TAKING ON COLLECTIVE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY WITH OUR FIRST AUSTRALIANS

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SUNDAY 2012
1: THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO ABORIGINAL DEATHS IN CUSTODY (RCADC 1991)

It has been over 20 years now since the monumental Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, (RCADC) published its report. The Royal Commission’s Report (1991) is regarded as the most comprehensive ever made on the topic. It embraced wide social and cultural parameters. It included analysis of social attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians. This attitudinal aspect is of particular importance when Catholic Christians examine this issue. We scrutinize such data in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour.

2: STATISTICS

Most regretfully, recent statistics indicate that the situation regarding Aboriginal incarceration has worsened over the last 20 years. At only 2.5% of the Australian population, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people now make up 26% of the prison population in our land. Indigenous people are 14 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-indigenous people. This statistic becomes 23 times more likely when we focus on young Aboriginal people.

This data alone is symptomatic of a deep moral malaise continuing in our attitudes towards our First Australians. Why is this continuing to happen despite the sincere good efforts of so many?

3: “HEART” PROBLEM

It seems that at the deepest level we have a “heart” problem here. Our attitude of the heart must change. Repenting from personal sins into something worthy of our vocation in Christ Jesus is our best chance of transforming structures of sin. These sinful arrangements in our land continue to marginalize our Aboriginal brothers and sisters despite the genuine attempts over the years to heal this festering sore.

4: SOME CONCLUSIONS OF RCADC

Let us recap the essential conclusions of the RCADC regarding this national challenge confronting us for so long.

There are three points to consider:

1: “The first and the most crucial [pre-requisite] is the desire and capacity of Aboriginal people to put an end to their own disadvantaged situation and to take control of their own lives. There is no other way. Only the Aboriginal people can, in the final analysis, assure their own future”. (RCADC 1.7.9)

2: “The second pre-requisite is assistance from the broad society and this basically means assistance from governments with the support of the electorate, or at least without its opposition”. (RCADC 1.7.14)

3: “The third pre-requisite to the empowerment of Aboriginal people and their communities is having in place an established method, a procedure whereby the broader society can supply the assistance referred to and the Aboriginal society can receive it whilst at the same time maintaining its independent status and without a welfare-dependent position being established as between two groups.” (RCADC 1.7.19)

In regard to non-Aboriginal attitudes towards our First Australians, the RCADC offered the following blunt assessments:

“Non-Aboriginal Australia must face the fact that for a very long time we have proceeded on the basis that Aboriginal people were inferior, were unable to make decisions affecting themselves, that we knew what was best for them, that we had to make decisions affecting them; it became second nature for us to have that attitude.” (RCADC 1.7.32)

....“Commissioner Dodson speaks of the need for a maturing of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people; a deeper understanding of how each sees the other and why; a bringing out of the common ground between us – the centrality of being human beings.” (RCADC 1.7.32)

5: CONTINUING CHALLENGES

The continuing challenge for all Australians is to mould a collective moral response in the light of such significant data and the well researched conclusions of the RCADC. Employing in a particular way our Catholic Social Doctrine, Catholics may have a special contribution to offer here. We offer three areas for us to consider seriously

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3 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.1869.
A) DISMISS COLLECTIVE GUILT IDEAS
It is best to avoid altogether any scenario that encourages concepts of collective guilt. The nurturing of theories that suggest that the present generation of Australians is to be held morally culpable as a whole for the establishment of past racial attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians is theologically absurd. National Sorry Days, Parliamentary Apologies, Amendments to the Australian Constitution, and so on, are all sincere symbolic gestures as long as they are heartfelt. But to suggest that the present generation of Australians is guilty for the sinful social arrangements of the past is, from a theological perspective, not appropriate. Sin requires personal intervention and collusion. However, “we have a responsibility for sins committed by others when we co-operate in them”4.

b) ENCOURAGE COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY
The issue of collective responsibility for entrenched and continuing Aboriginal disadvantage involves all Australians. These “sins that cry from the heart”5 diminish all of us. It affronts the common good of all in our fair land. Two extremes need to be avoided. One extreme is to appeal simply for personal consciences to be more considerate towards Aborigines. This can too easily lapse into a benign, patronising of Aborigines. It can fail to reflect on certain social mechanisms that seem to automatically marginalise Aborigines from the rest of the community. The other extreme, however, is advocating the mere changing of certain formalised social realities without any personal conversion of attitudes. The answer is somewhere in the middle of the extremes. Real conversion begins in the heart but does not simply remain there. Real personal conversion and repentance demand a scrutiny and change of social structures that alienate and dispossess our First Australians.

The ready acceptance by all of the right of Indigenous people to enjoy self-determination about their future and in the governance of their lives, is essential if relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous citizens are to be properly and justly ordered.

C) CULPABILITY
Whilst all are called to be responsible collectively, some Australians are actually culpable of perpetrating Aboriginal disadvantage. In other words, moral choices are being made today which collude with this “sinful” social reality and not only maintain it, but possibly propel it into deeper spirals of negativity. An honest “examination of conscience” in this area is an important step towards reconciliation.

6: A BRIEF COMMUNAL EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

(Based on Reconciliatio et Paenitentia,(1985) n.16; also quoted in Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (1987) n.36, & Catechism of Catholic Church, n.1868)

a) Do we co-operate or exploit racist attitudes and actions towards Australian Aborigines? Racial jokes? Direct actions? Praising them? Refusing to repudiate them? Protecting advocates? Lord, have mercy.

b) Are we in a position to avoid or limit attitudes, talk or actions that are clearly based on racist attitudes but fail to do so: - out of laziness – fear – silence? Christ, have mercy.

c) Do we think Aboriginal marginalisation in Australia is impossible to change and, consequently, avoid accepting any (or very little) moral responsibility? Lord, have mercy.

7: ASSESSING MORAL CULPABILITY
Assessing the moral culpability of individual consciences for Australia’s past history regarding racist attitudes to our First Australians is fraught with enormous difficulties. Very accurate historical data would be needed. But more importantly, adjudicating the personal consciences of past historical figures with modern sensibilities and knowledge seems lacking in basic fairness.

Nonetheless, as part of our “purification of memories”6 it may be advantageous for the present

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4 See Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.1868.

generation to ask what caused otherwise good men and women of past generations to perform certain reckless acts and adopt certain assumptions and viewpoints that assisted in marginalising Aboriginal people.

Our looking critically at the past may help us to look towards the future with courage and humility.

For example, it could assist us to ask the following question: How will future generations of Australians look back and judge those living today regarding our present attitudes and actions towards Indigenous Australians? Answering this seminal question may assist our repentance and resolve to respond more responsibly now.

8: GRATITUDE FOR PAST HEROIC EFFORTS

So far we have focussed on racist attitudes that continue to marginalise Aboriginal Australia. We have offered some moral assessments and criteria for taking up collective responsibility in greater measure.

However, all this must not diminish in any way the incredible heroism of so many over the years who have made wonderful contributions to “close the gap” to Aboriginal inequality in Australia. We think of bishops, priests, Religious Brothers and Sisters, lay volunteers, teachers, doctors, and other professional people, along with all sorts of everyday people with compassionate hearts.

In this light, when he visited Alice Springs (29 November 1986), Pope John Paul II made particular grateful reference to the many Australian missionaries that have offered education, health and social services to Aboriginal people. He said:

“Whatever their human frailty, and whatever mistakes they have made, nothing can ever minimalize the depth of their charity. Nothing can ever cancel out their greatest contribution, which was to proclaim to you Jesus Christ and to establish His Church in your midst.”

Such a balanced approach needs to be initiated today.

Let us pray,

Heavenly Father, we acknowledge sincerely the light and shadows of our efforts to “close the gap” of Aboriginal inequality in our beautiful land of Australia. We offer thanks for the heroic efforts of so many. We acknowledge in repentance the attitudes and actions that seem to have entrenched social arrangements in our land which appear automatically to marginalise our Aboriginal brothers and sisters.

Help us, dear Lord, to find your path of Reconciliation and conversion to truly ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR.

We make this prayer through Christ, our Lord, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.