



July 5, 2007

A Statement from the Catholic Bishops of Australia on dignity and justice for Indigenous Australians

The Catholic Bishops of Australia welcome the high priority the Federal Government has now accorded to addressing the appalling problems facing people in remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities.

The high incidence in remote Aboriginal communities of child sexual abuse and other unacceptable threats to children's wellbeing has been a matter of growing public concern for some time. Numerous enquiries and commissioned reports have raised these issues and highlighted the deplorable conditions in many Indigenous communities. The most recent such report was *Little Children are Sacred*, by Rex Wild and Pat Anderson.

In our *Social Justice Sunday Statement 2006*, we recounted some of the alarming statistics regarding the poor health, low life expectancy and high incarceration rates of Indigenous Australians. We argued that political will and relatively moderate resources could prevent such disadvantage, and called for positive and decisive action to eliminate these dire circumstances from the everyday experience of many Indigenous people.¹

While this is not a time for allocating blame, all Australians should accept some collective responsibility for redressing the current shameful state of affairs, and recognise that past wrongs are reflected in present legacies. As Pope John Paul II said when he addressed Indigenous Australians in Alice Springs in 1986:

*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.*²

We hope that the entire Australian community will now endorse the need for urgent and sustained action.

However, we have significant concerns about the nature of some of the Federal Government's "emergency response" measures announced on 21 June 2007, and about the proposed process for implementing that response:

- Child abuse and child poverty must be addressed by a long-term and comprehensive response – tackling such key causative factors as inadequate social services and infrastructure (including housing), inadequate numeracy and literacy, poor employment opportunities, substance abuse, and community breakdown. Guaranteed, long-term and adequate funding is essential.
- We need much more than a "law and order" response. Children who have been abused and vulnerable families need sympathetic and skilled carers, teachers, medical practitioners and social service practitioners. We need to ensure the full range of culturally appropriate support services to address this issue and foster strong families and communities.
- The response must be respectful of Indigenous culture and identity, and must be undertaken in full and genuine partnership with Aboriginal communities themselves. History clearly demonstrates that effective solutions cannot simply be imposed from above.

¹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Social Justice Sunday Statement 2006: The Heart of Our Country – Dignity and justice for our Indigenous sisters and brothers*, p.12.

² *Ibid.*

- Recognised Aboriginal community leaders have an important role to play. So too do Church and community organisations working with Aboriginal communities, many of whom have developed strong working relationships over many years of close partnerships.
- The Federal Government must do all in its power to promote the dignity and respect of Aboriginal people, and to acknowledge the many instances of good social practice that have occurred in many communities. Particular care must be taken not to stigmatise all Aboriginal men as abusers.
- Government action should take full account of, and implement where appropriate, the recommendations made in a number of reports, notably *Little Children are Sacred*.
- The Government needs to demonstrate why action to address child abuse in Aboriginal communities requires amendments to land rights and self-government legislation.
- The response must be designed and implemented so as to support, rather than undermine, the future sustainability of remote Aboriginal communities. Talk of “mainstreaming” calls to mind the following warning about the dangers of “ethnocentricity”: “The rejection of differences can lead to that form of cultural annihilation which sociologists have called “ethnocide” and which does not tolerate the presence of others except to the extent that they allow themselves to be assimilated into the dominant culture.”³
- Institutionalised racism cannot be acceptable. As Indigenous leaders have pointed out, the policy of imposing penalties on *all* parents receiving certain income support or Family Tax Benefits if they live in remote Aboriginal communities, while equivalent penalties will apply to other Australians *only* if there is evidence of “irresponsible” parenting, is both racially discriminatory and counter-productive. It would appear to breach the Racial Discrimination Act (Cth) and Australia’s international law obligations.⁴ As stated by the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, “*the law must be equal for all citizens without distinction. It is important for ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities...to enjoy recognition of the same inalienable rights as other citizens.*”⁵

We welcome and support the Prime Minister’s affirmation that government owes a duty of care to all Australian children. This obligation applies to all children in Australia, irrespective of race or location. Indeed we are all responsible for all children, especially those who are vulnerable or at risk.

Child poverty is itself a form of abuse, making children more vulnerable to other types of abuse. An unacceptable proportion of Australian children are living in poverty, many without secure housing. This too is a long-overdue cause for urgent national concern. We call upon Federal, State and Territory governments to take early and decisive action towards eliminating child poverty and child homelessness from our wealthy country. A national poverty strategy with a special focus on ending child poverty could be the vehicle for this, enabling collaboration among all levels of government and community sector and business groups.

We strongly support the ongoing work of our agencies which seek to provide social services to, and promote the interests of, Indigenous Australians facing disadvantage. Among these are the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, Catholic Social Services Australia, Centacare NT, the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, Caritas Australia, Catholic Health Australia and the National Catholic Education Commission.

³ Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, *The Church and Racism*, 1988, #12.

⁴ See *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, Articles 2 and 5 (<http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/cerd.htm>).

⁵ *The Church and Racism* (n.3 above), #23.