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Voice is one of three recommendations of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The Statement was issued at the end of a National Constitutional Convention with the endorsement of an overwhelming majority of more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

The Convention was the high point of extensive dialogue with a large number of



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in 13 regional dialogues across the country. This process was designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

No one should dismiss the recommendations of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* lightly. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who designed and led the process, who participated in the dialogues and the Convention and the many who support its recommendations, especially the Voice, deserve great respect and a serious consideration of their proposals and their reasons for it.

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples oppose the Voice and the referendum. They propose a different way forward. They and their position deserve respect, too.

Many well-known Australians, including prominent Catholics, have voiced their support for the referendum. Some have also opposed it publicly. Many Catholic organisations support the referendum. NATSICC has expressed its support and has developed a website to provide Catholics with a source of information on the referendum. A wide range of business, sporting, faith and community organisations have added their voices to those supporting the referendum.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference will not tell Catholics or their fellow Australians how to vote in the referendum. Instead, we ask all Australians to seek out information on the referendum proposal, especially from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We encourage you to participate in opportunities for dialogue about the

referendum with respect for different views. Those who propose the referendum do not seek to divide our country, and none of us should accept divisive behaviour during the referendum campaign.

Weigh up all the arguments and information carefully and make a choice which you think respects the hopes and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Choose the option which you believe offers the best chance of healing and justice for the First Peoples of our land.

The referendum begins efforts to implement the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* at a national level. Some States have already begun truth-telling and treaty initiatives. The Federal Government has also made a commitment to implement all the recommendations of the *Uluru Statement*.

Whatever the outcome of the referendum, we are committed to offering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples every support in their endeavours to develop these initiatives which give them hope that they will finally have the dignity which comes from determining their own future.

Together with Love

We, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, invite members of the Church to walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this year of great possibility.

We hope for an end to the pain, the hurt and the injustice that has burdened the First Peoples of this land for far too long.



Let us commit ourselves to fostering a civilisation of love in Australia. Let's come together in friendship and love to show all that love can not only change individual lives, but that it can change society for the better.

We urge every Catholic and all people of goodwill to take every opportunity to join with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in dialogue about their hopes and dreams for the future and about whether the Voice proposal could help to bring about change for the better. Listen and learn from what you hear. Let love guide you in making a decision that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to find justice.

Some actions you could take include:

- Reach out to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in your area to get to know local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people better;
- If your diocese has an Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, get in touch with

them and participate in their activities;

- Learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history;
- Attend events and ceremonies organised by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- Explore the Voice websites developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, especially NATSICC's (indigenousvoice.church);
- Participate in face-to-face and online conversations about the Voice.

Our Office for Justice, Ecology and Peace will produce resources to help you to undertake these actions.

Throughout the course of the referendum campaign, let us bear in our hearts the words of Paul:

Let all that you do be done in love.

1 Cor. 16: 14



ENDNOTES

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