

## **The Voice – It's time for the Church to proclaim 'Yes'!**

Sense of the Faithful Editorial Committee, 16 June 2023

On 19 June 2023, the final legislation to establish a referendum for an Indigenous Voice passed through the Federal Parliament. Australia now faces a pivotal moment in its history. If the Australian people agree to the request of the Indigenous leaders gathered at Uluru in 2016 for a recognised voice, a new era of reconciliation and justice is possible. If it is rejected, a wave of bitterness will sweep across the land, engulfing many sections of the community.

Now is the time for all Catholics, including the Bishops, to take a decisive stand on this moral challenge. We call on the Australian Catholic Bishops to put out a clear statement supporting a Yes vote and encouraging Catholics to work to give our Indigenous peoples this recognition and this Voice. Parishes should consider setting up a synodal process to pray, reflect, listen, discuss and discern on this matter.

### *An issue for all Catholics*

It is urgent that all Australian Catholics consider how they will vote in the referendum later in the year, if they have not already done so. For some people this will be an easy decision, for others it will be a lot harder. This is a decision for an individual following his or her conscience, unconstrained by directives from the Church or anyone else. However, many Catholics look to their leaders for guidance on the moral dimensions of this decision, as do some other Australians.

It might be helpful to keep in mind the words of Pope John Paul II nearly forty years ago, in his powerful address to aboriginal Australians in Alice Springs in 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”. [1]

### *The Bishops should provide a lead*

Without issuing directives, it is urgent that the Australian Catholic Bishops now provide stronger moral leadership on the Voice to Parliament. Following the lead of the Plenary Council, the Bishop's Conference in a statement issued on 11 May 2023 supported the Uluru Statement from the Heart. [2] They emphasised the potential importance of the Voice, and encouraged all Australians to engage in serious and respectful debate about this key issue. However, they stopped short of providing serious moral guidance on the substantive issue.

In particular, their statement stops well short of the words of Pope Francis speaking about recognising, listening to and making decisions concerning Indigenous peoples, in paragraph 26 of *Querida Amazonia*:

“We should do this in the first place with the [Indigenous peoples]. They are not just another party to be won over, or merely another individual seated at a table of equals. They are our principal dialogue partners, those from whom we have the most to learn, to whom we need to listen out of a duty of justice, and from whom we must ask permission before presenting our proposals. Their words, their hopes and their fears should be the most authoritative voice at any table of dialogue ... otherwise, the result would be, once again, ‘a plan drawn up by the few for the few’.”[3]

In recent decades, Australian Governments of goodwill have not listened effectively to Indigenous voices. As a result, we have had a series of plans for Aboriginal welfare drawn up by the few for the few, with little success.

We call on the Australian Catholic Bishops to issue a clear expression of the moral implications of the referendum, supporting a Yes vote at the referendum. This could draw on recent statements by some of their key advisors. For example, in late May 2023 the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) expressed its support for the Voice, as a significant stride forward for Indigenous peoples [3]. In Rome on 3 June 2023, Father Frank Brennan SJ declared that:

“Regardless of the shortcomings of our Parliament, I will be voting ‘Yes’, and I say that unequivocally.”[4]

He has indicated that, while he still has concerns about the process and about aspects of the referendum wording, it is now time to put those differences behind us and to support the Voice as overdue recognition and in the interests of national unity.

#### *Neither racially divisive or inappropriately political*

Two issues might cause the Bishops concern in providing that advice. One is the fear that the Voice will highlight race in our Constitution. This is quite wrong: the Voice is not about race but about indigeneity. A Voice in the constitution will not set aboriginal people apart because they are a different race from the Europeans, the Chinese or the Indians, but because they are the original inhabitants of this land, from whom it was taken. The Voice seeks to recognise and learn from their long history in this land, and to help to address the many injustices arising from dispossession. It is not at all about ethnicity or race.

The second issue may be concern that the Church should not be involved in politics. In our view, recognition of the original Australians through a voice to Parliament is a moral issue, directed at righting past wrongs and building a more just society. It is not primarily a political issue, but of course has political dimensions. The Church cannot refrain from commenting on issues of justice because of these political dimensions. This is a position regularly and clearly put by Pope Francis in his writing on Indigenous peoples and other matters.

#### *Engagement at the parish level*

For those parishioners who would like to engage fully in discernment, we suggest that Catholic parishes around Australia take a lead in offering a synodal process on this important concept on which Australians will in due course vote. This synodal practice was introduced to many parishes through the response to the Plenary Council and to the ongoing Synod of Bishops. It can be very moving experience, which allows people in small groups to listen, talk and pray about selected issues designated by the Parish.

We suggest that parishes offer a synodal process that asks parishioners to come together to pray, reflect, listen, discuss, and discern on these crucial issues of aboriginal recognition and the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. This powerful experience and process may help individuals come to a decision on how they will vote in the referendum later in the year.