



Justice News

Newsletter of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee

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'No more distinctions between Jew and Greek ...' Indigenous and Non-indigenous

For Christians, the model of all reconciliation is that won for us by Jesus with the Father through his passion, death and resurrection. In that reconciliation, there is 'no more distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female ...' (Gal. 3:28). According to St. Paul, the reconciliation with the Father is supposed to be reflected in the relationships between human beings. The *power* to achieve reconciled relationships between human beings flows from the Spirit released upon humankind by the Risen Christ.

The divisions between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians have stood in defiance of Christ's call to all to be reconciled. White Australia has, since colonisation, denied the grievances of the First Peoples of this land: that before the British stole it all, Indigenous peoples ruled and owned this continent. Until 1967, many Indigenous people were even denied citizenship in their own land. With the removal of the last barriers to Indigenous citizenship, much of white Australia claimed that all debts of justice to Aboriginal people had been paid, and from then on they were entitled to no more nor less than any other disadvantaged group in our liberal democracy. White Australians today, the argument ran, could not be held responsible for the thefts and atrocities of their forefathers.

The Prime Minister's apology on behalf of the nation in February gave the lie to this argument, and acknowledged also that the stealing of Indigenous children from their families continued into the 1970s. By this gesture, our government and our Parliament have, on the nation's behalf, officially confronted the injustices that have tainted our history, and divided us as a nation.

Nobody in his or her right mind would pretend that the reconciliation process is completed by the national apology. Righting the consequences of more than 200 years of wrongs requires more than an apology. Colonisation deprived Indigenous peoples not only of their position as rulers and owners of their lands, but also of the ways of life and culture that went with those things. Having robbed them of them of their own nationhood, the colonisers denied them a place in the white nation, and thus cast them out to the fringes of the white way of life. Disadvantage in employment, education, health, and housing are the symptoms of this alienation and marginalisation. The remedying of these ills is going to take years of patient and respectful cooperation between governments and Indigenous communities.

The apology removes the major barrier to such respectful cooperation. Until now, there has been a widespread patronising arrogance among non-indigenous Australians that led them to blame Indigenous disadvantage on Indigenous peoples themselves and to prescribe simplistic remedies for that disadvantage. While that attitude will no doubt linger in some quarters, its holders will no longer be able to justify it on the ground that the nation officially denies non-indigenous responsibility for the historical causes of that disadvantage. Christians will recognise in the national apology a sign of the further extension within human history of the reconciliation won by Christ and proclaimed by the Easter feast.



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We Say Sorry

Extract from Speech by Prime Minister Rudd on 13 February 2008

I move:

That today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

We reflect on their past mistreatment.

We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our nation’s history.

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.

For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.

We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.

A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.

A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.

The Apology was Terrific – Now What?

February 13th was a splendid day that seems destined to become one of those “Where were you when.....?” events. The Apology to the stolen generation was enormously important symbolically, and it removed a silly barrier to national unity.

Many were fortunate to share the event with members of the Wathaurong community and friends at their North Geelong Co-Operative. Reactions there were similar to those described around the country and there were few dry eyes. However, two things stood out.

The Apology will be celebrated long into the future, but there were no cheers, no exclamations of joy, no jumping about. Instead people cried and hugged each other, or exchanged firm handshakes, and the expressions on their faces said all that needed to be said. Indigenous peoples have struggled so long for this simple recognition. They believed it would never happen.

The other highlight was the warm welcome given to everyone who attended, black and white. There were no recriminations, and there was a lot of breakfast. .

On February 27th another event was held at the Co-Operative that allowed Geelong people to add their voices to the Apology. It was organised by local federal MPs Marles and Cheeseman, and the City of Greater Geelong. There were speeches by members of Government at all levels, and by Wathaurong community representatives. Representatives of a very large number of local organisations attended, and was an important demonstration of the depth and breadth of support in the Geelong community.

Of course the Apology was symbolic. It was nevertheless fundamental to allowing indigenous and non-indigenous communities to work together with dignity and respect to address problems besetting indigenous communities. As was pointed out in the Apology itself and echoed in virtually every commentary since, it was just a step in a very big journey.

There are two tasks – to overcome gaps in poverty, health and opportunity, and to allow indigenous communities to achieve a secure respected place in the Australian setting whilst preserving their culture and heritage. There has been no shortage of advice as to how this should be achieved, and there will be much more. There are however a few broad points that bear emphasis:

Action must be immediate. The problems are very real now, today, and people are suffering. It is also important that community support created by the Apology must be harnessed before it is swamped by the next great national event, or footy, or whatever. There must be consultation, consultation, consultation. This is hopefully now understood, but there remain many well-meaning experts who seem convinced they know best what is required.

The infamous NT Intervention must be re-assembled in conjunction with indigenous leaders. The Federal Government commitment to “do what it takes... spend what is required...” has to be preserved, but the new model should provide a framework acceptable to diverse indigenous communities. Most importantly, it must then be applied pragmatically in all parts of Australia. In the dust and debate surrounding the NT intervention it is often forgotten that gaps in health and opportunity exist in all States, including Victoria.

The campaign to educate the Australian community about both the riches of indigenous history and culture, and the reality of their third-world life style, must continue. Many people appear to believe that we’ve done the Apology and that’s all that is required, isn’t it? There also remain large sections of the populace that are ready to claim that “aboriginals get too much already...”. Ignorance and apathy in the community is a serious threat to long term programs, and is fertile ground for conservative politics.

There is an obvious parallel between indigenous issues and Australia’s commitment to achieve its contribution to the global Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the “Make Poverty History” campaign. There are eight MDGs:

- Halving poverty and eradicating hunger by 2015.
- Achieve universal primary education.
- Promote gender equality and empower women.
- Reduce child mortality.
- Improve maternal health.
- Combat HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases.
- Ensure environmental sustainability.
- Develop a global partnership for development.

Unsurprisingly each one of these is directly relevant to the indigenous community, and the similarity may inform our efforts in both areas.

The Rudd Government has made a commendable beginning in this policy area. We should congratulate and encourage them. We should also remind them as often as necessary, indeed more often, that indigenous well being must remain a top national priority. And we must work to ensure voter sentiment drives them along in the right direction.

John Butler

President, Geelong One Fire Reconciliation Group

Where to Now for Asylum Seekers in Australia?

The Rudd Government has been in power now for over a hundred days. We need to look and see what difference, if any, this has made for asylum seekers in Australia. Earlier this year it was formally announced that the Nauru and Manus Island (PNG) detention centres were to be finally closed. They will not be mothballed for potential future use. All asylum seekers who were on Nauru, recently had their cases finalised and have been moved to Australia. This is great news and the government is to be congratulated. There are still a number of issues which we hope will be addressed in the near future.

People asking for their cases to be considered by the Minister have no work rights and exist on the charity of people in the community. The Asylum Seekers Resource Centre (ASRC) in West Melbourne has around 371 asylum seekers applying for food each month. 75% of these people have no work rights or welfare. Around 1000 people hold Temporary Protection Visas (TPV). The holders of these visas are living in limbo, and many TPV holders are forced not just to live with the uncertainty of their future but also unable to sponsor and be reunited with their family. It’s time to act now. We need to remind the Minister of the plight of these people who have asked our country for asylum.

The ASRC suggests four steps we ask the government to consider

1. End Temporary Protection Visas
2. The right to work for all
3. End Mandatory Detention
4. Fix the refugee system for a fair go.

Anne Monk

Coordinator, Geelong Refugee Action and Information Network (GRAIN)

Justice News is a publication of the Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee, and is authorised and published by the Committee's co-ordinator, Gordon Snowdon, c/- St Mary's Parish Office, 150 Yarra Street, Geelong 3220.

The Committee welcomes letters and comments in response to items published in **Justice News**. All letters and comments are placed before the Committee and will be replied to wherever possible. The Committee can be contacted via its coordinator, Gordon Snowdon. The Committee's contact person for media enquiries is Michael Leahy on 5256 1656

We're on the web!

Earlier issues of *Justice News* and further information about the Social Justice Committee are available on the website of the website of the Justice Unit of the Archdiocese of Melbourne

<http://www.melbourne.catholic.org.au/ccjdp/geelongdeanery.htm>

Project Compassion at work in Uganda

A significant event early in Lent that went practically unnoticed by the Catholic Community in Geelong was the visit of Father Joseph Okumu from the Archdiocese of Gulu in Uganda. Sponsored by the Melbourne Office of Caritas Australia, Father Joseph came to promote the work of Project Compassion. He gave a most moving account of his work in the rehabilitation of child soldiers in Uganda who have been recovered from rebel forces. Gulu in Northern Uganda has seen 20 years of conflict between the armed rebel group the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan Government forces. This conflict has gained particular notoriety for the abduction of tens of thousands of children who are forced into becoming soldiers trained to kill. After gaining independence, the military moved in and took control. Language of the gun became the language of the day, exemplified in the person of the tyrant Idi Amin

In 1994 Father Joseph founded a Human Rights Group to save these children, especially the little girls who were being abused. By 2005 many thousands of children were returned from the rebels and the task of rehabilitation began. Many of them experienced nightmares at the memory of the people they had killed, and the community designed a very beautiful liturgy of reconciliation and cleansing in which Father Joseph played an important role. He is also very involved in the peace building processes continuing in Gulu.

The small group of people (seven in all!) who were privileged to hear him speak were profoundly impressed and inspired by his words. It underlined more than ever the vital importance of Project Compassion and the hope it brings to the lives of people in so many different countries and culture. Just to realise that our Lenten offerings of love and self-denial will assist the rehabilitation of the child soldiers of Uganda and elsewhere, among many other projects of development and self-help, make us fully committed to be an integral and permanent member of Project Compassion. Let us pray that the inspiring mission of rehabilitation of the child soldiers of Uganda and elsewhere will continue to be successful with our support through Project Compassion

Monsignor James Murray