

**Speech at the Launch of the
Australian Catholic Bishops'**

Social Justice Sunday Statement 2010

*Violence in Australia:
A message of peace*

Given by

Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC CVO

Governor of New South Wales

**Isobel Menton Theatre
Mary MacKillop Place, North Sydney NSW**

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The Most Rev. Bishop Christopher Saunders, Bishop of Broome and the Kimberley and
Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council
Mr Brendan McKeague, Australian Associate, Pace e Bene
Mr John Ferguson, National Executive Officer, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council
Sr. Helen Kearins, Research and Projects Officer
Mrs Elsie Heiss, Aboriginal Catholic Ministry
Dr Prudence Dunstone, singing the National Anthem
Members of Religious Orders
Other distinguished guests and friends

Thank you, my Lord Bishop, for your warm welcome to me. It is indeed a great pleasure to be sharing this significant occasion with you all. And at the outset may I thank you Aunt Elsie Heiss for your acknowledgement of country, and record my own deep respect for the traditional owners of this land upon which we gather indeed my respect for all Australia's Aboriginal people who have nurtured this great continent for tens of thousands of years.

I am indeed grateful to be asked to participate in the launch of the 2010 Social Justice Sunday Statement, *Violence in Australia: A message of peace* – a message which we earnestly hope our beloved country will hear and will heed.

For this is an eloquent and compassionate statement which not only illuminates the underlying causes that well may ignite and sustain the flames of anger leading to violence. It lights a way beyond that disintegrating descent into violence, violence of emotions, of language, of action; it reminds me of the supreme message of Jesus, that of forgiveness, of love and peace.

These are the pillars of the Christian message which has strengthened and inspired Australian people for over two hundred years.

Certainly, the Social Justice Statement is most timely and brings words of encouragement to a community in which violence has increasingly escalated to cruel and audacious levels in recent times.

The bishops' statement begins by drawing our attention to the environment of the family, where the most important early relationships and behaviours set the model for the years which follow – a family of peace-building, resilience, love of humanity, empathy and the value of trust. Or the opposite, where anger and violence is the presiding model – an environment which humiliates, denigrates, debases – and tragically implies that such behaviour is critical for survival. Above all, self-destructive and family violence – domestic violence – is affecting a significant proportion of our Australian families. Such violence initiates and perpetuates psychological vulnerability and in some circumstances depression and even suicide, and so often may follow with recourse to alcohol or other drugs to ease the emotional pain. The continued cost of these experiences for adults, as well as for children, given all the services often called upon in times of crisis – often for life-preserving intervention – is incalculable.

But violence is not only an interpersonal trauma, it is also a social problem of major concern across the wider society.

An imperceptible form of anger may affect an individual and accumulate gradually in our competitive consumer society. This statement of wisdom offers a reflection that such competitiveness may be an attempt to reassure oneself of a sense of

- adequacy versus inadequacy
- success versus failure
- inclusion versus exclusion
- perhaps even 'happiness' – sadly a thin and vulnerable form.

But, one may ask, why should we have an expectation that we must be in a state of happiness, constantly, rather than welcome periods of reflection, even sadness and reflection?

Most Australians, I know, have deplored and felt a sense of shame on learning of attacks on some of our international students – and upon other victims, who are conspicuous by

different appearance, or upon our Aboriginal sisters and brothers, the first Australians, who continue to forgive, and who teach us so much, if we open our minds and our hearts.

But perhaps the circumstances, the violence and anger, as this statement reflects, may present the opportunity to rebuild constructively – a peace which evolves through nurturing a genuine development of the individual, a healing and regrowth, in the spirit of Jesus Christ, to re-enter a community of acceptance and participation, to realise fully the rich potential of one's life – spiritual, cultural, social, and more – to be respected again – and to respect the dignity and rights of others.

The qualities and strength to obtain such enlightenment ideally will be initiated and nurtured within the family, or within a loving extended family which includes our schools, our churches, and altruistic community groups, whose unselfish commitment to the wider community is a precious quality of the Australian way of life.

The message reminds us of the message of Pope Benedict, whose words of challenge are timeless: 'Rather than measuring our life by what the world gives us' – His Holiness says, – 'and what we feel we are entitled to, we can measure it by what we can offer the world'.

Jesus' own words carried that very message when he told us, recorded in the Gospel of St Matthew, Chapter 20, that 'he did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life'.

So, *can* we follow that light and contribute – each of us – to peace in our communities, our land – a land that genuinely earns the reputation of the land of 'the fair go', the land of inclusiveness and acceptance, of individuals with a perceptive and quietly critical eye, to foster and to support the rights and dignity of those in our society who are being marginalised, excluded.

This 2010 bishops' Statement exhorts us in a most eloquent and empathetic way. 'As citizens of Australia', they remind us, 'we each have the right and responsibility to participate actively in the life of our nation and *consider* the part *we* can play in bringing peace to the world. We have a duty to help build up and share our nation's political, legal, economic and social structures and to identify where exclusion, oppression and violence occur in Australian society'.

Indeed this is the challenge in which we must not fail.

Conclusion

Perhaps we may derive both inspiration and courage from the life of Blessed Mary MacKillop, whose resting place is so close to us, so close indeed, in the Chapel of these very premises.

‘When we consider those areas in the life of our communities, our nation and, indeed, the world that are in need of healing, we can draw inspiration from the many endeavours of countless individuals who have realised the hope that peace is always possible.’

I think especially of Blessed Mary MacKillop who will be proclaimed a saint on October 17 2010 – just one month away.

For us, she is an Australian girl who became extraordinary in her commitment, inspiring the commitment of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart to serve the most vulnerable people at the margins of society. Her deeds remain a witness to the power of faith and hope for the betterment of society. And her words, ‘Never see a need without trying to do something about it’, are as much an encouragement as they are a challenge for *each* of us to bring justice and peace to our world.

It is indeed with a sense of humility and gratitude and a commitment to peace and justice for all that I formally launch this inspiring 2010 Social Justice Sunday Statement. May peace be with you!