



PASTORAL LETTER

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INDIGENOUS VOICE TO PARLIAMENT REFERENDUM

- SOME MORAL/ETHICAL REFLECTIONS -

Regarding the Voice to Parliament Referendum, the Bishops of Australia have encouraged us to consider the moral/ethical dimensions and not simply political arguments.

To assist us in forming our individual and collective consciences, may I offer the following very brief and initial reflections.

We are to ask: "How ought I/we vote? ... What ought I/we **DO**?" This is a good place to start. However, if we leave the question simply at this we may well end up with an answer based on political arguments alone.

The deeper moral/ethical question probes our conscience further. It asks: "What ought I/we **BE** as Australians given this issue now before us?"

To answer this deeper moral question requires considerations on two levels simultaneously: social structures and human attitudes.

On the level of social structures, there is a strong argument for change. At present, simply being born an aboriginal person places an Australian seemingly in a highly marginalised position.

The **Uluru Statement from the Heart** (2017) expresses this succinctly. "*Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.*"

The entrenched nature of this crisis seems to indicate an intergenerational social structure that is diseased.

Good ethics would insist that a deeper diagnosis of this situation would involve the interplay of structures with human attitudes. This dual consideration assists us in discovering foundations for the common good – the doorway to true justice.

This requires dialogue and listening with our First Australians. It is in this area of attitudes that Aboriginal activist, Noel Pearson (27 October 2022, Boyer Lectures), identifies a major weakness in finding healing solutions. He says in a most disturbing reflection: "*We are a much unloved people. We are perhaps the ethnic group Australians feel least connected to. We are not popular and we are not personally known to many Australians. Few have met us and a small minority count us as friends. And despite never having met any of us Australians hold and express strong views about us, the great proportion of which is negative and unfriendly.*"

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Regardless of the result of the 14 October 2023 Referendum and the social structural changes proposed, this area of conversion of attitudes would remain.

We all surely have a communal responsibility to ponder deeply on the type of Australia we want to become because of the Referendum. Let us educate our individual and collective consciences on the issues involved and vote according to these deep reflections.

As Pope St John Paul II so famously stated in the much quoted speech he gave to Aboriginal Australians in Alice Springs (29th November 1986),

You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others."

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