

2010 SOCIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY STATEMENT

# Violence in Australia

## A Message of Peace



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

# Chairman's message

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference I present the 2010 Social Justice Sunday Statement, *Violence in Australia: A message of peace.*

Every day, it seems, we hear news of some act of gratuitous violence: someone bashed in the street or some violent confrontation on the roads. Indeed, this Statement begins with a consideration of just such a confrontation.

This is not the only kind of violence that should concern us. Many people are affected by violence in their own homes, and their lives can be damaged for decades. Young people's lives can be ruined by campaigns of bullying and humiliation by their peers. And we see the culture of abuse that at times infects our politics and our media.

For Christians, Jesus Christ is the strongest example and source of strength in our long journey towards the peace of God. He was the victim of the worst that humanity could do. His response to violence was not more violence but an act of transcendence that set humanity on a new path forever: The mission and resurrection of Jesus are both a message of hope to humanity and a call to conversion: to renounce the sources of violence and to look for new and constructive ways of addressing the pain and anger we see in our world.

This Statement is issued at the conclusion of the United Nations' *International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the*

*Children of the World* and the World Council of Churches' *Decade to Overcome Violence*. Key goals have been the promotion of fundamental human rights, addressing wide varieties of violence – direct and structural – in homes, communities and in the international arenas, and learning from local and regional ways of overcoming violence.

In the Statement examples are given of men and women who are making their contribution to peace as individuals, in their communities, and in response to issues of national and global importance. There are countless others who work tirelessly, and often without recognition, to bring peace where discord or violence would otherwise prevail. As we celebrate Social Justice Sunday, let us remember that every effort we take to overcome violence is a response to Christ's call to go into the world and bring a peace that the world alone cannot give.

With every blessing,



Christopher A Saunders DD  
Bishop of Broome  
Chairman, Australian Catholic Social  
Justice Council

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## Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is the permanent assembly of the bishops of our nation and the body through which they act together in carrying out the Church's mission at a national level. The ACBC website at [www.catholic.org.au](http://www.catholic.org.au) gives a full list of Bishops Conference commissions as well as statements and other items of news and interest.

# Violence in Australia

## A Message of Peace

*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'...  
You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'  
But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...*

(Matt 5:38, 43–44)

On 25th October 2009 Gearoid Walsh, a young Irish tourist visiting Sydney, became involved in an argument at a takeaway shop. He was punched and fell, hitting his head on the ground. A week later he was dead.

Gearoid's story is tragic and, sadly, an increasingly common example of anger and frustration exploding into violence. We see how the community's outrage at such events, often fanned by media reports, can give rise to calls for retribution and revenge.

But the way in which his mother, Mrs Treasa Walsh, responded to the death of her son made this a remarkable story. She felt for the man who struck Gearoid: 'I am heartbroken for him because we don't blame him, we don't want him to serve time in prison.'<sup>1</sup>

The story of Gearoid Walsh's death affects us because it reminds us painfully of a destructive strand of violence in Australian life. At the same time, the response of his family to his death shows us that peacemaking is more powerful than violence.

Mrs Walsh's response reminds us how radical and central are Jesus' teachings about peacemaking in the Gospel. Her concern for the man whose violent action led to her son's death reminds us of Jesus' radical invitation to love our enemies, to do good to those who harm us, to turn the other cheek when we are struck (Matt 5:38–48). There is nothing weak or cowardly in acting in this way. It shows true strength.

Our Christian faith compels us to be peacemakers in the face of violence. We all respond to anger and violence at different levels: at the personal level, in the family and community, and in the wider society. The call to be peacemakers can be challenging when other aspects of our popular culture encourage aggressive attitudes or the desire to 'get even'. However, there are often many simple ways in which we can manage anger, prevent violence and build peace at all levels of society.

Discipleship of Jesus leads naturally to a desire to make



AJ Photo/photoLibrary.com

peace; and his power working in us makes that desire a reality. Christians welcome aspects of our culture that discourage violence. They treasure peace and are called to be strong in their commitment not only to live peacefully but to be creative makers of peace.

Peace and peace-building go beyond simply the absence of conflict. They are positive, constructive ways of living that require constant nurturing, and that reflect the sacredness that is in the deepest part of our being – the sacredness that is the presence of the God of peace in our world.



## violence in australia

# I. Violence and peacemaking in Australia

### The personal roots of violence

When we think of violence we often think of street fights, of war or of oppression. But the path to violence – and the steeper path to peacemaking – begins in the individual human heart.

Anger is a normal emotional response to loss, frustration or the experience of injustice – either towards oneself or others. It is an emotion that needs to be managed and controlled. At its worst, it becomes an intense, disproportionate rage. Violence can be considered an attempt to control someone else by physical and/or psychological force.

If we are fortunate in our childhood, we learn from our parents, family and schools how to act peacefully. They encourage us to have big desires for things beyond our immediate needs – desire for friendship, for a close relationship with God, or to live in a more just world.

Even if we have good role models in life, controlling our anger and being peacemakers will be a lifetime's work. It is natural to feel angry if our desires are frustrated, if we see others being treated unjustly or if our trust is betrayed. The key to acting in a peaceful way lies in shaping our desires and handling our anger creatively. In some circumstances, for example, the expression of a righteous anger can be entirely appropriate. Anger is a good servant, but not a good master.

When people are raised in an environment where violence is a common experience, there can be difficulty in holding back from acting violently. This response can rise from a well of rage that is fed by the violence they suffered themselves as children. But for all people there can be times when the response to circumstances that cause anger is out of all proportion to the events that trigger it. In day-to-day life in Australia we can all speak of examples of impatience or anger that result in verbal abuse, arguments and fights. This is just one of the ways in which the personal cycle of violence finds expression.

Another comes with the greed that is fed by consumerist culture. In Australia, we are often encouraged to believe that material things are what matter and what we should desire. We are told that we shall be happy if we have the latest clothes, the best cars and the newest gadgets. Our economy is built on consumption. When wealth and possessions are made the measure of happiness and success, people who are already disadvantaged can easily feel further excluded. Even those who are well-off can feel that they are deprived of what society says is their entitlement. Exclusion leads to frustration, and frustration can lead to rage and even violence.



Susanne Borges/AB/photolibary.com

A preoccupation with material acquisition that stunts human relationships has a similarly detrimental impact on how we relate to creation, seen in the degradation of the environment and the waste of resources God intended for the use of all.<sup>2</sup>

We are also told that we should strive to be strong, individualistic and competitive. People are divided into winners and losers. We are pushed to make choices and to perform outstandingly. Even at junior levels, sport can focus on winning and not enjoyment. School is often about achieving, getting the highest score, getting into the most prestigious faculties.

Competition in itself is not a bad thing; it can bolster the common good when it is based on fair play, shared effort and a concern for those who are vulnerable. A competitiveness with no rules and a concern to 'win at all costs', however, undermines the dignity of individuals and the bonds of our common humanity. An overly competitive culture based on selfish individualism is inevitably an angry culture, because for every winner there will be a loser whose desires and self-respect are frustrated. Yet again, anger can lead to violence.



## Violence in the family and community

Although both violence and peacemaking are ultimately matters of the human heart, they are played out where human beings meet. In particular, the home is the place where we see the most striking and generous ways of peacemaking. Yet that is also the place where violence often takes place.

We read reports of terrible incidents of family violence; those who work extensively with families know that much more violence and abuse goes unreported. Domestic violence is as likely to be found in rich as in poor families; those who suffer it are more likely to be women and children. Many of those who act violently suffered abuse in their own childhood. Children in these situations, ashamed not to be able to protect themselves or those they love, can come to associate peacemaking with appeasement and cowardice.<sup>3</sup>

If the home is a place of hidden violence, it is also the place of hidden heroism. People struggle bravely with their anger; forgive one another for their behaviour and make peace in difficult situations. We are aware of the angers that overflow into violence. We are less aware of the courage of those who control their feelings, soothe the angry and try to find a better way to resolve conflict. Patience and strength is apparent in family members who struggle with normal feelings of frustration and anger.

That does not mean that violence should be endured passively. There can be situations where feelings are not dealt with adequately and violence can ensue. We recognise the great strength displayed by those who seek professional support when violence threatens the wellbeing of their family.

The most publicised incidents of violence occur in public places where we meet as strangers. We hear increasing

reports of road rage; of bashings fuelled by drugs and alcohol; of armed robberies on trains or in shops; of professional sportsmen involved in violence in pubs and clubs; of players and umpires being assaulted even at junior sporting events. Assault, which constitutes the bulk of violent crime, has increased by over 50 per cent in the decade to 2007.<sup>4</sup>

While violence can be manifested at all levels of society, it is frequently experienced by those who are powerless, excluded and marginalised. Research shows that homeless people are particularly exposed to violence.<sup>5</sup> We know that Indigenous Australians are the victims of physical or threatened violence at much higher levels than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Recent incidents where Indian students and Sudanese migrants have been attacked remind us that cultural minorities can be vulnerable.

And what of the psychological bombardment of violence through television, the movies, networking sites and violent computer games? We are concerned at how children, even at an early age, are now being encouraged through these media to think and act aggressively. Many young people too are subjected to verbal aggression or internet bullying. They are belittled, have derogatory remarks posted and false stories told about them. This can extend to sustained campaigns of vilification and exclusion that are as destructive as physical violence. Worse, when children feel they have a need or right to carry knives to assert or defend themselves, recently with tragic consequences, we must ask what kind of society we have created for them and what values we have instilled.

However, if the perception of violence in the community is the problem, then it is also in the community that we are challenged to find solutions. Think, for example, of how our attitudes have changed in the space of a few decades towards

corporal punishment. School programs such as 'Peacemakers' and 'You Can Do It' are proactive ways children have been introduced to the nonviolent resolution of disputes.

Against the temptation to regard the world outside as a threat and to withdraw, our local churches, schools and community groups have a vital role in helping individuals and groups to find an alternative to violence and bring renewed community solidarity. In ways often small and unacknowledged, these groups bridge divides and restore community relationships.

Andrew Mearns/Fairfaxphotos



Riot at Cronulla, 2005

## Social structures and violence

Violence and peacemaking are also implanted in our Australian history, institutions and culture. Australians commonly think of their country as a tolerant and accepting one, the land of the 'fair go', and in very many ways they are right to do so. Australian society evolved to be a welcoming and accepting one for many, but strains of violence and discrimination have remained. Australian history contains stories of brutal attitudes towards some outsiders. It can be difficult to recognise the intolerance and even violence in our society's structures when we are not affected directly. For many, however, this structural violence has real and often devastating effects.

Violence was part of the European settlement of Australia. Most significantly, it involved the violent dispossession of Indigenous people. Convicts came from harsh conditions in British prisons, and could be subjected to brutal punishment during their time here. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese people experienced prejudice and often violence. Later in the 20th century, children sent as orphans from Britain were often treated harshly and even brutally in Australian institutions.

Today, the legacy of this history of violence and marginalisation persists in aspects of Australian society. Indigenous people remain among the most disadvantaged in our nation, facing enormous barriers to education, employment and access to health services, and making up almost a quarter of Australia's prison population.<sup>7</sup>



Mark Baker/AFP

*National Apology to the Stolen Generations, Parliament House, 2008*

When Australia was shocked by revelations of abuse in Aboriginal communities in northern Australia, our political leaders committed to an emergency response. That response has itself at times had the trappings of violence and imposed authority. As we the Australian bishops have pointed out since the beginning of the Northern Territory Intervention in 2007, this policy has needed less emphasis on law and order and dependence on police and the armed forces, and more on a consultative community development respectful of traditional culture and fostering true partnership.<sup>8</sup>

Politicians and the media can exploit violence for political or commercial reasons. For example, they can portray certain groups such as asylum seekers, cultural minorities, the unemployed and drug users as a threat, arousing fear and even anger. Often, the suggested remedies for community discord or violence lie in harsher penalties and in more intrusive forms of policing.

Divisive political rhetoric and sensationalist broadcasting encourage fear, even hatred, which can paradoxically make us more tolerant of the violence we deplore. How often do we witness the media 'blame game' where vulnerable groups are recast as aggressors and conflict among neighbours is inflamed?

The media have at times demonised the people who come to our shores seeking asylum from war and injustice. This campaign of dehumanisation can turn reality upside-down and make the powerful feel they are the victims of the powerless. How can it be that a group of desperate asylum seekers could

inspire such animosity and rage throughout Australia and reignite old fears rather than an informed debate about our obligations to the most marginalised and powerless? These people remain at risk of being pawns in a continuing game of political point-scoring until our national leaders find the resolve to adopt a bipartisan approach to meeting Australia's obligations.

We need to bring a critical eye to the way the structures of society operate, public policy is developed and implemented, and media coverage and national debate unfold. At each level of our lives many factors encourage violence. But these factors also invite us to build peace.



## 2. Christian faith: Peace triumphs over violence

Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, brings to birth a new world in which it becomes possible to live his peace, the peace which the world cannot give. He offers a vision: to act peacefully and to work for a just and peaceful world; he also becomes the power to make the vision reality. The heart of this vision is the God who loves each of us intensely and passionately. This God has invited us to shape our world so that all human beings share it equitably and justly, and has prepared for us happiness beyond our imagining. As Pope Benedict says:

*God is Love which saves, a loving Father who wants to see his children look upon one another as brothers and sisters, working responsibly to place their various talents at the service of the common good of the human family. God is the unfailing source of the hope which gives meaning to personal and community life. God, and God alone, brings to fulfillment every work of good and of peace.<sup>9</sup>*

This vision of the world, which is focused on Jesus crucified and risen, is significant because it colours the things that we desire. It leads us far beyond our immediate wishes for material things, for success, safety and wealth, and sets them against our larger desires to love, to be loved, to give ourselves to God and to one another. We may still be angry when we cannot realise our wishes for comfort and wealth, but to act violently towards other people would contradict what matters most to us – our shared humanity.

Other people are not simply competitors whom we must defeat to gain the prizes of life. They are not obstacles that we must push out of the way in order to get what we want.

The encounter with the Risen Christ enables us to see and work for a world in which all human beings are respected for who they are, and where people care for one another;

especially for the most needy. It is a world in which people want peace and resist any instinct for violence. If we desire such a world, we will find ways to be peacemakers within it. Pope Benedict says:

*The duty to respect the dignity of each human being, in whose nature the image of the Creator is reflected, means in consequence that the person can not be disposed of at will. Those with greater political, technical, or economic power may not use that power to violate the rights of others who are less fortunate. Peace is based on respect for the rights of all. Conscious of this, the Church champions the fundamental rights of each person.<sup>10</sup>*

More than just the absence of violence, peace in its fullest sense, the peace of Christ himself, entails the true development of people. It means ensuring individuals have the right and means to participate fully in community life and to realise the spiritual, cultural, social and economic potential of their lives.<sup>11</sup> To work for peace is to build a robust, participatory and mature society that is respectful of human rights and the development of people as God intended.

### Jesus as a peacemaker

Jesus shows us the way to peace and offers us the gift of his peace. The Gospel teaches us how to build peace and points constantly to what matters. As we reflect on the Gospel narratives, we become more aware of how our individual wants affect our relationships in the community and have a bearing on the very structures of our society. For Jesus, the key to a peaceful life and to just relations was to have a large vision of God's care for the world. Disputes about money or minor points of the Law, for example, were a sign of small desires. When people asked him to adjudicate their business disputes or challenged him on points of the Law, he simply shifted ground (Matt 22:15–22; Luke 6:1–11). Other things were much more serious. Then as now, he invites us into a communion with him which enables us to see the world through his eyes.

The Gospels recognise that we naturally become angry if we are frustrated, even when striving for the highest ideals. Jesus himself displayed anger at his opponents when they used religion to oppress people, and he acted forcefully in



Rob Griffith/AP



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overturning the sellers' tables in the Temple (Mark 11:15–19). The Gospel presents his action as a controlled gesture designed to remind people of the prophets' criticism of their society and to make them ask themselves what really mattered. It shows us that anger can be constructive if it is used for the right purposes.

### Yielding ground

Jesus also used dramatic gestures to make people stop in their tracks and ask themselves what really matters. In doing so, he showed us how to build peace. When, for example, his disciples begin to argue about which of them is the most important, Jesus tells them that rivalry has no place among his followers. If they understood him and his word, they would want to serve one another.

He stresses this point by bringing little children into the group, and saying that his disciples should welcome them (Mark 9:33–37). When the disciples respond to his invitation to turn to the little children, they recognise that what matters in life, what they should desire, is not honour but relationships that take them into the hearts of other people.

Jesus' teaching is full of these circuit breakers, which reverse the predictable cycles of quarrelling, hostility and violence. For example, instead of admiring the wealthy, the strong, the warriors, the idolised and influential, Jesus says that those who mourn, the poor, the peacemakers, the merciful and the pure in heart are blessed (Matt 5:1–12).

Similarly, when talking about violence, he does not leave us a handbook for self-defence, but a summons to shift ground and find reconciliation. He tells us to walk a second mile with the person who forces us to walk one mile, to offer our tunic when we are sued for our cloak, to love our persecutors (Matt 5:39–41). This behaviour is confronting, even shocking. But it moves us away from violence. Instead of escalating disputes, we look for peaceful ways of responding that allow us to engage with the violent person as a person and not simply as a force to be feared or confronted. They create a space for something new to happen – something that will take us away from the path that leads to violence. And Jesus himself enables that something new to happen.

The peace of Jesus does not conform to the usual standards of the world, but it is as relevant to the structures of our society, and even to the realm of international affairs, as it is to our personal and community relationships.

### Jesus goes to the margins

Jesus grounds this call to peacemaking in our attitude to people we see as hostile. We are to go out to them, not react threateningly to them. Against the conventional teaching that we should love our neighbours and hate our enemies, Jesus instructs his followers to love their enemies (Matt 5:38–42). He makes this command seem natural when he points to God, who treats all people equally.

We see how Jesus' teaching might work in practice in John's account of the woman at the well (John 4:1–29). Thirsty on a journey, Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for water from the town well. Samaritans and Jews were sworn enemies, so the woman answers him dismissively. But Jesus' actions in asking a favour of the woman and in keeping the conversation going leads to the transformation of a relationship from one traditionally characterised by fear and loathing into one of peace and understanding.

The same ethnic hostility underlies the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus is invited by a questioner to divide people into neighbours and enemies. Instead he tells a story about a Jewish person who has been mugged, of a number of his fellow citizens who ignored him, and concludes by praising an 'enemy', the Samaritan who went out of his way to help him. To be a neighbour really means going out to people in need, and not worrying about how to classify them as friendly or hostile.

### Jesus' death and resurrection

Jesus' claim, that in him God's Kingdom would be realised, threatened the foundations of the rulers' power, security and control. When what mattered to them was challenged, they responded by having him killed in the most dehumanising and degrading way they knew. Jesus' torture and death was a careful exercise in violence. It was designed to persuade people that control belonged to the violent, and to crush any hope that people might come together to shape a more humane world in which the love of God ruled.

For a time, the narrow world of sin seemed more powerful than the large hope of a peaceful world. Yet Jesus' death turned things around and offered a dramatic new vision. What seemed to be the ultimate defeat turned out to be the ultimate victory. Jesus goes to his death, but then God raises him from the dead. This is God's circuit breaker. The Son of God did not fight fire with fire, did not take control, but went to death for us. God, however, fought death with life, violence with peace.



World Youth Day, 2008/Getty Images

Jesus remained faithful to the large desires and to the great vision of God's Kingdom in this world and beyond. His rising proved that life was stronger than death, large desires were more powerful than small desires for power and control, and that peacemaking was far stronger than violence. The initial awe at Christ's Resurrection gave way to confidence that nothing could ever separate us from God's love. Resurrection was for all, not just for Jesus.

### Christian peace-builders

In the darkness of Gethsemane, surrounded by an armed mob that had come to arrest him, Jesus rejected violence. He rebuked the disciple who drew his sword against a soldier (Matt 26:51–52). The disciples, initially paralysed by fear, did not remain so, nor were they consumed with anger following his death. They did not resort to retaliatory acts of violence. Rather, with the Risen Christ in their midst, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, they were sent on a new mission and given a large vision – to go out to the world and proclaim the Good News.

Throughout the Church's history, Christians have been inspired by Jesus' example and empowered by his presence to make similar unexpected dramatic gestures of peacemaking. They were rarely appreciated by their contemporaries. In 1219, during the Crusades, St Francis of Assisi travelled to Egypt to visit and engage with the Sultan, accepting the danger he faced. The Sultan received him hospitably and spoke with him at length, and Francis returned

with an admiration for Muslim piety and life. Francis' courage in going unarmed to one he saw as hostile led him to recognise the humanity of his supposed enemy and so to break the logic of war.

In modern times, we have the example of Dorothy Day (1897–1980), who was willing to risk everything to promote peace. She established communities of poor and broken people throughout the United States, promoted social justice through her speaking and writing, and insisted on the Christian commitment to make peace. She also began a newspaper, the *Catholic Worker*, which helped promote her ideas and finance her good work. When she opposed Franco's rebellion in the Spanish Civil War, the *Catholic Worker* lost half its circulation. She was later pilloried for criticising the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

One who stood in solidarity with remote and marginalised communities was the Australian Irene McCormack (1938–91), a Josephite sister who followed in the tradition of Mother Mary MacKillop. Sister Irene was sent to a remote Peruvian community, supporting the work of Caritas Peru. She remained with those she had come to serve despite many warnings that she and her companions were in great danger from insurgents. In 1991 she was captured, along with other townspeople on the terrorists' death list. Sister Irene was interrogated and murdered only metres from the town church.<sup>12</sup>

Pope John Paul II was another witness to justice and peace in the face of violence. At the global level he demonstrated the courage called for in making peace and finding alternatives to war when he opposed the invasion of Iraq. Addressing the representatives of 177 countries at a time of heightened diplomatic tensions only months before the invasion, he spoke of the need for the peoples of the earth and their leaders to say 'NO TO WAR'.<sup>13</sup> Despite the pressure brought to bear on him he continued to make clear his opposition to the war, which flowed from his understanding of the Gospel.

These people demonstrate that peacemaking is stronger than hatred and violence. They were often criticised for being impractical, but their impracticality has spoken more powerfully and creatively to people than the 'realism' of those who clung to hatred and defended war. Mrs Walsh's forgiving response to the man who killed her son stands in the same great tradition of courageous generosity. Saint Paul was surely right when he said that 'I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me' (Phil 4:13). It is only the living presence of Jesus within us which can empower us to live consistently the message of the Gospel.

### 3. Faith and peacemaking in Australia

The Christian impulse to peace-building starts in the individual human heart. It gives a meaning to our lives, insisting that all human beings are precious because we are all made and loved by God. So each human being has dignity and deserves to be respected by other human beings. That means that they should be secure and free from the fear of violence and from experiences or social structures that undermine human dignity and development.

When considering the need for peace in our relationships, communities and our nation, the Church emphasises justice and equity for the needs of those who are vulnerable. We are reminded, in the words of Pope John XXIII, that 'the common good, since it is intimately bound up with human nature, can never exist fully and completely unless the human person is taken into account at all times.'<sup>14</sup>

In his recent Encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, Pope Benedict XVI challenges the mentality of greed, power and competition that divides our world into winners and losers. Against selfishness, which causes violence and oppression among individuals and entire communities, the Pope holds up the Christian example of love. He speaks to us of the 'astonishing experience of gift':

*Gratuitousness is present in our lives in many different forms which often go unrecognised because of a purely consumerist and utilitarian view of life. The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension.*<sup>15</sup>

Against some of the less generous values espoused in modern culture, we are challenged to consider what we have to give to others.

We are encouraged to desire more lasting things – loving relationships, wisdom, a better world. We are called to review our lives, reassess our priorities and consider how we conduct ourselves.

We are called to bring Christ's peace where there is conflict and division – to help build communities by addressing the causes of violence and creating social conditions that foster human dignity. When we follow Christ's example, we can even begin to empathise with people who act violently, ask ourselves what experience made them so easily yield to violence, and consider how we might help them find a better way to live.

More broadly, as citizens of Australia, we each have the right and responsibility to participate actively in the life of our

nation and consider the part we can play in bringing peace to the world. We have a duty to help build up and shape our nation's political, legal, economic and social structures and to identify where exclusion, oppression and violence occur in Australian society.

We have seen how the roots of anger and violence can run deep at these different levels. Paradoxically, if the circumstances of violence seem to be reason to despair, they are also an occasion for hope and an opportunity for justice and peace. Pope Benedict has given us a challenge: rather than measuring our life by what the world gives us and what we feel we are entitled to, we can measure it by what we can offer the world.

The Gospel stories show how Jesus gives us very practical examples of what we can do to bring peace – by yielding ground, protecting the most vulnerable, challenging injustice and restoring dignity. Easter shows how the examples can become reality.

In the spirit of the Gospels and in the light of Easter, the Catholic bishops of Australia invite all people to a conversion for peace. Conversion is a constant process, a continuing commitment to see and address the sources of violence in our lives and in the society around us.

We ask you, and all people at all levels of our society, to consider the following questions as a basis for practical initiatives for peace.



Gerard F. Fritz/photolibary.com



## Questions for individuals and families

### How do we acknowledge the dignity of others?

Listening respectfully to another's point, even if we disagree, bestows a dignity that is fundamental to all relationships. Even in times of uncertainty or tension there is scope to speak and act kindly.

### How can we respond positively to anger?

Anger, even when justified, can lead to blame and personal insults that divert people from addressing the cause of any problem. Instead, we can take a conscious decision not to 'get personal' but to take responsibility in our relationships. Small gestures of peace can restore relationships. It is a matter of justice that the voice of the weakest or most vulnerable person is heard.

### How attentive are we to prayer and our spiritual development?

Prayer and worship give us a renewed sense of the presence of God and create space to be more reflective about our lives and the needs of our families and friends. Peace fostered in our hearts lifts our vision above the trivial to consider what really matters.

### Are we prepared to seek help when we are not coping?

Emotional and physical violence cause tragic injury to individuals and destroy families. How can we be of support to all who are abused or caught in a cycle of violence? Can we find supportive and non-threatening ways to encourage people to seek help?

### How can we foster strong families?

Poverty, lack of education and work, addictions and poor health can tear at the very fabric of family life. It can be difficult for families who are struggling to reach out for support. How can we help meet their needs and ensure all families have the means to welcome new life, care for family members and create homes that are places of refuge and support?

There are many examples of initiatives fostering peace at the individual level.

We recognise the work of Church organisations assisting individuals and families who are struggling to survive often with the experience of violence. The marriage preparation programs, the relationship counselling and family support programs of Catholic Social Services Australia provide professional and innovative service to individuals and families in need. Another example is the charitable and outreach support provided by local groups, such as the St Vincent de Paul Society, to people who are pushed to the margins of society.

In schools, we see not only the fostering of respectful relationships through programs such as anti-bullying strategies. We see the encouragement of students in inspiring initiatives for peace. Last year, for example, year 9 students at an all-boys Marist college in Sydney introduced a 'Dignity Week' as their response to the prevalence of violence against women. Local dignitaries and mothers of the boys attended the launch of the college's week of activities. The boys collected funds, which they donated to a women's refuge run by the Good Samaritan Sisters.

A similar initiative is the 'NO MORE' campaign, supported by CatholicCare NT. In 2006, Indigenous men in the Northern Territory went to ABC sports commentator Charlie King, who was the Chair of the Territory's Community Services Advisory Council, seeking to have their voices heard in government consultations about family violence and to have a greater role in finding solutions. The campaign now has the support of local groups, football clubs and their players, media and governments. Men are taking a stand against violence, overcoming negative stereotypes about Indigenous men, and committing to strengthening family life.



CatholicCare NT



## Questions for our local communities

### **What can we contribute to the life of the community?**

How we engage with our communities has a huge bearing on the common good. How aware are we of the needs of our neighbours? Are we engaged with our local parish? Do we know of good works in our local community and are we willing to lend a hand?

### **How does our community meet the needs of all its members?**

The services and facilities of our local communities are important in supporting family life and protecting human dignity. The equitable distribution and sustainable use of resources helps to maintain a decent standard of living. Communities foster peace when they ensure safety and security while making it possible for all voices to be heard and differences to be resolved. How does our parish reach out to those in need and bring peace where there is discord?

### **How do we support and celebrate our cultural diversity?**

The policy of multiculturalism has given vibrancy to our national identity. Our common humanity is strengthened where cultural diversity can be expressed. How welcoming are we of those who are different? How can we support newly arrived immigrants who may experience difficulties adjusting to life in Australia?

### **Does our community reject violence?**

Safe and strong communities reject violent language and action. Do we speak up when we hear others make derogatory remarks about other ethnic or religious groups? What is our response when we see another person bullied or demeaned? What support can our local church bring to victims of violence?

### **Can we provide a meeting place?**

In the face of violence or the threat of it, parishes may provide a place for peace and reconciliation to begin. Without dialogue, community silence allows feelings of retaliation that can beget more violence. As well as creating a safe space where people are heard, can the local church provide a place where community leaders encourage and facilitate community efforts for peace?



Columban Mission Institute Centre for Peace, Ecology & Justice

There are many ways in which church groups have sought to bring peace to the community.

An example is the Christian-Muslim Peace Forums run by the Columban Centre for Peace, Ecology and Justice over the past decade. Out of concern over the climate of fear surrounding the international situation and the potential for intolerance and violence towards Muslims and people of Middle-Eastern background, the Columbans worked with local councils to host public forums dedicated to fostering nonviolence in a multi-religious society.

Local parishes have been engaged in similar initiatives. A parish in Queensland, for example, noticed intolerance and the likelihood of racism towards newly arrived refugees from Southern Sudan. They joined a local Harmony Day project and helped organise a community barbecue and lawn-bowls event. Common ground was established, stories shared, bread was broken and friendships formed. This was a simple yet radical gesture commencing a process of peace.



## Questions for us as a nation

### Are we engaged in the life of our nation?

We live in a democracy, and so can help shape the life of our nation through our votes. But there is scope for much more involvement. The peace of our nation has been maintained, even during periods of tension and great difficulty, through institutions that allow open debate, dissent and nonviolent change. How engaged are we with our local politicians? Are we prepared to write letters or lodge submissions to parliamentary inquiries? Would we exercise our right to join a peaceful demonstration on an issue of social justice?

### Are we aware of the most vulnerable?

In a peaceful and prosperous nation, those who experience violence and oppression can be invisible to us. Even if we are aware that certain groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or asylum seekers, are in need, factors such as ignorance and physical distance can keep them remote. Bureaucracy and biased public debate can obscure the face of the most vulnerable. How can we make a personal or community connection which brings dignity and understanding? Are we prepared to challenge arrangements that dehumanise or violate human dignity?

### Are we prepared to question assumptions or misinformation?

Some media coverage can give sensationalised or oversimplified accounts of vulnerable people and can reinforce community bias and misrepresent the facts. Populist political debate can dehumanise and even demonise, inflaming fears and undermining human dignity. Are we prepared to look deeper into the issues and become more informed? Can we step into the shoes of the victim, and consider what they have been through and how we can help them? Will we challenge misinformation?

### Will we defend the rights of others?

For the Catholic Church, human rights are based on a fundamental respect for the sanctity of human life and human dignity. Civil and political rights ensure personal safety and freedom from discrimination or oppression. Economic, cultural and social rights include the rights to basics such as food, housing, health and education. Where in Australia or elsewhere do we see human rights undermined? In which areas do we see the need for improvement in our human rights record?



S Sabawoon/EPA/photolibrary.com

In this year's message for Lent, the Holy Father spoke of how our faith calls us to work for justice. 'The Christian is moved', he said, 'to contribute to creating just societies, where all receive what is necessary to live according to the dignity proper to the human person and where justice is enlivened by love.'<sup>16</sup>

There are so many ways in which church groups contribute to creating just societies. We think particularly of those individuals and groups who have gone out of their way to defend the rights and advocate on behalf of the vulnerable.

Consider the work of the Pacific Calling Partnership, a group of church and community groups who met and worked with communities including Kiribati, Tuvalu and parts of the Torres Strait to address rising sea levels. They empowered local communities to be part of a delegation to the Copenhagen climate change summit. The bonds of solidarity ensured that the lived experience of rising sea levels was acknowledged.

We see the similar commitment of young people to create the links and work for change. Senior students of St Ursula's College, Toowoomba, spent a week in the communities of Nguui, Milikapiti and Pirlingimpi on the Tiwi Islands. In the course of their conversations with local women they heard of positive and negative aspects of the Northern Territory Intervention. With new knowledge of the complexity of the situation and inspired by the friendships they had made, two students wrote a letter to the Prime Minister raising concerns about discriminatory aspects of the Intervention.

These examples show how the Christian commitment to peace can inspire practical actions for justice.

## Called to bring peace



The ministry of Jesus shows us the importance of symbolic gestures that reverse the course of violence, defend human dignity and build peace. We certainly need more than gestures, but symbols like the national apologies to the Stolen Generations and the Forgotten Australians open up new possibilities. They see people as human beings. The new possibilities still need to be taken up if hopes are to be realised. But we need the power of the Spirit of Jesus to turn the possibilities into realities.

Many of the challenges faced by the people we have spoken of in this Statement seem monumental and the circumstances of violence greater than most people are likely to encounter in a lifetime. Similarly, the work for peace of the individuals and groups we have named often goes unacknowledged in our society. But they answered the same call to bring peace to a divided world. Each one provides us the same hope that even the simplest gestures of peace can make a difference.

The call to Christian peace-building is a call to joy and enlightenment. It is a call to recognise the power that Christ can give to us to build a society of justice and peace.

Peace is deeply embedded in every page of the Gospels and in the liturgy of our Church. At the celebration of the Eucharist, we are invited to offer each other the sign of peace, and in taking the hand of the person next to us, we imitate the love and sacrifice of Christ himself. More, we see and honour the presence of God in that person and everyone around us. No-one can take that presence from us.

Jesus told us that he did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life (Matt 20:28). We are called to serve others as he did. A world whose people are devoted to service of others must be committed not to violence but to peace:

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid ... Rise, let us be on our way.*  
(John 14:27, 31)

This is the promise Christ made to us. This is the promise we can depend on; his is the presence and power we can depend on (Matt 28:18–20). As individuals, as Christ's faithful, we are called to go into the world and to bring a peace that the world alone cannot give.

# WANTED: Volunteer Workers Kimberley Catholic Volunteer Service



The Diocese of Broome, Western Australia, urgently requires volunteers to assist with the work of the local Church on Aboriginal Missions. There are various important voluntary tasks: administration, building maintenance, gardening and landscaping. Placements are preferred for a period of six months to two years, with the possibility of an extension.

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Mrs Vicki Baudry: Phone: 08 9192 1060 or email: [admin@broomedioocese.org](mailto:admin@broomedioocese.org)  
PO Box 76, BROOME WA 6725

## Endnotes

- 1 Sydney Morning Herald, 30 October 2009, 'Man charged over Irish backpacker's death'.
- 2 Pope Benedict XVI, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, World Day of Peace Message 2010, nn. 7 & 11. (For Papal pronouncements, encyclicals and messages, visit: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/))
- 3 Visit the organisers of White Ribbon Day for further information on the elimination of violence against women: [www.whiteribbonday.org.au](http://www.whiteribbonday.org.au). See also Anthony Morgan and Hannah Chadwick, 2009, *Key Issues in Domestic Violence*, Australian Institute of Criminology, p. 2.
- 4 Australian Institute of Criminology, 2009, *Australian crime: facts and figures 2008*, AIC, p. 2.
- 5 See Kim Gallagher and Mark Gove, 2007, 'Tenuous and Dangerous', in *Parity*, July edition, Council to Homeless Persons.
- 6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2002*, Cat. 4714.0, ABS; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010 *Regional Statistics, Northern Territory, March 2010*, Cat. 1362.7, ABS.
- 7 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2008, *A statistical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia 2008*, HREOC.
- 8 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *A Statement from the Catholic Bishops of Australia on dignity and justice for Indigenous Australians*, 5 July 2007.
- 9 Pope Benedict XVI, *In Truth, Peace*, World Day of Peace Message 2006, n. 11
- 10 Pope Benedict XVI, *The Human Person, the Heart of Peace*, World Day of Peace Message 2007, n. 4
- 11 Pope John XXIII, 1963, *Pacem in terris*, Encyclical letter; nn. 55–59; Pope Paul VI, 1967, *Populorum progressio*, Encyclical letter; n. 14; Pope John Paul II, 1987, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Encyclical letter; nn. 29, 46.
- 12 From material supplied on the website of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart.
- 13 Pope John Paul II, Address to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Vatican, 13 January 2003.
- 14 *Pacem in terris* n. 55–56.
- 15 Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, *Caritas in veritate*, Encyclical letter; n. 34.
- 16 Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for Lent 2010.

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