



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Bishops Commission for Relations with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

Without a doubt, historically speaking, the advent of Christianity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has not always been good news. There are, of course, numerous instances of just and heroic work undertaken among Aboriginal people by missionaries. In some places Aboriginal people would have simply died out had not the missionaries intervened with care and support, and advocated for their protection. However, it is also manifest that some missionaries of various creeds acted less than honourably in the conduct of their duties. Still today, in the ranks of Christians, a minority persist in a view of Aboriginal people that is not at all welcoming or embracing. Active Aboriginal and Islander Catholic leaders have spoken often enough of being marginalized, not only in their own townships or neighborhoods but also in their Church, to the point of experiencing abandonment, left languishing outside the bonds of fellowship.

The address of Pope John Paul II in 1986, to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, at Alice Springs, still today has lost nothing of its impact: "The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks all languages. It esteems and embraces all cultures. It supports them in everything human and, when necessary, it purifies them. Always and everywhere the Gospel uplifts and enriches cultures with the revealed message of a loving and merciful God. That Gospel now invites you to become, through and through, Aboriginal Christians. It meets your deepest desires...Take this Gospel...let its spirit penetrate your communities and determine your behaviour towards each other. Let it bring new strength to your stories and your ceremonies. Let the Gospel come into your hearts and renew your personal lives".²

Incumbent upon the leadership of each particular Church, and upon the leadership that serves the various faith communities at the local level, is the responsibility to facilitate wherever possible reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. To establish an authentic unity among peoples, a just relationship must be forged with humility and driven by prayerful love. Any gulf between cultures that gives rise to exclusion, suffering, despair and injustice cannot be tolerated. The Gospel imperative demands that we advocate at all times for truth, inclusion and fairness. Any proclamation that fails to abide by such an imperative is not the Gospel. It is not Good News.

Perhaps the greatest realization we might come to as a faithful people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous together, is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples not only have a rightful place in Australian society but they have a uniquely important contribution to make that will enrich our lives, our nation and our Church.

In the Words of the Holy Father, at Alice Springs: "...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 by others."³

¹ Lowitja O'Donoghue, At The Crossroads - Living in a world of Change, Address to the National Council of Churches in Australia. Triennial Forum, 11 July 2004

² Pope John Paul II, Address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Alice Springs, 29 November 1986, paragraph 12.

³ Ibid, paragraph 13.



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Aboriginal and Islander Peoples: LIVING THE GOSPEL OF HOPE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday 2013



When Jorge Cardinal Bergoglio was elected Pope there was palpable elation among the people of God. When he chose the name Francis, after the great Saint from Assisi, there was enthusiastic general approval seldom before witnessed among believers and Vatican watchers, with unlimited support from most of the world's media.

The Holy Father's option for the poor, so clearly embraced during his previous experience as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, has brought hope to many people the world over. The downtrodden, the oppressed, and the marginalized - those who are victims of relentless greed - have already taken heart from his leadership. His words and his simple lifestyle have provided inspiration to those seeking justice and dynamic change.

Pope Francis enjoys the popular acclaim which can create a positive energy for transformation. He proclaims his yearning to rectify the dehumanizing injustices of poverty suffered by so many in our world. Although he knows well the plight of the poor and the powerless of South America he is abreast also of the grinding poverty endured by other peoples in other lands.

“ INDIGENOUS YOUTH SELF-HARM AND SUICIDE RATES CONTINUE TO CAST A PALL OVER PEOPLE'S LIVES. THE TRAGEDY OF SUICIDE LEAVES A HOST OF UNANSWERABLE QUESTIONS IN THE MINDS OF GRIEVING FAMILIES AND SORROWING FRIENDS. ”

The Australian Aboriginal people have been left, since the time of colonization, on the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder. As Lowitja O'Donoghue said: "On any social measure of health and well-being, Indigenous people, my people, are hugely over represented at the wrong end of the scale. No matter whether you look at life expectancy, health profiles, custody figures, educational outcomes, unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide – you name it – the trend is the same."¹

Reports from health authorities, and similar studies, note the prevalence of substance abuse and the types of substance abuse found among Indigenous Australians. A report by the State Health Department WA shows that in the Kimberley alone, 30% of all adults have used an illegal substance in the past twelve months. Alcohol and marijuana continue to dominate as the damaging substances most favoured by too many of Australia's First Peoples. However, an array of more potent illicit drugs is gaining in popularity, even in remote Indigenous communities, with disastrous consequences. At the same time, the dangerous practice of petrol sniffing in some Aboriginal settlements continues to destroy the minds of some young people, alongside the abusive use of solvents and hair-sprays.

Indigenous youth self-harm and suicide rates continue to cast a pall over people's lives. The tragedy of suicide leaves a host of unanswerable questions in the minds of grieving families and sorrowing friends. An increasing number of calls for help to authorities to counter instances of attempted self harm are evidence of a crisis in the young Indigenous group. Much anecdotal evidence suggests that those who are self-harming are increasingly younger, while more girls commit suicide today than ever before.

Statistics of overcrowding in houses for Aboriginal people are alarming and while some efforts have been made to correct the shortfall in public housing, it is very much a case of too little too slowly. Obviously, such overcrowding has unwelcome consequences for individuals and the family. Intrusive, persistent noise and anti-social behaviour become commonplace. These negative effects upon the family have serious consequences to do with health, child protection, family security and attendance in employment and education.

Financial cut-backs, the removal of the work for the dole type programs (e.g. CDEP) and the abrogation of meaningful authority previously held by Community Councils, have added to the pervasive anxiety of many Indigenous people. Once more in their history they find themselves being side-lined, shunted to the margins and denied any real measure of self determination by the vicissitudes of mainstream politics.

Is it any wonder that some remote settlements have been termed by the Government as Communities in Crisis? While this eye-catching title triggers a bureaucratic response, one that is too often more burdensome than helpful for communities, it fails to address attitudes and feelings at the heart of the matter. Low self esteem, feelings of hopelessness, a lack of a sense of direction and purpose, an absence of sufficient authority to practise self-determination, the diminishment of resources necessary for advancement and development; all of these are major factors that define the malaise that needs to be addressed by all stake-holders in the quest for true national reconciliation in our land, in our time.

Many Aboriginal people speak of a serious loss of the spiritual in their lives. This, they say, is the direct result of the circumstances in which they find themselves.

A demanding materialism, driven by the bias of the dominant western economy with its promotion of consumerism and emphasis on the acquisition of goods; competition for power and resources; and the dictates of economic rationalism have particularly affected Aboriginal people. Indigenous people have become inexorably immersed in the workings of this economic model to the detriment of their own cultural priorities and lifestyle. For many, the burden of this 'spirit-less' existence alongside the grind of daily living, has left them devoid of a positive sense of the future and sorely in need of a new start, one that inspires hope and healing.

An essential part of the strategy to combat the anxieties and oppression that weigh so heavily upon those who are poor is for all Christians to commit themselves to change for the sake of what is right and the common good. At the heart of action for justice must be the person of Jesus, the Word made flesh who is our model for living. Successive Popes have spoken of the New Evangelization by which we are called, among other things, to close the credibility gap between who we say we are and what we actually do.

“ ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES NOT ONLY HAVE A RIGHTFUL PLACE IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY BUT THEY HAVE A UNIQUELY IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION TO MAKE THAT WILL ENRICH OUR LIVES, OUR NATION AND OUR CHURCH. ”