



November 30, 2007

A statement from the Catholic Bishops of Australia on a way forward for Indigenous Australia

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference acknowledges the traditional custodians of this land. We affirm our respect for the elders past and present, and for the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. That the Aboriginal message stick accompanies the World Youth Day Cross and Icon is a visible symbol of that respect and acknowledgement.

In his acceptance speech, Australia's newly elected Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, said that "Indigenous Australia will be listened to". The Catholic Church in Australia, as always, looks forward to working in partnership with the new government and with indigenous communities to improve the situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout the nation.

Earlier this year we welcomed the high priority that the Federal Government placed on addressing disadvantage in remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, particularly in the areas of health, housing and employment.

However, we also emphasised that there is much more to be done to address fundamental causes of entrenched disadvantage and that this must be done in full consultation and cooperation with indigenous communities. The Northern Territory Government and indigenous organisations also have a wealth of experience to contribute.

The areas for continuing action include:

- tackling key causes of child abuse and poverty such as housing; poor employment opportunities, substance abuse and community breakdown;
- going beyond a law-and-order response to provide a full range of culturally appropriate support services to foster strong families and communities;
- respecting indigenous culture and identity through full and genuine partnership with Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal leaders and Church and community organisations working with Aboriginal communities;
- providing adequate funding to secure these goals;
- paying attention to the concerns raised by indigenous leaders and others about the compulsory land acquisition provisions in the Emergency Response laws;

- the decision to remove the permit system needs to be reconsidered because the removal has made indigenous communities vulnerable to negative influences.

Any response must be designed and implemented to take into account the particular circumstances of different communities.

The Emergency Response has had the support of both major political parties. We now urge the Federal Government to pursue the even more challenging task of addressing the underlying causes of disadvantage in our indigenous communities.

In this way the healing process required at the heart of our nation can be furthered.