

Bishop Vincent Long – Address Social Justice Statement Launch 2023

The Church in Australia will not be fully the church that Jesus wants her to be until you, the Aboriginal people, have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.

Dear friends,

Those were the words of Pope John Paul II when he gave a powerful address in Alice Springs, in 1986. He reminded us of the importance of justice, respect for cultural diversity, and the protection of the dignity and heritage of our First Nations Peoples.

Several decades have passed and the question of Australians and Australian Catholics in particular “receiving joyfully their contribution” is still relevant to us.

The Statement I launch today on behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference entitled “*Listen, Learn, Love: A New Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*” encourages us to apply the wisdom of St John Paul to our lived reality. It offers Catholics and all Australians a constructive approach to take in relation to the upcoming referendum. Even more importantly, to the way non-Indigenous Australians will engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the months and years following the referendum.

This statement is very different from those in the past. Much of the preparation was spent listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in major cities and regional areas. From Canberra to the Kimberleys, Sydney to Wadeye in the NT, and Melbourne to Cherbourg in Queensland. We also spent time with members of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council or NATSICC as it is called. Through this listening, we learned much about the experiences and feelings of First Nations Peoples as well as their hopes and dreams for the future.

One of the objectives of this statement is that we want Catholics to understand that Catholic social teaching and Catholic social action are not simply theoretical and academic exercises. We hear what God is saying to us about justice by being with our sisters and brothers on the peripheries of society. By getting “bruised, hurt and dirty” from being on the streets and in the bush where they are. This has been at the heart of Pope Francis’ message to us all from the beginning of his pontificate. It is not new. “*Gaudem et Spes*” or *Joy and Hope* is the title of the Second Vatican Council’s seminal document. It invites us to be attuned to the signs of the times. To be with people where they are and listen to their joy and hope, grief and anxiety wherever they are. Indeed, in the Gospel itself, we learn from Jesus that following Him means being on the streets, and listening and responding to what people are saying about their lives and what they hope for.

Listening and learning is also an essential part of the synodal approach which the Holy Father is inviting us to embrace. We tried to keep this in mind, too, as we wrote this statement.

One big difference you will notice in this statement is that we Bishops step aside for a significant portion and invite members of NATSICC to speak directly to us all. This is inspired by Pope Francis’ promotion of a culture of encounter and synodality.

Listening is hard. Hearing about young people taking their lives, about so many people ending up in jail, of children still being taken away from their parents and grandparents and about the ongoing racism is tough. It must be so much more difficult for these people to tell

us about their painful experiences. We are deeply grateful to those who shared their stories of pain with us.

Yet, even with all this pain and hardship, we also heard about many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people getting on with their lives, raising families, participating in community life and doing good things. There is not just darkness; there is also light. We also heard of their hopes for the future.

While the Church has done and said some good things over many years, we need to also acknowledge that we have been responsible for the pain our sisters and brothers have had to deal with. We Bishops have apologised more than once. And I say sorry again today for all the suffering that we have played a part in causing. But sorry is not enough. At its heart, that is what this statement is about.

Whatever the outcome of this year's referendum, we ask the Church in Australia to make efforts to lead the way for our fellow Australians. Our attitudes and actions towards First Nations Peoples need to be grounded in justice, love, and humility. "Doing justice, loving kindness and walking in humility" as the prophet long ago urges us.

We need to listen with deep respect and learn from them about what needs to be done to improve their situations. We need to walk with them, day by day, and work with them to bring about change for the better - for their people and for all of us. Strengthening our relationship with our First Peoples is integral and indeed critical to the strengthening of the whole nation.

I want to express my deep gratitude to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this country. You have shown such patience despite all the pain you have suffered.

In launching this statement today, I want to say to you, on behalf of the Catholic Bishops and the people of God in Australia:

"We love you and will walk with you on the journey of healing and justice."

May God bless you all.

Bishop Vincent Long OFMConv is Bishop of Parramatta and chair of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.