

Address of Sir William Deane in launching the Catholic Social Justice Sunday Statement 2003

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council was established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in 1987 as the national justice and peace agency of the Catholic Church in this country. That being so, the statement which we are gathered to launch – *A GENEROUS HEART IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST: Challenging Racism in Australia Today* – is of obvious importance to Australia's Catholic community. It is also of significance to our nation as a whole. One reason why that is so is its subject matter, namely, our attitude to racism and the importance of the inclusion, rather than the exclusion of those who are particularly vulnerable through racial, religious or cultural difference. That subject matter lies at the heart of our national worth and decency in these difficult times. Another reason for the Statement's general importance is that it represents not only a statement of Catholic principle but also an exposition of the basic standards and values accepted by all Christians, regardless of particular denomination.

One cannot, of course, fail to be conscious of the fact that these days there seems to be a tendency to criticise the leaders of our Christian Churches for presuming to speak out on politically controversial matters such as our nation's treatment of asylum seekers and the claims of the disadvantaged, including our indigenous peoples. With due respect, any such criticism is misconceived. It wrongly discounts the relevance of morality in our Australian democracy. It ignores the importance of the mission of both the Catholic and the Universal Christian Church in a community such as ours where more than a quarter of the population acknowledge their Catholicism and where more than two thirds of the population assert their adherence to one or other of the Christian Denominations. It reflects a failure to understand the essential nature and function of the Christian Church and its mission in the modern world. In the discharge of that mission, our Church leaders are not only entitled to be heard in relation to matters, however politically controversial, in respect of which Christian principles and beliefs might provide relevant guidance. They have a clear obligation to themselves, to their calling, to their communities and to our nation, to ensure that their views are known and understood.

For at the very heart of the mission of contemporary Christianity there lies the obligation to respect, to assist and to speak out for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of society. Indeed, as Saint Matthew (ch. 25) unambiguously tells us, the ultimate assessment of the life of each of us depends, according to the Christian message and ethos, upon how we have treated – and seen Christ in – the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of our fellows ... those in need of food, drink and clothes; the sick; the imprisoned; and, perhaps most relevant for present purposes, the homeless. And the parable of the Good Samaritan makes plain the uncomfortable truth that, for the purposes of that assessment, we cannot confine our fellow human beings to those who share our religion, our race, our culture or our nationality.

The statement which we are launching today recognises that those basic moral truths constitute an essential message of Christianity in our modern world. It is that message which defines and informs a generous heart in the love of Christ.

There are two aspects of the Statement to which I would make specific reference. One is its powerful rejection of racism and religious or ethnic bigotry – of exclusion or discrimination by reason of racial, ethnic or religious difference. In that and in its frank and honest acknowledgment of past injustices in our land, the Statement seems to me to provide convincing moral support for the mutual respect and acceptance which lie at the heart of our Australian multiculturalism. That moral support comes at a most appropriate time since, as the Statement points out, that mutual respect and acceptance are currently being subjected to extraordinary pressures in our community.

My years as Governor General taught me many things. Perhaps the most important of them all was how critical our multiculturalism is to the well being of our nation. One sometimes hears suggestions that multiculturalism is divisive. I respectfully disagree. For me, multiculturalism *means* inclusiveness

not division. It's enabled us to blend the many into a pretty harmonious whole without bringing to this new land old hatreds, old prejudices and old conflicts. It is our multiculturalism in that sense which inspires and sustains our modern Australia. It is not only a moral imperative. In the context of our history and our identity, it is also a pragmatic necessity.

The second aspect of the Statement to which I would make specific reference is related to the first. It is its recognition of the perhaps inconvenient effect of the Christian message of charity and inclusion in so far as the treatment of refugees or asylum seekers is concerned. At least those of us who are Catholics cannot simply ignore what the Holy Father has recently described¹ as "*the Christian duty to welcome whoever comes knocking out of need*". Some years earlier, as the Statement reminds us, the Holy Father had applied² the words of St. John³ to the case of the foreigner who comes seeking help: "*If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brothers and sisters in need, yet closes his heart against them, how does God's love abide in him?*"

Sometimes, of course, that Christian message can be almost impossibly hard. Certainly, perfection in its implementation is beyond the attainment of almost all, if not all, of us. There are, however, some minimum standards of Christian generosity and charity which are within the reach of us all as individuals, and, collectively, as a nation. It is those minimum standards, rather than any impossible quest for perfection or any unqualified denial of the need for some basic controls or safeguards, which constitute the solid basis of a critical point which the Statement seems to me to make. For, as I read its measured language, it seems to me to compel the conclusion that, by **any** acceptable measure of Christian morality, we Australians are losing our way in so far as our treatment of refugees and asylum seekers is concerned.

I quote the words of the Statement:

"In Australia, the desire to exclude is expressed most clearly in a hostile attitude to refugees and asylum seekers. The refusal to allow the asylum seekers on the Tampa to land, the excision of parts of Australia so that those are now places where people cannot claim refugee status, and the detention for prolonged periods of people, including children, behind barbed wire fences in the most inhospitable parts of Australia are powerful symbols of Australian exclusion. Those policies ... have won the support of a politically significant number of Australians, many of whom themselves were once welcomed as refugees."

I venture the thought that the fact that a politically significant number, or even a majority, of Australians might genuinely disagree, serves only to increase the need for the voice of Christian principle to be raised and heard.

And now, with much pleasure, I launch the Catholic Social Justice Sunday Statement for 2003: "**A GENEROUS HEART IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST: Challenging Racism in Australia Today**". I sincerely congratulate all associated with its preparation. It is an outstanding and timely document. I commend it to my fellow Australian Catholics.

I would add that I particularly commend the Statement to our young Australian Catholics. I sincerely hope that it will help them to accept that life does have greater meaning than material success and possessions and to understand that the Christian Church's mission of care and compassion for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of our fellow human beings also provides the ultimate test of our worth as individuals and as a nation.

17 September 2003

¹ Message for the 89th World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2003).

² Message for World Migration Day 2000.

³ 1Jn3:17