

In the classroom...

2003 Social Justice Sunday Statement

A Generous Heart in the Love of Christ: Challenging Racism in Australia Today

Teachers' Notes

Australia has a proud tradition of welcoming families of many cultures and from all parts of the world into our community. There have been times, however, when racism has emerged with force in the community.

In Australia, as in other nations, there have been groups whom people have always found it difficult to welcome and easy to exclude. The Church has a special concern for those who experience rejection and discrimination – particularly the Indigenous peoples of this land, asylum seekers seeking a safe haven, and Arab and Muslim Australians who now experience much racism.

Even in times when society is inhospitable, however, we hear inspiring stories of people who go out of their way to welcome strangers and make them feel at home. We are proud that many of these stories belong to the Christian churches. As Church, we celebrate the magnificent diversity of the Australian culture and seek to be a witness to the love of Christ by challenging racism.

The 2003 Social Justice Sunday Statement explores our reasons for welcoming or excluding people on the basis of their race. It asks why our faith in Jesus Christ commits us to be hospitable to strangers, and suggests ways we can be ministers of Christ's hospitality in response to the challenge of racism. The following themes drawn from the Statement are suggested as worthy of particular attention.

1. The image of God

We believe that all members of the human family are sons and daughters of the Creator and equal in God's eyes. This relationship is the foundation of our dignity. Our dignity does not depend on the colour of our skin, our customs, our religious beliefs and practices. Respect for the person demands a respect for their identity and culture. Our differences reflect the beauty of God.

Reflect on the image of the child described in the opening passage of the Statement. Discuss experiences of welcome that reflect our relationship with God and the human dignity we all share. Consider how racism is an affront to our relationship with God and undermines the dignity of victims and the identity of our multicultural society.

2. In the love of Christ

From his earliest years, Jesus experienced what it was to be a stranger. The Holy Family's escape into Egypt portrays a family facing persecution and seeking safe haven in a foreign land (Mt 2:9-11). Throughout his ministry, Jesus did not hesitate to break down the barriers and associate with the Samaritan woman and her community (Jn 4:4-42) or to heal the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30).

There are many other stories in the Gospels of how Jesus extended the hand of friendship to those who were excluded or despised. Ask students to study their favourite one and share their reflections. How did Jesus challenge the prejudices of the community? How was he hospitable to the stranger? How did he challenge people to change? In what ways does this relate to Australia today?

3. Who is my neighbour?

A lawyer once asked Jesus 'who is my neighbour?' Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37). In this story he challenged all of us to regard anyone struggling through difficult times as our neighbour. We are called to come to the aid of those in need as if they were our own sister or brother.

Are there particular communities in Australia today who are excluded or attacked because of their race, culture or faith? What about the Indigenous community, Arab and Muslim Australians, refugees and asylum seekers? How have they been portrayed in the media? What are their experiences of racism? They are our brothers and sisters – what can we do to protect and support them?

4. Racism in Australia today

While racism is a complex issue, it is based on the simple and mistaken belief that some people are superior to others because of their race, culture or original nationality. Racism is expressed in many ways: as negative attitudes; the fear of immigrants; institutional racism; or racial hate crimes. Racism is destructive in all its forms. It is important to understand its nature in order to prevent it. It is also important to know what governments, community groups and schools are doing.

Visit the following websites to get more information about racism and how you can challenge racism in Australia today:

<http://racismnoway.com.au/>
www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au
<http://library.trinity.wa.edu.au/issues/racism.htm>

5. Celebrating our diversity

Over the past four decades Australia has adopted the policy of multiculturalism. The community has developed greater cultural tolerance and celebrated the diversity of our society. There has been a greater awareness that many peoples have come to this island nation from around the world. With the First peoples of this land we share our customs, traditions, languages, stories and food...

Invite students to share stories and cultural heritage of their families and how they came to Australia. An international food day is a wonderful way to share in the diversity of our country.

6. Other examples of hospitality

The greatest challenge to racism is acquaintance. Catholic schools are a treasure for learning the welcome that faith requires. Young people can confront the prejudices of society there, and learn to find in their differences a source of richness.

After the anti-Islamic anger that followed 11 September 2001 and the Bali tragedy, some schools invited students from Muslim schools to speak with their own students. Other initiatives have involved the visual arts, music, film and public speaking. Visit the following website for a range of exciting projects schools are undertaking:

<http://www.racismnoway.com.au/news/breaking-news/index.html>

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A free copy of the 2003 Social Justice Sunday Statement is available from the following websites:

Australian Catholic Social Justice Council:

www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference:

www.catholic.org.au



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