

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday 2019

PASTORAL LETTER



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Peoples



"What is most intimate, most personal, is most universal"

(From 'Reaching Out'
by Henri Nouwen)

We share a common human nature regardless of our ethnic background. We share fundamental needs. This includes the desire to belong, to be happy, to find fulfilment, to be safe, to be appreciated.

Suicide is often the last straw in a build up of unhappiness and pain. There is often a desire for the pain to go and often not focusing on the permanent consequences of taking one's life.

Our Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have suffered dispossession, displacement, violence of various types and much more. So often others have determined for them what they considered to be the best for them. The challenges facing communities are multifold.

The whole of Australian society is going through massive change. The present rate of change is possibly unprecedented in human history ever. It is effecting all of us in many ways. Many think that you cannot be sure of anything anymore. This has many implications in our search for meaning in life and values.

This massive rate of change is also of course effecting our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters. When this is combined with the practical challenges that they face, the effect can be very far reaching.

As spiritual beings we need spiritual nourishment. When we are not nourished spiritually we can become spiritually sick. Australian society as a whole is challenged of how to nourish ourselves spiritually.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people recognize that this challenge also applies to them, all be it often in somewhat different ways.

As Catholics we know that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Our Christian faith gives us energy and good reasons for living.

There is such a vast history of deep spirituality in our First Nations People in Australia.

Pope John Paul II in his famous message which he gave in the Australian heartland when he addressed the Aboriginal peoples, stated that the Catholic Church will be lacking in its full expression if it does not embrace the spirituality of our Aboriginal people.

The embracing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality within the wider Catholic spirituality is deeply enriching.

We need to walk alongside our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as they reach for ways of deepening their spiritual life. All can benefit with such walking together.





Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a deep faith. We can all learn from them. Like all of us they are often challenged as to how to pass on their traditions to the younger generations. Many are deeply concerned about the challenges which their young people face.

The tragedy of the large number of suicides among our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially the young, calls us to action! This is a sad and unacceptable reality.

There are many groups working with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These include various layers of government, community and Church organisations, and others. We need to avoid the trap of trying to 'resolve' issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people! We must safeguard the principle of self-determination.

We can walk alongside in loving support but avoid any temptation to come in with quick solutions imposed from outside.



A few basic principles can be helpful so as to move forward in the improvement of support to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the support so as to eradicate suicide.

1. All the various organisations supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to work together so as to maximize positive results. All need consistent reviews about effectiveness.
2. The principle of self-determination must be truly respected.
3. The common good must be at the heart of all endeavours, i.e. the good of the individual, the good of a group and the good of all groups.
4. All must be motivated by respect and without self-interest.
5. Prevention as well as 'cure' are both necessary.

Young people often feel alienated and young people in cross cultures can often feel more alienated. Respect must be present at all levels, including respect for young people by those who are older. Respect is always 'two way'.

For Christians, Jesus came to bring life to the fullest. He is calling us to work together with love and respect, and to never give up trying to find the best way forward away from this tragic and unnecessary ending of life. While there has been many disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people taking their lives, no society is immune from this sad reality. We all need to remember that Jesus who laughs and cries with us is 'The Way, the Truth and THE LIFE'



Disclaimer: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respectfully advised that this publication may contain the words, voices, names, images and descriptions of people who have passed away.



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