



Social Justice Statement 2023-2024

Listen, Learn Love:

A New Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

In 1967, Australians gave overwhelming support to a referendum that recognised Australia's First Peoples as citizens. In 2023, we will be given a chance to vote in another referendum to constitutionally recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples through a Voice to Parliament. Australia's Bishops see it as an opportunity for all Australians to renew our engagement with the First Peoples of Australia. They have come to this view through much listening to the First Peoples and they encourage us all to listen to them in a spirit of love and humility.

The Bishops invite the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) to speak directly about their experiences of injustice and about their hopes for the future. NATSICC addresses the many injustices their people have faced since colonisation until now. They speak of many concerns including high suicide rates and incarceration, shorter life expectancy and poorer outcomes in employment, education and housing. They also identify racism as an on-going challenge. The information they use includes the Closing the Gap Report and the witness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who spoke about their concerns during visits to many communities during the preparation of this statement.

NATSICC also acknowledges the achievements of many of their people despite these challenges and notes the many efforts by First Nations communities to address these problems. They note with approval the efforts made within the Church to support their communities. They conclude by giving their support to the referendum on the Voice. They see it as a positive step in efforts to improve the lives of First Nations people.

The Bishops acknowledge the pain and hardship experienced by First Nations Peoples. They point to the Church's efforts to stand in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples since the early days of colonisation. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that the Church played a part in the injustices First Nations People have experienced.

The Bishops invite us, as Catholics, to begin a new engagement with the First Peoples to overcome injustice, an engagement grounded in love. This love is at the heart of Jesus' message. This love is characterised by a commitment to encounter and dialogue, reciprocity, mutual accompaniment and a desire to put the other at the centre of our attention. The Bishops offer us some simple actions which could help us to begin this new engagement. The Bishops do not tell us how to vote in the referendum, but they encourage us to inform ourselves about the issues through respectful dialogue, especially with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

The Bishops and NATSICC join together at the conclusion of the statement to call for us all to walk together in love on a journey of healing, whatever the outcome of the Voice referendum.

Resources such as the full statement, liturgy notes, videos, and promotional material are now available at:

www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au