



Aboriginal Catholic Ministry – Sydney Archdiocese Reconciliation Week Reflection

Let's Talk Recognition

The theme for this year's reconciliation week is "Let's talk recognition" for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is particularly relevant for us to consider as Australia is currently in the midst of discussions about whether to change the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of this land. Although there is significant support for changes, there is opposition and there are also many questions about what form such recognition should take. As we engage in the national dialogue we need to ask ourselves honest questions about what the proposed changes will bring for those who have been excluded for so long. How will we ensure that such a change makes a real difference to their lives? Will the changes go far enough or will they end up being more symbolic rather than enable tangible outcomes?

It is fitting then, that during this week of reconciliation, we not only celebrate but we also consider some of the 'unfinished business'. We celebrate those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have achieved so much - especially those quiet unsung heroes who make untold differences in their communities. We can celebrate, the still relatively few, landmark successes such as the 1967 Referendum, Mabo, Wik, and the Apology. We can engage in events in our local area that celebrate peoples and culture and the intent to reconcile the hurts of the past. And we can rejoice that Australia is home to such diverse, vibrant and resilient cultures.

We would be remiss though if we did not also spend time recognising and reflecting on those things which make us uncomfortable. For example, we need to recognise that over a quarter of the prison population in Australia is Indigenous, and growing. We need to recognise that the life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples still lags significantly behind other Australians. We could bring to attention the high rates of absenteeism from schools, the lower rates of literacy, the high rates of ill health, and high rates of violence. We also cannot fail to recognise the negative impact that the Northern Territory Intervention continues to have on many Aboriginal peoples.

It is fundamentally dishonest to campaign for recognition through Constitutional change, to talk constantly about 'Closing the Gap' and advances in Reconciliation and at the same time congratulate ourselves that we are fixing the 'problems' in the NT through the Intervention. What is occurring in the NT is not helping us reconcile our past, or to reconcile with each other in the present. In fact, the policies and structures of the Intervention are fracturing relationships further and creating even more distrust.

Elsewhere we have critiqued the various aspects of the Intervention and its offspring the proposed *Stronger Futures* legislation and we won't repeat those issues now¹. But as we engage with this week's theme of "Let's Talk Recognition" we are reminded that Aboriginal voices are systemically not recognised in the NT and in other places. If we are to honestly talk about recognition then surely listening to Aboriginal people is a great place to start. That includes listening to the things that challenge us and are difficult to hear.

¹ See our website for statements <http://www.aboriginal.sydneycatholic.org/latest-news/media>



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There are many Aboriginal voices who have expressed sustained opposition to the Intervention right from the beginning. Their opposition has increased as the consequences become more apparent after almost five years of life under these policies.

Rosalie Kunoth Monks from Utopia is one of those voices. She travelled to Geneva to voice her concerns about the lack of regard for Human Rights and had this to say at a forum in Melbourne.

To ask us to hand back the land so that we can get our rights to housing, what kind of a law is that? That is one of treachery and all I can think about is (in her language). Are they scared of my language?

In February 2011, a following statement was released by Elders from Yirrkala, Milingimbi, Nauiyu (Daly River), Galiwin'ku and Yuendumu.

Under the Intervention we lost our rights as human beings, as Australian Citizens, as the First People of the Land. We feel very deeply the threat to our languages, our culture and our heritage. Through harsh changes we have had removed from us all control over our communities and our lives. Our lands have been compulsorily taken from us. We have been left with nothing.

In August 2011, the Northern Land Council released this statement at the 45th anniversary of the Wave Hill Walkoff at Kalkaringi.

Let us be clear – we are not just asking for consultation – we want to set the agenda for our future.

Listen to us – negotiate with us.

No more Intervention: The Intervention caused us shame, hurt and trauma. Throw the word 'Intervention' away. We demand an apology from our governments for the terrible recent policies that encourage assimilation and 'normalisation' – this amounts to cultural genocide.

In November 2011, yet another statement was released by Northern Territory Elders and Community Leaders which also calls for an apology and an end to the Intervention. It was released following a series of 'consultations' undertaken by the Government on the proposed *Stronger Futures* Legislation which was devised to replace the current Intervention which expires in 2012.

We will not support an extension of the Intervention legislation. We did not ask for it. In fact we call for a genuine Apology from the Federal Government for the hurt, embarrassment, shame and stigma, and for the illegal removal of the Racial Discrimination Act. It is our intention to officially call upon the Government for reparation.



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The recent consultations report shows that the Government has failed to take seriously our concerns and feelings. This report is simply a reflection of pre-determined policy decisions.

The *Stronger Futures* Bills are currently before the Senate with debate due to resume on June 18th. The Senate Community Affairs Committee held an inquiry into the Bills and received over 450 submissions, the overwhelming majority of which were critical of the *Stronger Futures* legislation. These submissions were from Aboriginal people and communities; Aboriginal run organisations, church groups, welfare organisations, human rights organisations, health agencies and concerned individuals. There have also been several petitions created. One, the Stand for Freedom petition has garnered over 36,000 signatures.

Most recently, in April, the Yolngu Nations Assembly released a statement which said:

The Yolngu Nations reject the Stronger Futures Bill (and those associated) and call on the Senate to discard these Bills in full. We have clearly informed you that we do not support the legislation.

The Australian Federal Government can achieve all its aims through partnership in our communities. They have no need to grant themselves the continued and new powers contained within these Bills.

The Government has disregarded all these voices and continues to push through this legislation. When the vote came in the Lower House, due to bipartisan support, only five people were in the Chamber and only three voted against it. They were Adam Bandt, Green, Andrew Wilkie, Independent and Bob Katter, Independent. It was a sad indictment of the level of interest from our elected representatives that this legislation was pushed through despite such comprehensive and consistent community opposition.

The Bills then came before the Senate which so far has also ignored the voices of opposition. In fact the Senate Community Affairs Committee report on their inquiry recommended the legislation be passed with minor amendments. Only the Greens dissented. It looks very likely that the Bills will be passed and Northern Territory Communities will have to deal with the *Stronger Futures* regime for the next ten years – that's on top of five years of Intervention.

Given the fact that the majority of Aboriginal voices have not been recognised in the Northern Territory, we have to ask ourselves what that means as we celebrate Reconciliation week. Will the approach taken in the Northern Territory bring us closer to true reconciliation?

As we celebrate recognition what are we recognising? Are we to embrace the visible aspects of Aboriginal culture, the dances, the artwork, the didgeridoos and the boomerangs, whilst at the same time continue legislation that is actively killing off living cultures and languages?



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When we talk about Constitutional Recognition let's not forget that the successful 1967 constitutional change unwittingly led us down the path to the Intervention. Through that the Federal Government now has the right to make laws for the "benefit" of Aboriginal people. But the Government interprets what "benefit" means. Any Constitutional change therefore has to be both meaningful and unambiguous and not lead us inadvertently down a path where Aboriginal peoples can be denied their rights in the future.

Raising these issues is tough at this time when many are celebrating. There is no intention to denigrate the honest efforts by many at a local level to forge relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. We need to recognise that the road to reconciliation is not an easy one. But, in general, we see a worrying apathy towards addressing the hard stuff and a reluctance to engage with the apparent inconsistencies in what we, as a country, are actually doing, rather than what we say we are doing.

For us Catholics we can draw on our rich history of Catholic Social Teaching to guide us towards achieving justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Despite our complex shared histories the Catholic Church has been a strong advocate for justice for Aboriginal peoples. The Church through its many agencies and religious orders has been in relationship with Aboriginal peoples for a very long time. Although mistakes have been made, and hurt has been caused, there have also been many good things that we can celebrate. In addition to developing deep relationships with Aboriginal peoples the Church has made many statements highlighting injustices and calling for action on these issues. The Church has also reminded non-Indigenous Australians to recognise that each of us bears responsibility for addressing injustice where we find it.

In 1978, the Catholic Bishops of Australia in their Social Justice Statement *Aborigines: A Statement of Concern* reminded us of that obligation:

No member of the Church community can avoid the task of self-examination, of striving to eradicate racist attitudes, ignorance, insensitivity and apathy from his or her own life, and to challenge it in the lives of others. Nor can we remain indifferent in the face of incidents of personal or institutional injustice anywhere in Australia.

This month, the Australian Catholic Bishops together with Catholic Religious Australia spoke against the Stronger Futures legislation.

We need to listen to the Aboriginal people. They are asking for their rights as human beings and citizens of this country to be respected...Social inclusion does not result from intervention, imposition, discrimination and exclusion. We call for an urgent shift from punitive controls to measures that restore community control, rebuild Aboriginal initiative and capacity, improve living conditions and show respect for Aboriginal languages and culture. The way forward needs to be principled, promoting self-determination, enabling participation in decision making and ensuring free, prior and informed consent.



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As we celebrate Reconciliation week, which we remember grew out of the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation, we can reflect on the positives, but we should also recognise and reflect on what still needs to be done. We can examine our own lives and ask ourselves are we actively standing up against racist attitudes, ignorance and insensitivity? Are we happy to revel in the positives but ignore the voices of those who are suffering injustice? Are we happy to believe what we read in the papers or hear from the Government without questioning what Aboriginal voices are asking us to hear? Whose voices will you recognise this Reconciliation week?

Let's Talk Recognition – what can you do this week for reconciliation?

- Reflect on what recognition means for you and why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be recognised in the Constitution. Go to www.youmeunity.org.au for information on the proposed changes.
- Find out what Aboriginal Elders are saying about the Northern Territory Intervention and the proposed Stronger Futures. Statements can be found at the ACM website at <http://www.aboriginal.sydneycatholic.org/social-justice/social-justice/nt-intervention> another website with loads of excellent information is www.concernedaustralians.com.au
- Sign the Stand for Freedom Petition – www.standforfreedom.org.au
- Write to your Senator and Minister Macklin and ask them to:²
 - Reconsider the Stronger Futures Legislation
 - Send the Bills to be scrutinised by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights
 - Listen to what the Elders are telling them.
- Reflect on how we as Catholics are called to act on injustices, particularly in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Pray for better understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

² Senators' contact details can be found here

http://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/~/_link.aspx?id=589097ED6DD447118C15830C086D1CA5&z=z