

Response of Dr Brian McCoy SJ

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at the launch of the

**Australian Catholic Bishops'
2006 Social Justice Sunday Statement**

***The Heart of Our Country:
Dignity and justice for our Indigenous sisters and brothers***

**14 September 2006
Reconciliation Church, La Perouse, Sydney**

In responding to Tom Calma's launch of the Social Justice Statement for 2006, let me begin with his final words: '***we sometimes have to look to the past to assist us with the present and the future***'. In seeking dignity and justice for our Indigenous sisters and brothers he offers us a challenge. How do we examine our past, and how do we understand the past that continues to operate in our present? What can our future be?

Last week I attended a conference in Cairns whose theme was, quite appropriately in the context of this launch, 'Creating Futures'. This was a health conference that gathered people from overseas and within Australia, and it had a strong Indigenous focus. The first day was spent in the nearby Aboriginal community of Yarrabah.

Yarrabah represents many of the challenges currently facing a number of Indigenous communities in this country. Between 1975 and 2005 it experienced a total of 29 suicides, many of them young people. Suicide has come to painfully affect many Indigenous communities over the last three decades. It is possibly the most obvious indicator of pain and brokenness in our nation when young people believe they have no future. However, what has become evident and impressive about this community, especially over the last decade, has been its strength and commitment to find a new way. As community members have worked together, they have transformed many of the deep and extensive wounds to their hearts and spirits. Within that long and painful search for healing, many lives have been saved, and suicide is now rare. What has also been revealed is the desire to live and express a spirituality that unites the best of the past and is both Aboriginal and Christian.

In visiting this community I was reminded of a Kukatja desert saying: *marlakarti nyawa, kurranyu nyinama*. Literally, 'look back if you want to go forward'. It is one of those wisdom sayings that, at first sight, appears to be a paradox. How can we go forward if we are looking backwards? What this saying reveals is a valuable Indigenous insight: to be human is to be intimately connected with one's past. *Marlakarti nyawa* means more than 'let's have a quick look, see what happened in the past and then move on', as some of our political and community leaders sometimes propose. It means to look within and deeply engage our past. It is to allow the meaning of what is past to be revealed within our present. It is to recognise how our past has shaped and moulded us, and how it has made us the people we are today. Only then, when we honestly and deeply know how our past continues to live within the present, can we *kurranyu nyinama*. Only then, can we safely, honestly and purposefully move forward.

When Pope John Paul II spoke in Alice Springs twenty years ago, he offered the assembled group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the image of a tree. They were like a tree, he suggested, that had been burned and scarred but

had also survived. This earthy image continues to resonate with many people today. An ancient way of life has been badly wounded by the effects of colonisation, but it continues to hold life and share that life with others. There is evidence of a resilience and deeper strength that lies within the hurts and sufferings of the past. However, what also holds true and what can so often be denied, is that if we seriously engage our past, we, the non-Indigenous people, will recognise that we have also been burned and scarred as well. In our failure to establish a dignified and just relationship with Indigenous people we have suffered, and we are diminished as a nation as a result. It is this relationship – its pain, as also its promise and hope of healing – that this Social Justice Statement calls us to acknowledge and address today.

Above all, the Statement reminds us, we need to listen to Indigenous voices. We are fortunate to have with us today, Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. As the voices of other Indigenous people have been silenced through the demise of ATSIC, and as important political decisions continue to be made without elected consultation, we need even more today to pay attention to those voices. These voices remind us of relationships that have been fractured in our shared history when we did not listen. They remind us that too often we have made decisions, and decided what was best, without sitting down, taking the time and allowing genuine relationships to develop. These voices call us to remember how that past continues to shape our listening, even now.

We need also to listen to the hurts, angers and frustrations that emerge from this wounded relationship. There is increasing evidence that the fire of colonisation often spread unchecked and unacknowledged throughout our history. Such a fire threatens once again as with recent changes to the Native Title legislation, the gradual eroding of communal title and the threat to abolish the Northern Territory permit system. In recent months, and from a range of Government ministers, we have heard of the need for the introduction of a new paternalism and the abolition

of remote outstation communities. There has been criticism that Indigenous people spend too much time grieving, that the teaching of culture within Aboriginal education should be lessened, and customary law not taken into account when sentencing. In many ways, these actions and comments re-ignite that bushfire of colonisation once again. These are not new policies. They are simply old colonial fires that have re-emerged from a past that we have yet to publicly and honestly acknowledge.

The need to engage our past so that we might find a way forward is not a new or radical one. And, it is not only Indigenous people who remind us that our past reveals and challenges our present. Christians have believed for centuries, as they have tried to live the Christian gospel, that they needed regularly to return to the company of Jesus at the Last Supper and on the Cross. In remembering that past, they were able to draw into the present a relationship that held and strengthened them to face the violence, and injustice they experienced in the world. It was a living past, within their present worlds, that enabled them to move forward with hope and courage.

We know that, at the heart of our country, we share this ancient land. We share a past that calls us to courageously remember its place within our present. Like the people of Yarrabah, and many other Indigenous communities and people, any road ahead can only arise out of a painful and broken history. It is, in our honest facing of these wounds and the burns and scarring of our shared relationship, that we will be enabled, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, to turn towards and shape a new future. Those four themes, as Tom Calma has summarised them, remain our challenge: respect for, and preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, the acknowledgement of the points of connection between different belief systems, the preservation and respect for land and land rights, and the need for true reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The invitation by this year's Social Justice Statement, as was the message of Pope John Paul II twenty years ago, is to encourage us to stop, *marlakarti nyawa*, look back, so that *kurranyu nyinama*, we can move forward. However, we will only move forward, and we will only find dignity and justice for our Indigenous sisters and brothers, if we can turn around and allow our Indigenous past to be recognised for the place and the relationship it lives within us now.