



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Bishops Commission of Relations with Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Peoples



The *Strength & Blessing* of Indigenous Family Life

Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander
Sunday 2017

*Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander peoples
are respectfully advised
that this publication
may contain the words,
voices, names, images and
descriptions of people who
have passed away.*



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TELLING THE GOOD
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AFFIRMATIVE ENDEAVOURS
IN THE NAME OF
GOOD RELATIONS ARE
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SUPPORTED.

Just a few months ago an Aboriginal Elder in the Kimberley, well advanced in years and at that time in poor health, wrote a letter a few weeks before his death. It was written in copperplate style, in blue ink on thin note paper and was several pages long. His instructions were that the priest at his funeral might share the letter with the mourners in attendance at the church.

In this letter he outlined his own personal faith journey. He recalled how he had been brought up on a Catholic mission, had been given a good grounding in the faith but then how it was that he had then strayed from his faith after a torrid life and a broken marriage. He spoke of his conversion, his repentance for the wrongdoings in his life, the absolution given him at the hands of a local priest, and how he began to walk the pathway of new life in Christ. He was, in his own words, “Close once again to Jesus.” and “Happy to be with God.”

A large part of his letter was addressed to his family where he spoke of the importance of the family, how he needed them and how they needed each other. How the family, he said, was the foundation of their lives as Aboriginal people, and was at the core of their identity.

Keen observers of Aboriginal Family life in the earliest days of European settlement noted something peculiar to Indigenous people; the responsibility of caring for the children of family groups was shared among the members and was not left merely to the biological parents. Children might be born of one couple and raised

by another couple in the family. This practise of shared responsibility protected children whose parents might have met with some adversity or hardship. It was of course based on the kinship system whereby every person was born into a group, sometimes referred to as a ‘Skin’, and that meant that for every person a relationship one to another might be defined and obligations one to another made clear. By means of this simple yet at once complex system it was evident which couples might marry and which might not; who were eligible partners in marriage and who were not. Further, this shared responsibility was clearly made visible in the names given to members in the family group. For instance, my mother’s sister is also my mother. And my father’s brother also my father. Not just in name but in fact.

Keen observers of Aboriginal family life today are aware that this customary practise of collective responsibility for the raising of children and the useful complexities arising from the kinship system are still largely at work across a range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout the land. And this is despite the devastating effects of colonisation, the dispossession of family country, and the accompanying social dislocation. While Indigenous languages across the continent continued throughout our history of settlement to diminish in number and usage, nonetheless the strength of family relationships and the power that gave to the



struggle to survive proved enduring. Families were torn asunder through the removal of children of mixed race from their families by governmental policies. This resulted in what is known today as "The Stolen Generation" or "The Separated Children". And yet, the bonds of family life persevered and survived these overwhelming tribulations.

However, in our fast moving society, sadly, when every culture in our land is in crisis, other grievous trials continue to assail the strength and blessings of Indigenous families as they do non-Indigenous families. Various chemical addictions and other terrible social scourges are as much at work among Indigenous people as they are among others in our country. These wretched problems must be faced and strenuously dealt with, with a sense of great urgency.

In many Aboriginal communities throughout the nation, groups of people are protesting against these harmful activities that, like the hardships of

days gone-by, threaten the wellbeing of families. Women's groups in particular are standing up to promote healthy community pastimes and to uphold the family values that are held to be sacred. Marches through community villages, and meetings in townships and cities are signs of hope in these challenging times. Such positive words and actions applied to the benefit of families are a result of courage and dedication displayed by a host of Aboriginal community leaders. Telling the good stories and fostering affirmative endeavours in the name of good relations are successful when they are vigorously supported. Such people in our midst who seek to bring about the good in society need encouragement and support from us all. We should never be afraid to speak out against racism or discrimination or anything that harms the family or threatens the integrity of our society. The prophets in Sacred Scripture encourage us: "Cry out aloud, do not hold back, raise your voice like a trumpet; tell my people their offences.... give relief to the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your darkest hour will be like midday, ... the Lord will guide you always." (Isaiah 58:1, 10-11)

The old man spoken of earlier, had much to say in his letter quoted to his family and others at the funeral Mass. He implored them all, but particularly his grandchildren, to be determined to get their lives in order by right-living and by basing their behaviours on Gospel values. He spoke of the power and the importance of prayer as the Grace of God alive in us. Such prayerfulness is a necessary help if we are to live as God intended.

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Writing of the Rosary as prayer, the Elder pointed out to them just how important a prayer it is and how easily it can be prayed by individuals or better still in a family group, around the camp-fire at night. "Ask Mary to talk to Jesus for us. Our Lord will never deny His Blessed Mother", he counselled.

Like the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, let us do our best to see to it that families today will continue to strive to be examples of peace and harmony, of commitment and solidarity, of sacredness and wholesomeness. Prayer is our power at hand; we should not be afraid to use it enthusiastically because it helps to hold families together as it sustains the love all peoples hope for.

Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Australia in 1986, wrote in his address to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: *If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush-fire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn.*

May our nation be inspired by those Indigenous people who in the depths of their family life stand together as one. May our families continue to grow to be like Christ so 'that all might have life and have it to the full.' (John 10:10)



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