

Opening Keynote: Catholic Social Services National Conference

Melbourne, 22 February 2018

Catholic Social Services as Agents of Hearing, Healing and Hope

Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land, the Wirundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I do not make that acknowledgment lightly. I do it because history happened here, and much of that history remains unfinished business, unreconciled. And as the old saying goes, if we do not learn from the sins of our history, we are bound to repeat them. And as a nation, repeat them we have, for too long and too often – not just with regard to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, our First Peoples – but also to the last to arrive, people seeking asylum and refugees.

There are linkages in the way Australia has treated the first peoples and the last to arrive, and some key learnings for us.

This looks like being a great conference and I want to start by affirming the wonderful work of Catholic Social Services, which is a profound source of hope in this world of fake news, 24/7 news cycles, reality TV (which is really *escape* from reality TV). There is a crisis in leadership across the world from Donald Trump to Brexit to Barnaby Joyce's shenanigans.

This conference is well timed as we explore the barriers, challenges, hopes and opportunities we face in serving those who are at the heart of the mission of the Church. We will canvas environmental conversion, economic paradigms, human rights challenges, the NDIS, housing refugees and Indigenous peoples rights. It's a big agenda.

We will also be considering the implications of the outcomes and learnings from the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse. And that is a good

thing. I believe that this post-Royal Commission time offers a real opportunity for the Church for liberation and redemption for the Church in Australia. The truth sets us free, and this ugly truth had been hidden for too long.

One of the biggest challenges we face – and not just at this Conference – is to reflect on the leadership required to address the need for root and branch reform in the Church, and in our wider society, to ensure that what we have heard over the past 5 years, can never happen again.

It is easy to become cynical when we consider the state of the world and, with the notable exception of Pope Francis, the state of the world's leadership. But I have always held that cynicism is just an elegant form of surrender, and the one thing we must not do in the light of challenges we face is surrender. And yes, there are plenty of challenges, but there is also plenty of hope.

The on-going work of Catholic Social Services right across this nation is a clear example of where we have to look to find that hope. And this work is not just about 'us' doing good to others. If we get it right then we can find ourselves in a situation of mutuality, of learning from each other.

EXPAND

Last week marked the 10th anniversary of Kevin Rudd's National Apology to the Stolen Generations, though you had to look hard to find much mention of it in the midst of Barnaby-gate, and the PM and his Deputy throwing political hand-grenades at each other.

Indeed, even on the political junkies Sunday morning hangover cure, ABC TV's *Insiders*, it took 50 minutes until it was even mentioned, briefly. On the anniversary day itself, the Prime Minister walked out of the *Close The Gap* recommendations for another commitment, prompting Father of Reconciliation and now Senator Patrick Dodson referred to as "indicative of the deafness, the derision and contempt this Government is meting out to Aboriginal people". This Government, of course, does not have that on its own.

All Governments, with some noticeable exceptions, have failed to listen to Indigenous Australians. The recent rejection of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, is but another example.

We are living in difficult hardening times. Reflected by:

- The situation of Manus and Nauru
- The story of Mahamood and her child
- 65 million people displaced; 24 million refugees
- Suicide attempt at Homebush, of young Sri Lankan

Calculated cruelty works best when it is accompanied by silence, by deafness and an unwillingness to hear

This deafness is nothing new, this inability to hear, is often how the powerful (in society (and as the Royal Commission has found) in the Church, have walked away from responsibility to those broken by ‘the system’ that excludes them, or by a toxic culture.

Yet real active intense listening is the key to finding hope not just for the Church, but across society.

Over 20 years ago at a Let’s Talk Reconciliation Conference in Northern Ireland, Aboriginal leader Olga Havnen was asked by the Sinn Fein Mayor of Belfast what would need to happen for a reconciled Australia to become a reality. Olga said that there were 5 steps:

1. Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as First Peoples of Australia;
2. Acknowledgment of the unique rights to land, culture, language and spirituality that flows from that recognition;
3. A commitment to social justice that is both formal and substantive
4. Negotiations in good faith; and
5. A fundamental change in power relations

When the issue about a change in power relations was mentioned, some of the politicians on the stage went demonstrably pale. However, a few short years

later, that was what was delivered in the Good Friday Agreement that put an end to the Troubles and ushered in a new era of peace in Northern Ireland. Power was shared. The guns were put down.

Reconciliation here remains a fundamental plank in the unfinished business of this country.

However, Olga's very wise 5 steps of Recognition, Acknowledgment, Commitment to justice, good faith negotiations leading to a change in power relations could provide us with a template for learning from the Royal Commission and to build something new.

I agree with Francis Sullivan's view that it is not enough for the Church to get its house in order, the house has to be re-built. *(I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Francis for his leadership and witness of behalf of all of us in attending the Royal Commission for every day of its sittings. We owe him a great debt).*

This is not a time to put the wagons in a circle. There needs to be an honest and open recognition of the history that happened: the abuses and systematic cover-ups; an acknowledgment of hurt and pain to the victims, their families, and to the Catholic people, and an acknowledgment of the criminal culpability of a culture that allowed this to happen and be covered up.

There needs to be a commitment to justice that is formal and substantial. Victims must be heard and listened to and compensated properly. In many instances of course, this has been happening. It needs to continue. It needs to continue for a long time.

However, there must also be a fundamental change in Power Relations in the Church. The culture of secrecy, of unquestioning deference to the hierarchy must change. As the Royal Commission concluded: There was "catastrophic failure of leadership, and ultimately in the structure and culture of the Church over decades to respond to child abuse. This harm could have been avoided if the Church had acted in the interests of children rather than in its own interests".

Here lie the seeds for the future, in putting this right.

Those of us involved in Catholic Social Services, and the ‘punters’ in the Church need to see the outcomes of the Royal Commission as an opportunity for liberation and redemption. The child abuse scandal and crimes represent a sordid truth that was hidden. The fact that the truth is out now, as horrific as it is, is far preferable to keeping it hidden.

Last year should not be seen as the Catholic Church’s *annus horribilis*, as has been suggested, because of the outcomes of the Royal Commission and the same sex marriage plebiscite

Last year was however, an *annus horribilis* for Behrooz Boochani and the other hundreds of men trapped on Manus island for up to 5 years; it certainly was for Fatima an asylum seeker on Nauru who is facing imminent death from heart disease who won’t leave Nauru for hospitalisation in Australia because the Australian Government have banned her 17 year old son from accompanying her. It has been one *annus horribilis*’ after another for the victims of child sexual abuse and their families.

If the truth sets us free then we need to embrace this opportunity to act in the interests of the other, rather than in the interests of the Institutional Church.

There is no room here for the “yes,but” response – that admitting that terrible things happened but ‘hey we run great schools, hospitals and social services’. That won’t do any longer. It’s like saying to Indigenous Australians, sorry about the Stolen Generations but looks at the money the Government spends. Completely misses the point.

Acting in service to others, is something that all Catholic Social Services aspire to do, and do in reality, working alongside the poor, the disabled, the homeless, the Indigenous, the refugee and the broken. Every day. It is in this work, the spirituality that drives it, and the compassion that sustains it that we find the hope to face the future.

The late great Columban Cyril Hally used to say to me that you won't hear the Gospel at the centre, but you will hear it at the edges. As Pope Francis says 'go to the fringes'. This is where our social services are based. It is where Jesus went.

Jose Comblin writes of his deep concern for the fate of Christianity in the West and its adherence to what he sees as the Religious Pole as opposed to the Gospel Pole. They of course do not have to be mutually exclusive, but Comblin warns of a Western Church that focusses too much on the Religious Pole which he says requires a tight hierarchical caste system, with a focus on rules and regulations, tightening and straightening, judgments of who is in and who is out, hell-bent on defending the institution.

The Gospel Pole however, takes us back to the social reality, to engagement with the poor. It takes us to places that are messy, chaotic, heroic, painful and joyful. The ups and downs of life. Where lives are lived. These are the places where Jesus hung out and the people he hung out with.

Royal Commissions of themselves do not necessarily deliver lasting change. Sadly, 27 years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the situation concerning Indigenous incarceration rates is worse now in 2018 than when the Royal Commission made their recommendations. Change will only come when it is demanded, and made a priority. That task is up to all of us.

For the future, unquestioning loyalty to the Institutional Church should no longer be espoused as a fine Catholic attribute: it has led to deep institutional failure with catastrophic results for many families and vulnerable children. As Frank Brennan has written: "We Catholics all need to get better in our firm, respectful, and demanding encounters with our hierarchy". Indeed, to question *is* to care. Not enough questions were asked in the past. That was the culture and that is the culture that has to change.

So we need to work for change, building on the great work that is being done and remains being done by Catholic Social Services Organisations. This work is not only important in the life of the Church, it is essential for our society that we engage with the factors that limit the possibility of the living of a fully human life

– environmental destruction, poverty, racism, discrimination, an economic order that reduces people to servants of an economy rather than equal citizens in a society.

This notion of *the citizen* is one we have to defend, especially in these days where it often seems we all live together in an *economy* rather than a *society*. This is significant because the people who live in a *society* are *citizens*, and they have *rights* and they have *responsibilities*. However, those who reside in an *economy* are *customers* or *consumers*, with *choices* – dependent on how much wealth they have access to.

This paradigm shift from a *society* to an *economy* has been accompanied by a shift in language: people who travel in planes are no longer referred to as *passengers*, now they are *customers* (listen to the boarding announcement next time you are at an airport). Banks no longer provide *services*, they sell *products* (I remember recently renegotiating my mortgage, and was told by the bank manager how ‘we have some great new products for you’, i.e. how much further into debt he would like me to be!) And those *who* reside in the care of a psychiatric institution in NSW are no longer *patients* or residents, everyone is a *client* (what are they purchasing?)

Moreover, those who live in a *society* are valued inherently for *who they are*, as human beings with inalienable rights; in an *economy* we value people for *what they can do*, for their utility or production value. And once we base our relationships and interactions on economics primarily rather than humanity, it becomes easier to treat people in inhuman ways. Welcome to Don Dale and its treatment of Aboriginal youth. Welcome to Nauru and Manus Island.

If we are not attentive to the words we use and the assumptions and values they represent, this enables and emboldens “an ideological creep back to bigotry and to racism”. Patrick Dodson explains: “It is fine if you sit in some leafy suburb and never rub shoulders with people who are battling to interpret and navigate their way through modernity in this land of Australia, with its highly-sophisticated culture and its complexities of protocols and procedures and social ethos.”

David Ervine, a Northern Irish Unionist politician who became great mates with Patrick, the former Aboriginal Catholic priest with Indigenous and some Irish

ancestry, summed this up when he visited Australia in 2004 to speak at the Treaty Conference, reflecting on the state of race relations in Australia:

“I can smell racism. It doesn’t grow wild in a field. It is tended in a window box”. He went on to suggest that the then Prime Minister had a very green thumb! The point here is simple: words count. Language matters.

In his speech in the Senate last year calling for section 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act not to be watered down, Patrick Dodson said:

“If this nation cannot stand up for the weakest, the poorest and those who are most vulnerable because of their race, their ethnicity or their beliefs, then we have become a very sad replication of what democracy is about”

In the same way if the Catholic Church in Australia cannot stand up for, *and be seen to stand up for*, the weakest, the poorest and those who are most vulnerable because of their race, ethnicity, beliefs or health, then we would be a sad replication of the Church Jesus wants us to be.

This is the work of Catholic Social Services; Catholic Social Services do this, not just in the Church, but in Australian society.

Australian society needs to hear this. So we cannot be silent. Martin Luther King once famously said that silence is betrayal, and that we begin to die the day we are silent.

The 24 million refugees, the population of Australia – are not just numbers. They are human beings. They are brothers, fathers, sisters, mothers, friends, they are children. More than half are children. They include Mahomood and her daughter. They include a young asylum seeker just released from a Sydney hospital.

Emmanuel Kant was right when he proclaimed that human beings should never be used as a means to an end. They are an end in themselves. The wrong done to them must be righted, the cruelty must to refugees and people seeking asylum must stop and this sorry chapter in Australian history must be closed.

This generation has a challenge on its hands. All of us, unless you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island person, are descended from someone who came from somewhere else – usually over the course of our history, by boat.

Even in recent times the vast majority of people seeking asylum in this country arrive by plane, not by boat.

There remains something about us and boats. Ask an Aboriginal person. Given events in the Parliament last week, with an end to bi-partisan commitment to constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in the Constitution, there is an opportunity for all of us to put on the record our support for the unfinished business of Australian history to be taken seriously and not used for partisan political point-scoring. The Uluru Statement is a conservative proposal with no legislative power. The “nothing about us without us” notion has been rejected again. We cannot accept that. We must not accept that.

Part of the theme of this Conference, calls for Hearing. Over the many years I have spent in this work, it is the voices of the people that point the way forward to Healing and to Hope.

A poem penned by a young Iranian asylum seeker who spent a number of years in mandatory detention, after arriving in Australia by boat:

***I do not know
what will happen after I die
I do not want to know.
But I would like the Potter
to make a whistle
From the clay of my throat.
May this whistle fall into the hands
Of a naughty child
and the child to blow hard on the whistle continuously
with all the suppressed and silent air of his lungs
and disrupt the sleep
of those who seem dead to my cries***

We must proclaim to that asylum seeker, and all others who seek protection only to be met by cruelty, that we are not dead to their cries, and we must never be dead to these cries, no matter what the limits or blindfolds of the domestic political debate.

The work of Catholic Social Services is testament to that the Church is not blind. But this work also needs to be proclaimed – loudly – not just to the members of the Church but to all of society.

The cry of this young man seeking asylum is echoed in the voices of Indigenous people, the homeless, the disabled, the lonely, the invisible people, the very people Catholic Social Services encounter on a daily basis. These people matter.

Nor can we be dead to the cry of the Indigenous people of this country seeking fairness, equality and recognition *in their own land*. As Martin Luther King famously said, we begin to die the day we are silent about the things that matter. Today, the first and last peoples of this nation must not have their cries met with the deadening silence of indifference. They matter.

In recent times we have heard that the biggest threat to our way of life is immigration. The narrative proclaiming that migrants take our jobs, and the Minister Dutton claiming that refugees not only take jobs but clog up unemployment queues at the same time! (Even though all research indicates that more than any other group in society are more inclined to employ other Australians than any other group). And we hear that in Melbourne people are scared to go to a restaurant for fear of being accosted by African gangs. This is blind populism straight from the Donald Trump playbook.

The words of British journalist, Laurie Penny, writing for the New Statesman a year ago about Europe, seem ever more apt today, not just for the European continent but also for Australia:

“The greatest threat to our “way of life” is not migration. Migration does change society, although far less so than, for example, technology, economic austerity, escalating inequality, globalisation or climate change. But the greatest threat to our “way of life”, if there has ever been such a thing on this vast and varied

continent, is not that someday you or I might be sitting on a bus and hear someone speaking Pashto or Tigrinya (or Dari or Arabic).

“The threat is that we will swallow the public narrative that immigrants, people from non-European countries are less human than the rest of us, that they think and feel **less**, that they matter **less**. Europeans are quite capable of sitting calmly in the bubbling water of cultural bigotry until it boils away every shred of compassion we have left. That’s the real threat to our “way of life”. It is in Australia as well.

I often say to young people, never let someone tell you that compassion for others is a form of weakness. In fact it is our greatest civilizing strength.

Healing requires a need for us to reclaim the values that enable people to have life and have life to the full. We must reclaim the language, and fundamentally put humanity and the planet back in the picture. The language we use matters, because when we strip back the language we reveal the *assumptions* underpinning decisions, and when we strip back the assumptions underpinning decisions we reveal the *values* decisions are based on.

As we have learnt in the refugee sector we have to advocate for something not just against something.

We need to work together with those we seek to serve to *create the space* where the authentic voice of people with lived experience can be heard. Ours is not to speak on their behalf but to work with people – we liberate each other together

We will need not to be afraid to raise our voices because as Martin Luther King said ‘we begin to die the day we are silent about the things that matter’.

There is a need in Australia for an articulate cohesive and clear voice of Catholics talking about our issues, not just within the Church. We need a Peoples’ Movement that takes Gospel values into the public debate

Lead up to the Synod – infuse it with the lived experience of those at the margins. Catholic Social Services will have a key role to play

For mine the Synod can go a long way to reclaim for the Church (if it follows the aspiration of Bishop Vincent Long of Parramatta) that it is:

- Less an enclosure for the virtuous but more an oasis for the weary and the downtrodden
- Less an experience of exclusion and elitism and more an encounter of radical love, inclusiveness and solidarity
- Less an attitude of 'we are right and you are wrong' and more of an openness to truth wherever and from whoever it is to be found
- Less a leadership of control and clericalism but more a diakonia of a humble servant exemplified by Christ at the Last Supper
- Less a language of condemnation and
- Less a preoccupation for its own maintenance but more a concern for the Kingdom and the people of God

We are indeed on the threshold of renewal and transformation, and a new paradigm based on mutuality not exclusion, service not clericalism, engagement with the world not flight from or hostility against it.

To do this we will need to maintain our passion and enthusiasm. This can often be difficult to do but if we remain close to the people, listening etc...

For me, maintaining hope and optimism comes down to a simple decision- to Choose Life! EXPAND re grandchildren

Maintain the faith in the Christian 'craziness' (as Jon Sobrino suggests) that it is still possible to live on this planet like a human being.

Look to history – **change happens**. Particularly through Peoples' Movements – where people coalesce to take joint action around shared values – inspired by a mobilizing vision:

- The environment movement
- Women's movement
- Anti-apartheid movement
- The movement for disability rights

- The peace movement
- Look at the fall of the Soviet Union, the Berlin Wall, the independence of East Timor, South Africa

Now is not the time for putting the wagons in a circle. We need a Peoples' Movement in the Church, including significant lay leadership in partnership of course with Bishops, clergy, religious and people of good will. All in. We will need to be brave in our pursuit of justice in words and deeds as we seek:

Justice for those who have been hurt by the Church and those in our community who have been left behind by poor Government policy or through an economy that fails to value them as people

We seek to build a world reflective of Jesus' love where

- The needs of the poor take priority over the wants of the rich;
- The freedom of the weak takes priority over the liberty of the powerful and where
- The access of marginalized groups in society takes priority over an order which excludes them

In the words of Seamus Heaney, some will often say it is futile to hope on this side of the grave, but, occasionally in the lives of people and nations the great tide of justice rises up and *hope and history rhyme*.

AS we go about this task we do more than hope, but work and live *in expectation* that the change is gonna come.

Time to start blowing on those clay whistles, and go and change history.

Phil Glendenning