

## Pope John Paul II and Reconciliation as Mission

---

Dominic O'Sullivan

**Abstract:** A particular emphasis of Pope John Paul II's pontificate was the recognition of certain political rights belonging to indigenous peoples. In particular, in Australia the Pope recognised that encouraging political reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous people is essential to religious mission. At Alice Springs in 1986 he gave impetus to a growing Catholic acceptance that promoting reconciliation is an important missionary duty.

FOR POPE JOHN PAUL II a religious duty to confront evil in the public realm was a cornerstone of mission. A missionary activism on behalf of indigenous Australians was an obvious feature of his visit to Australia in 1986. He saw the promotion of reconciliation, which became a major political theme in the 1990s, as an inescapable responsibility of the Catholic Church. The Church claims a capacity to make a unique contribution to human affairs based on its connection of the anthropological with the Christological: the Church cannot abandon humanity whose "destiny...is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ".<sup>1</sup>

Public attention to the political implications of faith is by no means a new expression of mission, but John Paul gave it a renewed sense of urgency. This sense influenced Catholic contributions to political

---

1. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (Vatican City, 1979) 18. Cited 12 December 2002 from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_04031979\\_redemptor-hominis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html). "

reconciliation debates, which in turn helped to establish reconciliation as an “immovable part of the Australian political landscape”.<sup>2</sup>

#### RECONCILIATION

Political interpretations of reconciliation dominated Australian indigenous policy debate during the 1980s and 1990s. This provided opportunities for significant expression of religious principles within the political arena. John Paul II led Catholic contributions to public debate through his speech to indigenous Australians at Alice Springs in 1986. The speech was one of many during his pontificate which stressed that where religious goals have political implications they cannot but be attended to within the secular political realm. Religious mission must respond to contemporary political circumstance.

Reconciliation takes place within an international context. The Christian seeking of reconciliation with Moslems over the Christian atrocities during the Crusades, attempts to reconcile historic differences between France and Germany following World War II, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement, are all examples of internationally adopted models for overcoming political division. Theologically, reconciliation is required because a communal division is inconsistent with the teaching that “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (Col 3:11 NRSV)

Reconciliation follows from the desire to overcome sin and correct its consequences. In the Church's view it is relevant to Australia because:

One has to say that sin is structured into Australian society, and has been since 1788. What might be described as the primal (or original) sin of the Australian people is the injustice done by the European settlers to the original inhabitants of this continent.<sup>3</sup>

The Church further teaches that “Structures, whether they are good or bad, are the result of man's actions and so are consequences more than causes.”<sup>4</sup> It is from this belief that the Church can further explain its

---

2. Frank Brennan, “A Free Speaking Church Goer's Guide to Wik in '98 (*Uniya Focus* 3 [March 1998] (Sydney: Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre, 1998).

3. John Wilcken, “A Theological Approach to Reconciliation”, in Frank Brennan (ed.), *Reconciling Our Differences: A Christian Approach to Recognising Aboriginal Land Rights* (Richmond, Victoria: Aurora Books/David Lovell Publishing, 1992) 67.

4. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”*, IV.15.

interest in reconciliation. Reconciliation concerns challenging and changing people's values, which originate

in free and responsible persons who have to be converted by the grace of Jesus Christ in order to live and act as new creatures in the love of neighbour and in the effective search for justice, self control, and the exercise of virtue.<sup>5</sup>

A further theological explanation for the Church's interest in reconciliation in a political context is that "the fusing of the Christological and anthropological dimensions is to be found in the person of Jesus himself".<sup>6</sup> The Church's ultimate transcendental objective is therefore inextricably linked with the human condition, which creates a moral imperative "for social engagement".<sup>7</sup>

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Cor 5:18-19 NRSV)

Promoting reconciliation is a function of mission because "without commitment to what is true and good, Christian piety has a false other worldliness".<sup>8</sup> The Church emphasises reconciliation because it differs from the secular realm in its values about what is most important. The Church's conception of the human being precludes a purely short-term adversarial approach to disagreement. The Catholic perception of the human being is not the individualist one of political liberalism. Unlike parliamentary candidates, the Church is not involved in an immediate campaign for the support of 50% plus one of voters; its inclusive concern creates a broader acceptance of what counts as solutions. The Church can take a longer term approach to political problems and need not fall into despair or give up hope of justice if such has not been achieved by election day. Its very catholicity should preclude bias towards any one people and allow a focus on a universal standard of justice – the natural law – a higher standard of justice by which all human attempts at justice are judged. The Church's ultimate goal is the realisation of human

---

5. *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"*, IV.15.

6. Christopher C. Prowse, "Racist Attitudes Towards Aboriginal Australians in the Light of Contemporary Catholic Concepts of Social Sin and Conversion" (Doctoral Dissertation. Rome: Pontifical Lateran University, 1995) 38.

7. Prowse, "Racist Attitudes", 36.

8. Frank Fletcher, "Mabo and Wik as Spiritual Events", Discussion Paper for the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (1998) 6.

dignity – not the individual prosperity of one group at the expense of another.

#### RECONCILIATION AND THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The Second Vatican Council's theological emphases help to explain contemporary interest in reconciliation, which is also given particular attention because the Church today concedes that "general apathy with intermittent stirrings of a troubled conscience"<sup>9</sup> is an accurate description of its historical responses to indigenous mistreatment.<sup>10</sup> The Church's universality should have set it apart from prevailing settler political attitudes. It claims that it is for all the peoples of the world. The Church maintains that all people are created in the image and likeness of God and that such creation precludes racism and establishes a right to individual and collective dignity, to self-determination, to culture, to religious freedom and a share in the common good. It is not a state Church, taking orders from any government and it has a distinctive emphasis on the family, which it sees as a natural social unit prior to, and not subservient to the state. Yet prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Church failed in its own terms to take consistently and unashamedly a public stand for the equality of peoples. It failed to resist comprehensively the break-up of families, and its failures served the colonising and imperial ends of the British Crown. The attitudes and approaches of the Australian Church were inconsistent with the Holy See's emphasis on the public advocacy of certain rights as a religious imperative. This is in spite of local churches having no grounds for reducing the importance that the Holy See attached to affronts to the rights and dignity of indigenous peoples.

The Church's general inattentiveness to racism was challenged by the combined influence of the Second Vatican Council and political change beginning in the 1960s. The Commonwealth's entry into indigenous affairs, following the constitutional referendum in 1967, the acknowledgement of land rights in the Northern Territory, and the generally more sympathetic attitude towards indigenous peoples adopted by the Whitlam (1972-1975) and Fraser (1975-1983) Governments, were among the political changes which helped shift a more

9. Eugene Stockton, "Maverick Missionaries: an Overlooked chapter in the History of Catholic Missions", in T. Swain and D. Rose (eds.), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions* (Adelaide: ASSR, 1988).

10. For a detailed analysis of this argument see Dominic O'Sullivan, *Faith, Politics and Reconciliation: Catholicism and the Politics of Indigeneity* (Adelaide: The Australian Theological Forum, 2005).

obviously Christian attitude towards indigenous Australians from the fringe to a broadening mainstream of secular political debate.

A major turning point in the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia occurred in May 1967 when the Holt Government (1966-1967) held a referendum proposing two amendments to the Commonwealth Constitution. The first was to allow Aboriginals to be counted in the population census. The second was to make Aboriginal Affairs a concurrent Commonwealth/State power and permit the Commonwealth Parliament to make laws relating to Aboriginals.

In support of the proposals, Edward Doody, Bishop of Armidale, issued a joint statement with his Anglican counterpart stating that such change would remove "any suggestion of race prejudice and will demonstrate our real concern for the dark people who are fellow citizens".<sup>11</sup>

While the bishops may have been overly optimistic in their expectation, the referendum did attract more than 90% support, indicating a growing awareness of Aboriginal rights. It also gave the Commonwealth the opportunity to work with states towards addressing issues of poverty, land rights and discrimination.

Although there are arguments about the extent of its significance, the referendum did help to create a political climate in which the Church could more easily contribute to indigenous policy debate. The political systems "of this world" had created space for an institution that sees itself as simply "in this world" to present its values to the body politic. At the same time, through the Second Vatican Council, the Church itself had clarified its understanding of its proper relationship with the political order to the extent that the presentation of such values was becoming increasingly accepted as a necessary function of religious mission.

The Council challenged the choice of silence and emphasised that religious aspirations demanded by the natural law have unavoidable political implications, because they can only be given effect through human law, which should conform to that higher natural law. When human law affronts the natural law there must inescapably be religious as well as political issues at stake.

The Council maintained that Church reliance on works of charity and appeal to the consciences and good will of individuals was not in itself an adequate way of fulfilling its responsibilities to the victims of

---

11. Quoted in Scott Bennett, *Aborigines and Political Power* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 11.

injustice and oppression.<sup>12</sup> This marked a significant change in missiological approach and presented a challenge to the Church, particularly those members of a more conservative political disposition. The Council acknowledged that on occasion the Church had been guilty of sins of omission through avoiding public demonstration of its values and responsibilities.

The Council's comments on cultural preservation were also very significant for the relationship between religious ideas and political preferences:

whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that cultures should not just be preserved but should be promoted and upheld for their contribution to the salvation of their members was a significant re-emphasis of a previously understated Catholic belief. Much of the Australian Church's contemporary interest in issues such as self-determination, land rights and linguistic and cultural preservation therefore give effect to Second Vatican Council teaching that cultural preservation and salvation are linked.

#### WORDS "BACKED UP" WITH "ACTION"

In Australia a public sign of the Church's renewed interest in political decisions affecting indigenous peoples was Pope Paul VI's remark in Sydney in 1970 that:

We know that you have a lifestyle proper to your own ethnic genius or culture – a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask you to renounce.... Society itself is enriched by the presence of different cultural and ethnic elements.<sup>14</sup>

Paul VI was clearly dismissing current assimilationist ideas as no longer legitimate public policy. In 1971 and 1972 the Australian Bishops' Conference issued pastoral letters on indigenous affairs and in 1978 a

12. The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican City, 1965). Cited 15 March 1998. Available from <http://www.cin.org/v2modwor.html>.

13. The Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican City, 1964) 17. Cited 7 January 2000. Available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

14. Paul VI, "Speech to Indigenous Australians" (Sydney: 1970).

Social Justice Sunday Statement, *Aborigines: A Statement of Concern*, was published to mark the centenary of the death of Australia's first bishop and a defender of indigenous rights, John Polding. It was an explicit response to the Second Vatican Council's statement of the Christological implication of the human condition: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."<sup>15</sup>

The *Statement of Concern* noted the "destruction of Aboriginal Society", a need to move "beyond assimilation" and to "recognise land rights",<sup>16</sup> and was endorsed by the Catholic Aboriginal senator Neville Bonner as "the most graphic, authoritative summary of my people's culture that it has been my pleasure to read".<sup>17</sup>

Following the publication of this Statement, *The Catholic Weekly* argued that it presented an "immediate challenge" to the Catholic community and printed a headline "statement remains rhetoric unless Church backs words with action". The article that followed was clearly intended to focus the social conscience of the Church. The article reported the National Aboriginal and Islander Liberation Movement's "scepticism" over the Statement's "nice words".<sup>18</sup> The Movement was blunt in its criticism of the Church and the unemotive forthright publication of that criticism suggested its acceptance by the *Catholic Weekly*. The Movement's General Secretary, Naomi Mayers, expressed the view that

because of early neglect and silence, they [the Church] share a responsibility for genocide: in fact they are more responsible than others, because Christians, above all, should and could have prevented the tragic injustices to which Aborigines were subjected, just as they should and can play a far more active role now.<sup>19</sup>

Mayers did, however, acknowledge the Statement's recognition of land rights and white racism, but also noted that "unless the Catholic Church is prepared to back up these words with action, the statement remains rhetoric".<sup>20</sup>

The Australian Church "backed up" the *Social Justice Sunday Statement's* sentiments with "action" by actively encouraging the

15. Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, "Social Justice Sunday Statement", 3.

16. "Social Justice Sunday Statement", 3.

17. Neville Bonner, in *The Catholic Weekly* (Sydney: 24 September 1978) 2.

18. *The Catholic Weekly* (Sydney: 24 September 1978) 2.

19. Naomi Mayers, in *The Catholic Weekly* (Sydney: 24 September 1978) 5.

20. *The Catholic Weekly* (Sydney: 24 September 1978) 2.

development of reconciliation as an integral feature of Australian political discourse. Although for the Church reconciliation is a religious concept, its general principles have become important as possible foundations for alternatives to prejudice and racism as key informants of public opinion.

In a letter to the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, in 1985 the bishops expressed the ambitious hope that "by the time of this nation's bicentenary there will not be any Aboriginal persons whose aspirations to land or other needs remain unaddressed".<sup>21</sup>

This aspiration had not been achieved by the time of the bicentenary in 1988 when Edward Clancy, then Archbishop of Sydney, reaffirmed the Church's position by signing a joint statement with the leaders of other churches, *Towards Reconciliation in Australian Society*, which commented that:

We are said to have been living together for two hundred years. Yet ignorance, prejudice and discrimination have divided us. In these two hundred years, many Aborigines have lost life, land, language, culture and dignity. Many European Australians have never met or known Aboriginal Australians.... we Australians, Aboriginal and not, can not be reconciled until we know each other, appreciate each other, our cultures and our perspectives on life. We must acknowledge and own our past, even the injustices.... Aborigines need an ensured, empowered place in our public life.<sup>22</sup>

The letter to Hawke foreshadowed some of the issues that have become central to reconciliation. It expressed concern at the intolerance of some white Australians towards the Aboriginal condition, and asked that Aboriginal land-owners be given at least the same protection from mining without their consent as other land-owners. The bishops also asked that consideration be given to traditional Aboriginal communities and traditional lifestyles when making decisions about permitting mining on Aboriginal land. In order that the common good not be compromised, the bishops said that the meeting of Aboriginal aspirations should be achieved to the greatest possible extent "without occasioning injustice to other citizens".<sup>23</sup>

---

21. Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, "Letter to the Prime Minister", Canberra, 20 May 1985.

22. Australian Church Leaders Joint Statement, "Towards Reconciliation in Australian Society", 1988.

23. Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, "Letter to the Prime Minister".



## JOHN PAUL II AND RECONCILIATION

The post-Second Vatican Council Catholic interest in indigenous rights set the scene for John Paul's response to the indigenous "Petition to John Paul II from the World's Oldest Living Culture", at Alice Springs in 1986. "On behalf of our ancestors and the children still to be born, we expect you to heed our call for reconciliation and justice."<sup>24</sup> The petition then put it to the Pope that

Your Church has played a part in our dispossession and oppression. We struggle for recognition of our sovereignty and our basic rights as indigenous people. Your visit gives you the opportunity to add your voice to our 200 year struggle for peace and justice.<sup>25</sup>

John Paul's response stated that harm was done, and that its acknowledgement was a precondition of progress for indigenous peoples. "The establishment of a new society for Aboriginal people cannot go forward without just and mutually recognised agreements with regard to these human problems, even though their causes lie in the past."<sup>26</sup> The Pope also affirmed indigenous cultures and challenged assimilation.

Take heart from the fact that many of your languages are still spoken and that you still possess your ancient culture.... Your "Dreaming", which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain forever people of your culture, is your own way of touching the mystery of God's Spirit in you and in creation.<sup>27</sup>

In his 1989 World Day of Peace Message, *Respect for Minorities*, John Paul affirmed the Church's position that under no circumstances may prejudice, discrimination or notions of cultural superiority inform the policy positions of any legislative authority, or underlie the implementation of any policy.<sup>28</sup>

The unity of the human family requires that the whole of humanity, beyond its ethnic, national, cultural and religious differences, should form a community that is free from discrimination between people

---

24. *Petition to John Paul II from the World's Oldest Living Culture, Recognition: The Way Forward* (North Blackburn, Victoria: Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, 1993).

25. *Petition*.

26. John Paul II, "Address to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders", in Sandie Cornish (ed.), *Always the Same Spirit* (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul's, 1996) 70.

27. John Paul II, "Address", 65.

28. John Paul II, *Respect for Minorities* (1989).

and that strives for reciprocal solidarity. Unity also requires that differences between the members of the human family should be used to strengthen unity, rather than serve as a cause of division.<sup>29</sup>

From this, John Paul concluded that the responsibility to uphold human diversity belongs to the institutions of state as well as to every individual within the community.<sup>30</sup>

In 1998 and 1999 John Paul convened a Synod of Bishops "to prepare the Church for the new millennium".<sup>31</sup> The Synod's *Instrumentum Laboris* affirmed the Australian Church's pursuit of reconciliation:

Reconciliation between indigenous peoples and the descendants of colonising settlers is required in many countries and the Church has the right and the will to contribute to this process. National reconciliation is an indispensable condition for internal peace and real progress.<sup>32</sup>

The Church claims its contribution to reconciliation as a "right and a will" because, as John Paul remarked to the New Zealand Bishops' Conference in 1986, a bishop's teaching office "constitutes an important factor in the formation of public opinion".<sup>33</sup> He also told the New Zealand bishops that "It is an act of justice towards society to speak the Church's teaching with sureness and clarity...."<sup>34</sup> The *Instrumentum Laboris* also recorded widespread episcopal concern for indigenous land rights not just in Australia, but in New Zealand and throughout the Pacific. The document indicated that by the end of the twentieth century the experience of indigenous peoples had become the concern of a much wider group within the Church.

The view that a Church promotion of reconciliation contributes to the well-being of society was implied through the *Instrumentum Laboris* itself and its expression of reconciliation: "In the past, some Christians in

---

29. John Paul II, "Address", 65.

30. John Paul II, "Address", 65.

31. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania* (Vatican City, 2001) 2. Cited 13 December 2001. Available from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20011122\\_ecclesia-in-oceania\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20011122_ecclesia-in-oceania_en.html).

32. The General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops and Libreria Editrice, *Instrumentum Laboris, Synod of Bishops for Oceania. Jesus Christ and the Peoples of Oceania: Walking His Way, Telling His Truth and Living His Life* (Vatican: 1998), 17.

33. John Paul II, "Meeting with New Zealand Bishops", in *Peace: The Message of the Gospel. Complete Texts of Addresses Given by Pope John Paul II During His Pastoral Visit to New Zealand 22-24 November 1986* (Wellington: Catholic Communications for the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference, 1986) 29.

34. John Paul II, "Meeting with New Zealand Bishops", 29.

Oceania have...shared responsibility for political and social injustices. Not only individual Christians but also church leaders have committed errors, approved un-Christian actions or been passive before injustices."<sup>35</sup> The *Instrumentum Laboris* noted that in Australia, as well as in New Zealand, New Caledonia and Fiji,

The original indigenous population has to cope with the effects of large-scale immigration from colonial times. In some places, the indigenous population has become an ethnic minority, leading them sometimes to feel disenfranchised because of a lack of respect for their identity and development. They look upon other ethnic groups of European and Asian descent as more wealthy, privileged and powerful. The political and economic problems of these indigenous communities reflect the tensions between the ethnic groups. They revealed the historical injustice that was perpetrated and whose wounds remain to this day.<sup>36</sup>

The document then noted a Catholic imperative to helping to address injustice because "in some countries there is need of national reconciliation between the descendants of people on opposite sides of the conflict. The Church has the right and the will to contribute to this process."<sup>37</sup> The *Instrumentum Laboris* also observed that:

National reconciliation is an indispensable condition for internal peace and real progress. There is a place for repentance and forgiveness without undermining the sense of justice. Above all, the Church believes in the power of God's Spirit, the bearer of peace, reaching farther and deeper than all human efforts.<sup>38</sup>

For the Holy See, reconciliation requires that the Church's social teaching "be taught and implemented still more effectively in Oceania.... This social teaching is to be clearly presented to the faithful in easily understandable terms."<sup>39</sup> It was in this context that John Paul "clearly presented" the view that "it is the Church's task to help indigenous cultures preserve their identities and maintain their traditions",<sup>40</sup> this being particularly important for the Church because the Church itself has contributed to injustice against indigenous cultures:

---

35. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 4.

36. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 17.

37. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 19.

38. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 17.

39. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 26.

40. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 28.

The Church expresses deep regret and asks forgiveness where her children have been or still are party to these wrongs. Aware of the shameful injustices done to indigenous peoples in Oceania, the Synod Fathers apologized unreservedly for the part played in these by members of the Church, especially where children were forcibly separated from their families.<sup>41</sup>

The Australian Church can draw even stronger endorsement for its increasing tendency towards public expression of religious goals from John Paul's instruction that "a secularised society needs to be confronted again by the entire Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ".<sup>42</sup> John Paul seemingly emphasised this point for fear that religion, and Christianity in particular, has been pushed to the margins of public interest "to be regarded as a strictly private matter...with little relevance to public life".<sup>43</sup> His conclusion however, that as a result the Church has a "diminished voice in public affairs",<sup>44</sup> is not supported by the fact that in recent times, at least in the area of the rights of indigenous peoples, the Church has taken advantage of a political environment that is more conducive to the expression of its ideas than has been the case at any time in its history. While religious principle may not strongly influence the day-to-day decision making of political actors this is not necessarily a new phenomenon, nor has there ever been a time in Australia where religious values relating to political issues for indigenous peoples had any more influence in the secular realm. Instead it is precisely because the body politic has created space for the expression of the Church's ideals that the Church has been able to give practical effect to its post-Second Vatican Council emphasis on presenting religious arguments in the political realm. So, at least in the case of the rights it believes belong to indigenous peoples, the fear that the Church might allow "her voice to be silenced or her witness to be marginalised"<sup>45</sup> is not well-founded. Instead the Holy See might consider that while "greater knowledge of human nature and behaviour... pose[s] new and difficult questions for the peoples of Oceania",<sup>46</sup> it is also that greater knowledge of human nature has challenged hostility or indifference towards indigenous peoples and aided the creation of a political environment in which secular and religious concerns for respecting the humanity of people of whatever race have converged.

---

41. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 28.

42. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 6.

43. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 7.

44. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 7.

45. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 7.

46. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 7.

Numerous public contributions from the Church to indigenous policy debate followed the Pope's address at Alice Springs. For example, in August 1988 the federal parliament met for the first time in the new Parliament House. Symbolically the first item of parliamentary business, which the Jesuit lawyer Frank Brennan negotiated between government and opposition, was one of acknowledgement and affirmation of indigenous peoples and a step towards reconciliation. The *Native Title Amendment Bill 1997*, which aimed to remove the land rights indigenous peoples had secured under the *Wik* decision of the High Court,<sup>47</sup> and the public inquiry into the removal of indigenous children from their families, the "stolen generations" inquiry,<sup>48</sup> attracted significant and widespread Catholic interest.<sup>49</sup>

The Church's association with the first National Sorry Day<sup>50</sup> on 26 May 1998 is an example of one of the most public Catholic contributions to reconciliation. In the title of their Sorry Day media statement, *Bishops Seek Forgiveness from the "stolen Generation" on National Sorry Day*, the bishops re-stated the theological requirement that forgiveness is a precondition of reconciliation. Many of the Church activities throughout the country also highlighted the relationship between reconciliation as a theological concept, and reconciliation as a political goal.

Among the national sponsors of the day was Kevin Dance,<sup>51</sup> President of the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, the national Catholic body representing Australia's 10,000 religious. Dance noted that saying "sorry" is an essential pre-condition for reconciliation. He thereby drew attention to the possible reason for the Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to do likewise. Dance said that "Saying sorry also commits us to work in a creative partnership with the indigenous people of Australia in overcoming the tragic aftermath of this pain and loss."<sup>52</sup>

47. *The Wik Peoples v. the State of Queensland & Ors; the Thayorre People v. the State of Queensland & Ors* (High Court of Australia, 1996). Cited 1996. Available from [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/cth/high\\_ct/unrep299.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/cth/high_ct/unrep299.html).

48. Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, *Bringing Them Home. Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (April 1997). Cited 29 January 2003. Available from <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/prelim.html#terms>.

49. For a full analysis of further examples, see O'Sullivan, *Faith, Politics and Reconciliation*.

50. An annual National Sorry Day was recommended in the *Bringing Them Home* report to acknowledge the impact of the separation of indigenous families.

51. Kevin Dance is a priest of the Passionist Order. As President of the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes he took a prominent role in giving public expression to Church thought on reconciliation.

52. Kevin Dance, "We Are Sorry: Words Which Aren't Enough, but a Vital Beginning", Media Release, 22 May 1998, 1.

While the Church sponsored the Sorry Day at a national level, many local churches expressed their own endorsement of Sorry Day as an important part of the reconciliation process. In the diocese of Broome, for example, support for the political purpose of reconciliation was evident in the explanation for the establishment of a "Kimberley Sorry Book". Its purpose included the sending of "a clear message to our national parliament that we are capable of saying sorry".<sup>53</sup> The Diocese of Broome believed that the National Sorry Day had significance to the reconciliation process because at a theological level: "Jesus promised that his followers would know the truth, and that this truth would set them free."<sup>54</sup>

The political significance of this promise in the context of Australian reconciliation was then explained:

We are hoping that facing the truth of what happened to our indigenous people will free our nation from this dark and disgraceful chapter of our history, ensure that the effects of past actions will be addressed in the present and that such acts will not be repeated in the future.<sup>55</sup>

"Sorry Day" also highlights one of the major political obstacles to reconciliation. Many white Australians viewed Sorry Day as an attempt to impose guilt. For the National Reconciliation Council and for the Church, however, the purpose of Sorry Day was not the imposition of guilt, but the acceptance of responsibility for redressing the mistreatment of Aboriginals. In Catholic churches and schools throughout Australia, Sorry Books were signed by numerous Catholic clergy, religious and lay people. In the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, for example, the Sorry Books were presented to Aboriginal people at an especially celebrated Mass. At the Mass, attended by several hundred school children, Archbishop Francis Carroll addressed the suggestion that it was not for present generations of white Australians to apologise because they were not responsible for what had previously been done to indigenous peoples. Carroll argued that: "If we have not come to terms with the pain, injustice and mistakes, there will always be a weakness... we regret the past two hundred years and know the present reconciliation difficulties."<sup>56</sup>

The "reconciliation difficulties" to which Carroll referred related to the political unwillingness to satisfy Aboriginal concerns over native

53. Shane Wood, Media Release, Broome, 26 May 1988.

54. Shane Wood, Media Release, Broome, 20 May 1998.

55. Shane Wood, Media Release, Broome, 20 May 1998.

56. Francis Carroll, *Catholic Voice*, 3 August 1998.

title and recompense for the stolen generations. Furthermore, the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council noted that Sorry Day

does not mean everyone should feel guilty today. It is a day to acknowledge the truth about the injustice of past governments... it is a day to hear and understand the pain of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Acknowledging the truth will set us all free. It is a day for us all to say that we are sorry that these things happened.<sup>57</sup>

Interpretations of National Sorry Day as an attempt to impose guilt came largely from those seemingly opposed to reconciliation itself. Interpretations of that kind were a hindrance to political reconciliation and inconsistent with theological reconciliation.<sup>58</sup> Prowse had argued, for example, that for the Church, "concepts of collective Catholic guilt are to be dismissed as theologically without foundation and, indeed, adding unnecessary confusion to the issue".<sup>59</sup>

Nonetheless, today's Catholics have a responsibility to resist any attempts to perpetuate disadvantage. It is the recognition of this responsibility that has motivated the Church's denunciations of the continuance of policies and practices detrimental to indigenous well being. Prowse described this as "a grave moral responsibility", and present day Catholics "like all Australians (have) to dispel the ideologies, ignorance and biases in which racist attitudes may still fester and largely be hidden from conscious awareness".<sup>60</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Church's recent consistent and forthright engagement with the secular political realm to advance religious mission is not a new requirement of faith, but in the last forty years it has been given greater urgency. That urgency was particularly apparent in Australian Catholic participation in the reconciliation debates of the 1990s. This aspect of mission has been more readily translated into practice in recent times, not just on the basis of institutional will, but with the practical encouragement of a secular political process that ensured the lasting presence of indigenous concerns on the public policy agenda. The Second Vatican Council's insistence that a willingness to attend to the

---

57. Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, "Social Justice Council Marks National Sorry Day", Media Release, Sydney, 26 May 1998, 2.

58. Prowse, "Racist Attitudes", 118.

59. Prowse, "Racist Attitudes", 118.

60. Prowse, "Racist Attitudes", 118.

public implications of religious principle be developed was aided by the body politic's creation of space for such alliances to form, even though there did remain significant prejudice and anti-Aboriginal sentiment within the body politic. The Australian Church's alertness for political issues to give secular context to its theology allowed political context to be utilised for the pursuit of the religious goal of reconciliation. Reconciliation, therefore, became also a political goal in the secular order. Yet the reconciliation that John Paul encouraged as an essential element of mission was justified not as following a secular political agenda but as a lobbying of the body politic to recognise religious rights belonging to indigenous Australians. The process was unquestionably political, but the motivation religious. Therefore the Church was able to avoid its historical "dilemma with politics"<sup>61</sup> and engage with the political realm on its own terms, thus avoiding manipulation towards an impotent neutrality and the neglect of its religious mission. The Pope saw human conversion as a sure foundation for the human unity that the Church sought, and it was through promotion of reconciliation that the immediate missionary responses to an unnecessarily divided community were effected.

---

61. Hugh Henry, "Between Gospel and Policy: The Catholic and Social Problems", in Geoffrey Brennan and John K. Williams (eds.), *Chaining Australia: Church Bureaucracies and Political Economy* (St Leonards, NSW: The Centre for Independent Studies, 1984) 104.



