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A PASTORAL STATEMENT ON THE REFERENDUM

The Referendum on the Voice brings Australia to a threshold moment, since it looks not only to our past but to our future, not only to what we have been but to what we can become.

There is no doubt that Australia has achieved great things since European settlement, and that is a source of national pride. But Australians are increasingly coming to appreciate the devastation that European settlement has brought to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Australia's first Catholic bishop, the English Benedictine John Bede Polding, spoke plainly of their treatment. In 1842 he wrote, "The life of an (Aboriginal) human being is valued no more than the life of a kangaroo, and far less than that of a bullock". Later he wrote, "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'." Polding went on to denounce "occupation by force, accompanied by murders, ill-treatment, ravishment of their women...the white man coming for his own advantage, without any regard to their rights". He concluded, "I am making myself [an Aborigine], putting myself in that position, 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."

There emerged in time a policy of assimilating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into mainstream Australian culture. However well-intentioned it may have seemed, the policy led to the dissolution of Indigenous culture. We are now familiar with the concept of *terra nullius* (that before European settlement the land belonged to no-one), the tragedy of the Stolen Generation and the fact that the prior habitation of the First Nations peoples was not recognised in the Australian Constitution.



Australians are now being asked to consider a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament and to executive government, which was asked for in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. The hope is that this will not only offer constitutional recognition but also assist towards a more just and equitable Australia, helping to tackle not just the symptoms but the causes of chronic disadvantage.

In response, we need first to see the truth of the suffering of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the disadvantage many experience today as a result. Justice demands that we seek to rectify this disadvantage and its consequences.

We also need to listen to the Indigenous peoples, in order to learn from them and learn to love them, not see them as “the other”. Pope Francis has said of the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, and how best to engage with them on issues particular to them: “They are our principal dialogue partners, those from whom we have the most to learn. Their words, their hopes and their fears should be the most authoritative voice at the table. Otherwise, the result would be, once again, ‘a plan drawn up by the few for the few’.” The same could be said of the Indigenous peoples of Australia.

In 1986 at Alice Springs, Pope St John Paul II said to the Aboriginal people: “You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received”. Pope Francis and Pope John Paul ask us to listen to the Indigenous peoples and to receive joyfully what they have to offer the whole nation and the world.

Regrettably, the debate on the Voice has been politicised to the point where it is being enacted, as Andrew Hamilton SJ has noted, “as a battle between the Yes and the No side in which the task is not to unite the nation but to smash the opposition”. But the issues surrounding the Voice are not primarily political; they are at their heart moral and ethical, which makes this essentially a conscience vote.

For Christians, it is also a summons to see the issues through the lens of the Gospel and ultimately with the eye of Jesus who is not above or apart from the Referendum process.

Therefore, all Australians need to educate themselves on the issues, asking not so much what we might lose but what the nation might gain. One part of this would be a careful and open-minded reading of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

The status quo is not an option, because the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia is growing wider rather than closing. Therefore, I urge everyone in the Archdiocese to prepare to vote in a way that looks to the Gospel and, whatever the result of the Referendum, to commit to redressing the chronic disadvantage suffered by the Indigenous peoples and promoting reconciliation for the good not just of some but of the whole nation.



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