

1988

Pastoral Letter

Racism and the Conversion of the Human Heart

Archbishops and Bishops of Australia

11 December 1988

For everyone living in Australia the two hundredth anniversary of white settlement [2910] has had some significance. For some it has been a year of celebration; for others it has brought great pain because of injustices suffered now and in the past by themselves or their ancestors. For the community as a whole it has provided an opportunity for reflection on issues that divide. Racism is one of the most significant of these issues.

Events during 1988 that have highlighted deeply serious problems of racism include [2911] the Immigration Debate, the Muirhead Inquiry into Black Deaths in Custody and the discussion on the place of refugees in our society.

Decisions of governments are central to the resolution of these matters and we all [2912] have the responsibility to influence them. At the same time, it is in day-to-day living that each one of us has the obligation to promote values of justice, to be well-informed, and to practise an all-embracing personal acceptance of others. In doing so, we will surely be rewarded by the joy and enrichment resulting from greater familiarity with other cultures.

This significant year for Australians also coincided with the commemoration of [2913] other important world events. Forty years ago, on 10 December 1948, the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the time when representatives of the people of a world recuperating from World War II were drafting this important statement, the Australian government was setting in place its immigration program. During these forty years about four million migrants from Asia, the South Pacific, the Middle East, Britain, Ireland, Europe, Africa and the Americas have added to the mosaic of Australian cultural communities of which the original inhabitants, the Aboriginal people, are now giving us deeper insights into their rightful place.

In 1986 during his visit Pope John Paul II repeatedly drew attention to the multi- [2914] ethnic richness of modern Australia. Among the most significant and publicised occasions were the meetings with Aboriginal people at Alice Springs and with children of many races at Altona North.

In the encyclical letter, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, racial discrimination is placed in the [2915] context of underdevelopment and exploitation (par 15). Australia provides an ideal opportunity for showing the way in eliminating racial discrimination and exploitation by reasonable, thoughtful neighborliness, a relationship that includes

every single person. The Pope calls this ‘solidarity’.

As a member of the United Nations, Australia has participated closely in the formulation of human rights standards and laws. Half a decade has passed since the Decade Against Racial Discrimination (1973 to 1983). During that decade, in 1975, the Commonwealth Parliament passed the Racial Discrimination Act and, in 1981, appointed the Human Rights Commission, now succeeded by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. [2916]

Preventing the injustice caused by racist attitudes however, is not only a matter of legislative action; what is first required is a conversion of the human heart. [2917]

May we never forget the words of Pope John Paul II in Adelaide during the Mass for ‘Australia: Land of Many Cultures’:

Every expression of hostility towards others builds a wall of tension between people and reveals a heart of stone. Every act of discrimination is an act of injustice and a violation of personal dignity. Every time we are intolerant we close our eyes to God’s image in the other person. Every time we fail to recognize the demands of worldwide justice, we fail to grasp the meaning of our universal solidarity.

At both the personal and communal level fear is one of the main factors leading to racist attitudes and behaviour. What could we fear from building bridges between races instead of high, almost insurmountable walls? [2919]

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in article 1: *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.* [2920]

Racial acceptance is given the highest priority in theory, but in practice it is far too frequently violated. [2921]

Racism can be defined as discrimination or prejudice against a race or races resulting from the belief that a particular race, especially one’s own, is superior to others. [2922]

Racial prejudice can stem from the fear of losing something that another may want. It can stem from the proud assertion that one’s own race is the best. Fear and pride make it only too easy to prejudice, categorise, keep people out, and violate the rights of others. [2923]

Racist behaviour expresses itself in exploitation, or the attempt to use people of other races in a way that suits ourselves and not them; in discrimination, or treating some people worse than others because of their racial characteristics; in aggression, verbal and physical; in stereotyping, or holding to fixed ideas about what people from other races must be like; in scapegoating, or allowing others to bear the blame for disharmonies; and in offensive language, or a choice of words that can put down [2924]

instead of lift up or state simply the way things are.

Racism lies behind some of the housing and renting problems faced by certain individuals and groups in the community It also manifests itself in the fact that the imprisonment rate is many times greater for Aboriginal people than for others and in the comparatively high infant mortality rate among Aborigines. And it is present when our society takes inadequate measures to eliminate the disadvantages experienced in such areas as employment, education, the courts, social welfare, politics and even in some forms of religious practice and parish life by those who speak little or no English. [2925]

Although history shows us that tensions between races are common they are certainly not inevitable. [2926]

In the New Testament some of Christ's strongest and most powerful statements related to the inclusion of all people, to giving a place to those whom others preferred to exclude, and to being open to dialogue with every individual and group in his society. He was not concerned so much with the external or with appearances but with allowing the emergence of the beauty that is within and in which the whole person is contained. The final messages of Christ were commands to include all nations in what was his legacy: to spread joyful and good news, and to wish all people well, in other words to love others. [2927]

It is our responsibility as followers of Christ to acknowledge and address the issue of racism prepared by a true change of heart and with a resolution for practical action in the years ahead. As pastors we recommend that all of us: [2928]

1. Affirm multicultural Australia, making it clear that we believe that our society provides the opportunity for groups of people with different cultural backgrounds and identities to live in harmony.
2. Consciously opt for the elimination of racism by every means, especially education.
3. Take every opportunity to learn from the original inhabitants of our land and their descendants.
4. Refuse to countenance all forms of injustice and discrimination towards the Aboriginal people.
5. Seriously and objectively evaluate the contribution of our immigrants.
6. Change attitudes which have given so much offence to people of Asian origin during this year's immigration debate.
7. Take every opportunity in our daily contacts and conversations to learn about and rejoice in the cultural riches of one another.
8. Firmly opt for solidarity between all of Australia's inhabitants by individually and communally responding to a call to conversion based on hope, promise and love, and to reconciliation with people of every race living in our country.

9. Recognise that humanity will never achieve the full unity desired by Christ until it learns to transcend barriers formed by racial difference and to accept the spirit of St. Paul's words: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3:28)

10. Pray that we will all achieve in our own lives that conversion of heart which will lead to the elimination of racist attitudes; and that all people of good will may be open to such conversion.

We appeal to our political leaders to consider increasing immigration levels and the intake of refugees. Let discrimination in employment be eliminated and appropriate access be guaranteed to all. Let every person open his or her heart without fear or prejudice and recognise that we all have the same rights and duties and the same responsibility to witness to unity and cooperation. [2929]

We repeat what we said in our pastoral letter to mark the beginning of this bicentennial year: We ask you, our Catholic people, to be leaders of reconciliation seeking the unity of Christ that acknowledges but transcends all differences of culture, status or race. [2930]

We believe that Australia has a unique opportunity at this moment in history to become an example and a symbol of the kind of world community of peoples which should exist in the coming century: one in which all of God's children live in peace and solidarity with one another. [2931]

Source: Archives of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO), Canberra, Australia
