

May 27, 2007

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

**Pastoral Letter on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum**

On Sunday 27 May we celebrate Pentecost Sunday, the festival when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it is also referred to as the “Birthday of the Church,” marking the beginning of the Church’s mission to share its renewed and abundant life with all humanity.

Sunday 27 May 2007 is also the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum on Indigenous people and the Australian Constitution. The Referendum gave the Commonwealth Parliament the power to make laws with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people wherever they lived in Australia, and for Australia’s Indigenous population to be counted in national censuses. The result was remarkable in the history of all Australian referendums, before and after 1967. A resounding YES vote was recorded in every State, with almost 91 per cent of voters approving the measure (In South Australia the YES vote was 86.3%). This remains the highest affirmative vote of all the 44 constitutional referendums held since 1901. The 1967 Referendum was a landmark because it was a granting of recognition – too long denied – of the place of Indigenous Australians in the Commonwealth of Australia.

The 1967 Referendum is rightly seen as a turning point in our national history. From that time, the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians has become an important area of Commonwealth legislation and policy-making, and of national discussion and debate. It was an impetus for Government action in granting land rights, improved protection of Aboriginal rights more generally, and increased provision of desperately needed services.

Over time, there has been a greater focus on returning lands to traditional owners and communities; to enable Aboriginal self determination (through vehicles such as the now defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission); and eventually

to limited recognition of surviving Native Title rights after the historical lie of *terra nullius* was overturned in the High Court's *Mabo* and *Wik* decisions. The Commonwealth played a decisive role in establishing and convening the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, set up with unanimous cross-party support in 1991. It also began the process of coming to grips with painful and traumatic aspects of our history, commissioning the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, under the guidance of the late Sir Ronald Wilson. This month in 2007 marks the 10th anniversary of the tabling of the *Bringing Them Home* Report on the "stolen generation."

Perhaps a high point in our national movement towards reconciliation was the extraordinary "Walks for Reconciliation" in May 2000, where hundreds of thousands walked together across Sydney Harbour Bridge and in other centres around the nation - including over 50,000 here in Adelaide.

We cannot gloss over the reality of continuing injustices, the stark social and economic inequalities, and also the lost opportunities to progress the cause of reconciliation. In a land of plenty, and after a sustained period of strong economic growth, statistics relating to Indigenous health, life expectancy, infant mortality, income and incarceration paint a picture of serious and persistent disadvantage. Pope Benedict XVI himself raised these issues last year when he accepted the credentials of the new Australian Ambassador to the Holy See. He said: "*In regard to the Aboriginal people of your land, there is still much to be achieved. Their social situation is cause for much pain. I encourage you and the [Australian] Government to continue to address with compassion and determination the deep underlying causes of their plight.*"<sup>1</sup>

The Church's need to be committed to Aboriginal rights and recognition was dramatically highlighted when Pope John Paul II delivered his historic speech to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Alice Springs.<sup>2</sup> The Pope challenged all Australians to recognise and respect the dignity of Indigenous cultures, and to ensure their preservation.

Over the years, and as recently as 2006, the nation's Catholic Bishops have issued statements addressing the realities of Indigenous disadvantage, apologising for any part the Church may have played in causing harm and suffering to Aboriginal people and communities, and recording our ongoing commitment to contribute to the process of national reconciliation.<sup>3</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI has recently reminded us that Christians are called to "*assume their specific political and social responsibilities,*" to address the scandal of injustice and

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<sup>1</sup> *Address of Pope Benedict XVI to Mrs Anne Maree Plunkett on the occasion of the presentation of her credentials as new Ambassador of Australia to the Holy See* (18th May, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Address to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in Alice Springs*, 29 November 1986

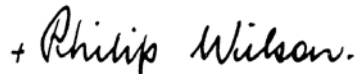
<sup>3</sup> See "*The Church and Aborigines in the Bicentenary*" - A Pastoral Letter to the Catholic People of Australia from the Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference (1988); Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Statement on National Sorry Day, May 26, 1998; Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, "*The Heart of Our Country: Dignity and justice for our Indigenous sisters and brothers.*" Social Justice Sunday Statement 2006

inequality, and "to work courageously within our world to bring about that renewal of relationships which has its inexhaustible source in God's gift."<sup>4</sup>

Let me take this opportunity to acknowledge the great work being done by the Aboriginal Catholic Ministries around the country and by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC). For many years agencies such as the Otherway Centre in my own Archdiocese of Adelaide have been offering a welcome and a growing range of programs and services, reaching out with great generosity to the homeless and vulnerable in our city. Those involved in ministries such as these have made an invaluable contribution to the lives of thousands of people in our country, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

As we mark this 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, and the beginning of Reconciliation Week, I urge you to make use of the attached prayers, and whenever it is possible and appropriate, to begin meetings and gatherings with an acknowledgement of the traditional owners and custodians of the lands upon which we gather.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Philip Wilson." The signature is written in a cursive style.

Most Rev Philip Wilson DD JCL  
**Archbishop of Adelaide**

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 22 February, 2007, n. 91

# PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION

In the midst of conflict and division,  
We know it is You  
Who turn our minds to thoughts of peace.  
Your Spirit changes our hearts:  
Enemies begin to speak to one another,  
Those who were estranged join hands in friendship,  
And nations seek the way of peace together.

Let Your Spirit be at work in us.  
Give us understanding and put an end to strife,  
Fill us with mercy and overcome our denial,  
Grant us wisdom and teach us to learn  
From the people of the land,  
Call us to justice.

*(Australian Catholic Social Justice Council Prayer Card,  
adapted from the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer for Masses of Reconciliation II)*

## Reconciliation Prayer

Holy Father, God of Love,  
You are the Creator of this land and of all good things.

We acknowledge the pain and shame of our history  
and the sufferings of our peoples,  
and we ask your forgiveness.  
We thank you for the survival of indigenous cultures.

Our hope is in you because you gave your Son Jesus  
to reconcile the world to you.  
We pray for your strength and grace to forgive,  
accept and love one another,  
as you love us and forgive and accept us  
in the sacrifice of your Son.

Give us the courage to accept the realities of our history  
so that we may build a better future for our nation.  
Teach us to respect all cultures.  
Teach us to care for our land and waters.  
Help us to share justly the resources of this land.  
Help us to bring about spiritual and social change  
to improve the quality of life for all groups in our communities,  
especially the disadvantaged.  
Help young people to find true dignity and self-esteem by your Spirit.

May your power and love be the foundations  
on which we build our families, our communities and our nation,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

*Prepared by Wontulp Bi-Buya Indigenous Theology Working Group  
13th March, 1997, Brisbane QLD*