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Catholics & the Process of Reconciliation

The relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians has been wounded by injustice and misunderstanding. The relationship needs healing so that we can build a better future together. This is what the process of reconciliation is about.

To understand where the process of reconciliation has come from, it is helpful to revisit a little history.

To understand what our faith asks of us in this process of reconciliation it is helpful to remember what the Church teaches about the theology and sacrament of reconciliation.

A key opportunity for us to act for reconciliation is currently offered through the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's consultation on a draft Document for Reconciliation and draft National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation.

Where did the Process of Reconciliation Come From?

When Britain established a colony at Sydney Cove in 1788 no agreement or treaty was made with the Aboriginal people, they simply claimed sovereignty for the British Crown and dispossessed the Aboriginal people without any compensation. Similarly, when the Queensland Government later annexed the Torres Strait Islands, there was no treaty or agreement with the Torres Strait Islanders. The legal fiction of 'terra nullius' that is, the idea that the land had belonged to no one and sovereignty could thus legitimately be claimed by the British, was the basis of Australian law until the Mabo Case of 1993 in which the possibility of the survival of native title under certain circumstances was confirmed by the High Court.

Australian children were taught in school that Australia had been peacefully settled by the British. The history of physical and cultural violence, theft, dispossession, forced relocation, the removal of children from their families, and racism towards indigenous peoples in Australia has only become better known and more widely acknowledged in recent times. The bicentenary was an important moment in our growing awareness of white Australia's black history.

The relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians needs healing.

The ownership and use of land has been at the heart of the conflict between indigenous Australians and later arrivals and their descendants. As early as the 1820s there was a movement for the recognition of Aboriginal land rights. This 'first land rights movement' originated from the Imperial Colonial Office and was an outgrowth of the campaign against slavery in the British Empire. This movement wanted to see Aboriginal ownership of land recognised, the acquisition of land to proceed on the basis of negotiation and purchase, and compensation paid for land that had already been appropriated.

For the 'second land rights movement' which gathered force in the 1970s, legal title to land was the key issue and a treaty was seen by some as a way forward. Since the 1970s land rights legislation has been introduced in most Australian States. During the 1980s attempts to establish a national land rights model ended in division and bitterness. The idea of a treaty became bogged down in a debate about terminology. Could there be a treaty within a sovereign nation or was a treaty only appropriate between sovereign nations? Were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people asserting their sovereignty? If such sovereignty still existed, how could it be recognised in practice? Would it mean it a separate indigenous State? Would it be better to speak of a compact, a Makarrata, or to use some other term? While a treaty would have been appropriate in 1788, was it really the best way forward now? How would a treaty address the needs of urban indigenous people for whom a traditional life on their land would not be possible? Indigenous Australians held a variety of opinions on the utility of a treaty. Was it just a European process that would not accommodate indigenous decision-making procedures? Was it better to concentrate on the more tangible struggle for land rights?

Out of this debate came the expression 'instrument of reconciliation' and a stronger focus on the process by which the content of such an agreement might be reached.

In 1991 legislation was passed with bipartisan support allowing the creation of a Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. The Act described the Council's purpose in the following way: to promote a process of reconciliation between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community, based on an appreciation by the Australian community as a whole of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures and achievements and of the unique position of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as the indigenous peoples of Australia, and by means that include the fostering of an on-going national commitment to co-operate to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage.

While this process of reconciliation has been government initiated, it has in recent times taken on the character of a people's movement, especially in response to debate surrounding the Native Title Amendment Act. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's mandate expires in December 2000 but a true people's movement will continue to work towards reconciliation.

Do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people Want Reconciliation?

While few, whether indigenous or non-indigenous, were opposed to reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the creation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation policy was not universally well received.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have welcomed the openness to and interest in their cultures among non-indigenous people that has been promoted by the process of reconciliation. Some believe that the process of reconciliation will help indigenous people in their own journey of healing and will lead to the recognition of their unique place in Australia.

Some indigenous people were critical of the policy from the beginning because it excluded the question of sovereignty, because the indigenous people on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation would be government appointees and not representatives of their own people, and because the government would be free to alter and amend whatever document of reconciliation was produced before presenting it to Parliament.

For some indigenous people today, the process of reconciliation is simply not a priority. They choose to focus on the more immediate and tangible needs of their communities. The process of reconciliation will be valuable to the extent that it results in better recognition of the dignity and rights of indigenous people and the satisfaction of their needs. Without such results the process will have been a whitewash and a distraction.

The variety of views among indigenous people on this formal process aimed at reconciliation is not surprising. It is, after all, the non-indigenous community that most needs to seek reconciliation.

What Does the Church think about Reconciliation?

The Catholic Church supports reconciliation. It is a deeply Christian concept. In fact the language of reconciliation was borrowed by politicians from the Churches.

Supporting the goal of reconciliation does not mean that the Churches are locked into or coopted to support uncritically any and every political option that makes use of this language. When Catholics approach the process of reconciliation we bring to the word reconciliation a very specific meaning from our own tradition. For us, reconciliation is not just a political process. We have a theology and a sacrament of reconciliation to draw on and which urges us to act.

The insights about reconciliation which we find in our long tradition of penance and reconciliation offer us a model for something that is fundamentally human. These insights might help members of the Catholic Church, as well as others outside it, to better understand what is needed if the process of reconciliation in Australia is to be truly authentic.

The Church must work for reconciliation if it is to be, as Vatican II suggested, a sacrament of unity both with God and among peoples. The mission of the Church is to be at the service of the whole of humanity in making the unity achieved in Christ a living reality. This must be demonstrated in the quality of relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous Catholics themselves.

Sin & the Need for Reconciliation

Reconciliation is needed wherever sin, and the consequences of sin in our world, have fractured our relationships with God, with ourselves, with our sisters and brothers, and with the whole of creation. To be reconciled requires an examination of conscience which leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of wrongdoing and the naming of the harm that it has caused. In the sacrament of reconciliation we confess our sins – both those of commission and of omission. In a social process of reconciliation a process of public truth telling can serve a similar function. The 'Stolen Generations' inquiry was one such exercise in public truth telling for Australia.

Reconciliation requires a conversion or change of heart. In the sacrament of reconciliation this metanoia leads us to express our determination to turn away from sin and wrongdoing and to ask for God's help in this. A social process of reconciliation also requires a change of heart which is expressed in a determination to behave in new ways. We know that words alone, even when formalised in parliamentary motions or legal documents, will not lead to real change and the healing of relationships unless they express a change of heart. For Christians, our faith makes this change of heart possible. If we can see the image of God in all people, we will be able to live the reality that we are sisters and brothers to one another. For others in our community who do not share our faith, it may be that the notion of universal human rights can provide the basis for such solidarity.

Reconciliation was central in the preaching of Jesus: in fact we could say that he preached a gospel of reconciliation. He called on people to be reconciled with each other if they wished to stand before God in worship, and in John's gospel he prays that his followers may be one so that the world may believe. Racism within the Catholic Church is a scandal that we need to address. We need to work for reconciliation within the Church as well as in society if we are to be true followers of Jesus and good witnesses to his Gospel in our world.

Social Structure, Personal Responsibility & Action to Repair Relationships

The one seeking reconciliation must ask forgiveness and express their contrition in some form of penance or in acts of restitution which aim to repair relationships to the extent that this is possible. In the sacrament of reconciliation we ask for God's forgiveness and we seek by various means to repair our relationship with God, and with our neighbours. In the process of reconciliation in

Australian society non-indigenous Australians must express their sorrow and regret for the pain and injustice suffered by indigenous Australians and ask for forgiveness for contributing to or failing to address this situation.

We cannot avoid personal responsibility for unjust social structures and systems. These structures of sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. While social structures and systems may condition and limit our freedom to act, we are ultimately free and responsible to choose whether or not we cause or support evil, whether we seek to eliminate or limit evil, or whether we fail to do so through complicity, indifference or taking refuge in the idea that it is impossible to change things. An individual's failure to address evil in our world is a sin of omission.

Recognising individual responsibility, the sacrament of reconciliation confers forgiveness on individuals rather than on the community at large. And yet we as a community also experience a need to find ritual ways of facing up to the situation of injustice in our society. The second rite of reconciliation may be useful here to reflect on the situation of injustice in our society together before addressing our own individual responses to this situation in a personal confession. Other creative uses of non-sacramental penitential services may also provide scope for symbolising and ritualising the various aspects of the basic penitential process. In the secular sphere activities such as signing Sorry Books and taking part in the Sea of Hands have helped many in our community to name the situation of injustice and to address it in a ritual way with others. It is a fundamentally human thing – and a characteristically Catholic thing – to need rituals, symbols and signs of reconciliation.

Saying Sorry

There can be no reconciliation without an apology. Many individuals and groups in Australian society have made apologies. Many of the injustices perpetrated against indigenous Australians were the consequences of public policy. Because of this, many people feel that an apology for those things done by elected governments in the name of all Australians should also be made by our elected governments on behalf of the whole community. Following a similar logic, contemporary Church leaders have apologised for the pain and suffering caused to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by Church policies of the past.

While some doubt the sincerity of the Prime Minister's apology, others are prepared to see it as a step forward. This event in the life of our nation raises the question of how to get on with healing and reconciliation if there is a lack of understanding of the wrong that has been done, or the harm that has been caused by it, or a lack of sincere contrition.

Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who killed him even though they did not repent. No one is beyond God's saving power. While there is life, there is hope for conversion of heart. We may need to leave those who do not repent to the mercy of God and get on with doing whatever we can to promote healing. At some later point, when real contrition is present, full reconciliation might yet be achieved.

Renewed Relationships

When we approach the sacrament of reconciliation we know that, having been forgiven, we cannot simply continue as before. When we approach the sacrament of reconciliation, the Minister, acting in the person of Christ, tells us to go and sin no more. In approaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for forgiveness the non-indigenous community needs to demonstrate a willingness to actively dismantle or reform those social structures, processes and institutions which have been and continue to be sources of pain and injustice to indigenous Australians. We can't undo the past but we must do what we can in the present and we must build a better, more just future together. Any political process of reconciliation which does not lead to real improvements in the lives of indigenous Australians and their communities is unlikely to foster real healing of relationships.

A key moral challenge for all Catholics in Australia as we approach the Great Jubilee is to find ways of remedying what we can of the injustices of the past and of the present towards indigenous Australians, and to replace these structures of sin with structures of grace. This is a challenge for both indigenous and non-indigenous Catholics.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics, whose families and communities have been wronged, it may be a difficult challenge to forgive those who cannot say sorry, those who have contributed to or failed to address the suffering of indigenous Australians. It may be a difficult challenge to accept appropriate efforts to address the effects of past injustice and to remove the causes of present injustices, to heal and overcome injury to be reborn.

For some non-indigenous Catholics it may be difficult to understand the responsibility of present generations to address injustices whose sources are in the past, to say sorry for the injury done to the indigenous community from which all non-indigenous Australians have benefited, and to work for a more just situation and renewed relationships. For others, who are strongly committed to reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, it will be a challenge to relate justly and charitably to their sisters and brothers who are yet to experience this conversion of heart.

There is also the challenge of overcoming divisions and achieving reconciliation among indigenous people themselves and among non-indigenous people themselves.

Draft Declaration for Reconciliation

Speaking with one voice, we the people of Australia, of many origins as we are, make a commitment to go on together recognising the gift of one another's presence.

We value the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of traditional lands and waters.

We respect and recognise continuing customary laws, beliefs and traditions.

And through the land and its first peoples, we may taste this spirituality and rejoice in its grandeur.

We acknowledge this land was colonised without the consent of the original inhabitants.

Our nation must have the courage to own the truth, to heal the wounds of its past so that we can move on together at peace with ourselves.

And so we take this step: as one part of the nation expresses its sorrow and profoundly regrets the injustices of the past, so the other part accepts the apology and forgives.

Our new journey then begins. We must learn our shared history, walk together and grow together to enrich our understanding.

We desire a future where all Australians enjoy equal rights and share opportunities and responsibilities according to their aspirations.

And so, we pledge ourselves to stop injustice, address disadvantage and respect the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to determine their own destinies.

Therefore, we stand proud as a united Australia that respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, and provides justice and equity for all.

What Can We do About Reconciliation?

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has heard that many Australians believe that some form of document for reconciliation will help remedy injustice and build a better future for all Australians. It is asking for people's views on what should be the content of such a document, and about the kinds of strategies that would be needed to support an on-going process of reconciliation. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has provided a draft document for reconciliation and four draft strategies. These materials will provide the focus for the consultation.

Catholics need to get involved in this consultation process and to contribute to it from the riches of our theology, sacraments and living tradition.

There are three ways in which you can get involved in this consultation:

- 1. attend a public meeting organised by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation**
- 2. organise your own meeting to discuss the draft Document for Reconciliation and the Draft Strategies**
- 3. fill in a personal response form.**

1. Public Meetings Organised by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is organising a series of public meetings all around Australia. If you would like to find out the details of where and when these meetings are happening so that you can attend and have your say, the latest details are available on the following numbers.

New South Wales

Ph 1800 060 266

South Australia

Ph 1800 060 270

Northern Territory (Centre)

Ph 1800 060 268

Tasmania

Ph 1800 659 363

Northern Territory (Top End)

Ph 1800 060 268

Victoria

Ph 1800 060 265

Queensland

Ph 1800 060 267

Western Australia

Ph 1800 060 269

2. Organise your own Meeting

Not everyone will be able to attend one of the public meetings, and some people will prefer to discuss the issues with a smaller group. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has produced a very comprehensive and helpful Meeting Guide for those who wish to organise their own meetings to discuss the draft document for reconciliation and the draft strategies.

If you would like to run your own meeting for the consultation, contact the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to obtain a Meeting Guide or contact your Diocesan Social Justice Contact Person. The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council is sending a copy of the meeting guide to each of its Diocesan Contact People, and they are likely to know about meetings being organised by social justice groups in their dioceses.

3. Personal Response Form

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has also produced a short questionnaire style form which people can use to send their own individual responses in to the consultation. These are available from the Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation which can be contacted on the number below:

Toll Free Number: 1800 807 071

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