



CSTs FOR THE JOURNEY

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“We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.”¹ That is the closing sentence of the [Uluru Statement From the Heart](#). It is an invitation for all of us to journey together in hope.

The reflection that follows considers how the Catholic tradition, in particular, Catholic Social Teaching principles (CSTs), might help us along the way. It is accompanied by a series of discussion questions and a prayer, to spark contemplation, dialogue and action towards the goals of First Nations recognition, truth-telling, equity and reconciliation.

A way of new life

First shared in May 2017, the Uluru Statement From the Heart extends an open invitation to all Australians: to join together in a new life of justice and hope. It also highlights the challenges to be addressed as we move forward. The more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Delegates who came

together “from all points of the southern sky” to “make this statement from the heart”, did so to remind us that the sovereignty of Australia’s First Nations Peoples “has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.” Powerfully, they ask, “How could it be otherwise?”²

The question affirms the deep and lasting spiritual and ancestral connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the lands they were born on and remain attached to. It also recognises their strength and resilience as the First Peoples of Australia, who have possessed and cared for this place and each other from “time immemorial” to today – for generations, according to their “own laws and customs” and “culture”.³

At this time in our shared history, as with other key moments in our reconciliation journey, we are invited to walk a way of new life. Our first step is to recognise one another’s human dignity.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is a God-given “quality of being human, independent of ethnicity, creed, gender, sexuality, age or ability”. From a CST perspective, the principle affirms the Christian “belief that every person is made in the image of God and is intrinsically valuable and worthy of respect, simply because they are human”.⁴

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples form the world’s oldest living cultures. Strong and resilient, they “and their cultures have prevailed and endured despite too many experiencing entrenched disadvantage, political exclusion, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism.”⁵ Today, more than 200 years since the beginning of Australia’s story of colonialism, First Nations Peoples continue to experience injustices that keep them from enjoying the fullness of life and rights that match their human dignity.

We can all take action to help put things right. Learning about the Country, Culture, Language and everyday realities of First Nations Peoples where you live is one step towards seeing, affirming and celebrating the human dignity of First Nations Peoples. Considering all points of view ahead of the referendum “to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice”⁶ is another.

Subsidiarity and Participation

Subsidiarity is an important and related idea that sustains human dignity. The word is based on the Latin word *subsidium*, which means support or assistance. This CST principle builds on the idea that people and groups have the right to participate in decisions affecting them. But more than just promoting participation, it means that when people and groups can’t meet their own needs, other parts of society (e.g. the government) act according to their duty to assist with resources and support.

Subsidiarity ensures that people are architects of their own development. When this principle is put into practice, the capacity of First Nations Peoples to shape their own futures is strengthened and our common life is made more equitable for all. The proposal to amend the Constitution to recognise Australia’s First Nations Peoples, including through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, is an example of this Catholic Social Teaching in action. As the [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council \(NATSICC\)](#) explains, “Your support of our voices on important issues helps to make Subsidiarity a reality.”⁷

The Common Good

The Common Good guides each step towards justice and equity. Underpinning our life together, this CST helps ensure people realise their full potential as individuals and communities. More than just sharing what we have, the common good is “what happens when individual rights to personal possessions and community resources are balanced with our collective responsibility to meet the needs of others.”⁸

We know that, despite collective efforts to ‘close the gap’ between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their fellow Australians, First Nations Peoples experience inequity and other injustices, including homelessness, poverty and incarceration, at disproportionate rates.⁹ To look away from the First Nations children and adults who continue to be overrepresented in the criminal justice system, to highlight just one inequity, is to ignore what the authors of the Uluru Statement describe as “the torment of our powerlessness”.^{10 11} It is also to ignore Jesus’s call to accompany and advocate for people in hunger, sickness, need or other trouble.¹²

Pope Francis describes the common good as something “belonging to all and meant for all”.¹³ To understand how best to work towards this kind of world, we need to accept that we have a collective responsibility to meet the needs of others. We can only do this when we listen to the voices of the people who are experiencing such needs. This is an act of solidarity.

Solidarity

Solidarity is relational. By definition, it’s “a firm and persevering commitment to the common good, which reminds us that everything is related... It’s a way of saying, ‘I’m here with you.’”¹⁴ When we practice the CST principle of Solidarity, we act in ways that accompany others in their own life experiences. Learning about First Nations Peoples’ challenges and joining them as they campaign for justice is one example.

Solidarity reminds us that we are much stronger and better when we are together. It compels us to lift one another up. The referendum on the Voice is an opportunity to listen to First Australians and come together as one, united by mutual respect and compassion. It is a chance to come together alongside the Traditional Custodian, the migrant striving for a better life, the grandmother who has lived through so much.

Solidarity therefore requires a kind of deep listening. Ngangiwumirr artist and educator Dr Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann offers the concept of dadirri as a gift of her Culture to all Australians. “In our Aboriginal way we listen from our earliest days, we could not live good and useful lives unless we listen. It’s the normal way for us to learn.”¹⁵

Through this practice of deep listening, Dr Ungunmerr Baumann leads us into relationships of breathing, listening and connecting together. She says, “To know

me is to breathe with me. To breathe with me is to listen deeply. To listen deeply is to connect.”¹⁶

Such gentle, quiet attention is precisely what Australia’s ‘coming together after a struggle’ – makarrata – requires of us. It is what can help us on our journey of reconciliation.

The Uluru Statement From the Heart invites all Australians into relationship together so that First Nations Peoples, together with their fellow Australians, can flourish. A First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution is identified as a first step. A Makarrata Commission for truth-telling and agreement-making, a second. At every step in this process of reconciliation, solidarity demonstrated by deep listening is key.

Fr Frank Brennan SJ agrees when he offers ten steps for Catholics to consider ahead of the referendum on the Voice to Parliament, the first of which urges us to listen: “Be attentive to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Stop telling them what is good for them. Start listening to them. Accept that they know what is good for them, just as we know what is good for us and our loved ones.”¹⁷

Care For Our Common Home

That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have lived on and cared for the continent we now call Australia for more than 60,000 years is ample evidence, not only of their

resilience, but of their enduring wisdom, innovation and care for our common home. As Pat Anderson AO, Alyawarre woman, health administrator and social justice advocate, explains,

For 65,000 years or more, our First Nations cared for and sustainably regulated the diverse nature of ecosystems of this place. Looking after Country was our job. We cherished the land, understanding that *our* health relies upon *its* health.¹⁸

Care for Our Common Home is an important CST because it helps us preserve creation for future generations. “A way of appreciating the earth, not as a commodity but as a sacred space, a gift from God”, care for our common home is “an approach to looking after God’s creation by ‘tilling’ (cultivating or working) *and* ‘keeping’ (caring, protecting and preserving) it”.¹⁹ In Australia, First Nations Peoples have managed to balance these activities of tilling and keeping for millennia.

But, as Pat Anderson AO elaborates, this balance has not been preserved:

In less than 250 years of colonisation, our knowledges and practices, developed and refined over millenia, have been marginalised, just as we have. Our adaptability, creativity and wisdom has been ignored, sidelined or suppressed or even seen of no value whatsoever. Our ability to care for Country has been profoundly undermined. The results are all around us.²⁰

Acknowledging and learning from First Nations wisdom is part of the reconciliation journey, as is engaging such organisations as the [Aboriginal Carbon Foundation](#) who, with the support of [Caritas Australia](#), are using their ancient knowledge to sustain their growing role and work towards helping all of us better care for our common home. Another way that we might learn from First Nations wisdom is via the Voice to Parliament. If it is enshrined in law, it could be a mechanism for First Australians to share their knowledge on caring for the environment in more strategic and coordinated ways that benefit all, for example by offering advice on such things as sustainable land management methods.

Preferential Option For the Poor

In his fifth step, Fr Brennan challenges Catholics to, “Know your history; know the Aboriginal history.”²¹ He emphasises that First Nations Australians belong in our country’s collective story and in the law that guides our common life. The lack of acknowledgment and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution means that it requires amendment. This change needs to be a matter of priority.

Akin to practicing the CST of Preferential Option for the Poor – that “act of prioritising the needs of the poor over the desires of the rich, the rights of workers over profits and the preservation of the environment over its exploitation”²² – amending the Constitution is a way of responding in love to the unjust circumstances in which First Nations Australians live.

A way of love

Sadly, given ongoing experiences of injustice, many First Nations people feel “unloved” by their fellow Australians.²³ Aboriginal leader, lawyer, academic and activist Noel Pearson underlines the divisive role this lack of love – expressed as racism – plays in our common life and how it breeds hate and fear, to the detriment of First Nations Peoples. But he also imagines a way to overcome it. In the first of his five 2022 Boyer Lectures, he said:

Of all the claims I will make in these lectures, this is the boldest and one of which I am most convicted: racism will diminish in this country when we succeed with recognition. It will not have the same purchase on us: neither on the majority party that has defaulted to it over two centuries, nor the minority that lives it, fears it and who too often succumb to the very fear itself.²⁴

How are we to respond?

The road of reconciliation we have to walk is long. But in returning to the best of our spiritual traditions and, for Christians, to the new commandment Jesus gave to “love one another” (John 13:34), we discover again or for the first time that love always leads us to justice and hope – to a new life.

So, with the late great Uncle Archie Roach, may we sing:
“Let love rule.”

QUESTIONS

- How do Catholic Social Teachings shape your experience and expression of faith?
- Following Jesus's commandment "to love one another", how do you, your household and community show love for First Nations Australian people?
- How could the activities of truth-telling and agreement-making help address the inequity and other injustice experienced by First Nations Peoples in Australia?
- Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann offers the concept of dadirri or deep listening as a practice that can help us along our journey of reconciliation.²⁵ Reflect on the sounds and voices you are listening to. Do they resonate with CST principles? Are there other, different voices you are yet to hear?
- Stan Grant emphasises the need for compassion in our conversations about the Voice to Parliament.²⁶ How will you demonstrate compassion in your interactions with others (including with differing views) about the Voice and related matters of justice for First Nations Peoples?

PRAYER

Creator,
You beautifully, wonderfully make us.
May we go your way of love.

Christ,
You lead us to reconciliation.
May we go your way of justice.

Spirit,
You move us on the journey.
May we go your way of breath.

Amen.

NOTES

- 1 The Uluru Statement From the Heart, <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>
- 2 The Uluru Statement From the Heart.
- 3 The Uluru Statement From the Heart.
- 4 Caritas Australia, *Catholic Social Teachings Card Set*, 2022, www.caritas.org.au/cst-card-set
- 5 Closing the Gap, “Preamble,” <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/1-preamble>
- 6 Prime Minister of Australia, Media Release, March 23, 2023 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/next-step-towards-voice-referendum-constitutional-alteration-bill>
- 7 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) <https://www.natsicc.org.au/first-nations-voices-on.html>
- 8 Caritas Australia, *Catholic Social Teachings Card Set*.
- 9 Closing the Gap, “Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes,” <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>
- 10 Commonwealth of Australia, *Commonwealth Closing the Gap Annual Report 2022*, p. 19.
- 11 The Uluru Statement From the Heart.
- 12 See, for example, Matthew 25:31–46.
- 13 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* n23.
- 14 Caritas Australia, *Catholic Social Teachings Card Set*.
- 15 Marilyn Rodrigues, “Invitation to live together,” *The Catholic Weekly*, October 14, 2022 <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/invitation-to-live-together/>
- 16 Miriam Rose Foundation, *YouTube*, “Dadirri (Official Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Video): 3 minute promo,” https://youtu.be/tow2tR_ezL8
- 17 Frank Brennan, “Fr Frank Brennan SJ: How to Vote on the Voice,” *The Catholic Weekly*, March 17, 2023 <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/fr-frank-brennan-sj-how-to-vote-on-the-voice/>
- 18 Pat Anderson AO, “The Gandhi Oration: The Fight for Indigenous

- Rights,” UNSW Centre for Ideas, March 25, 2020 <https://www.centreforideas.com/article/pat-anderson-fight-indigenous-rights>
- 19 Caritas Australia, *Catholic Social Teachings Card Set*.
 - 20 Anderson, “The Gandhi Oration.”
 - 21 Brennan, “Fr Frank Brennan SJ: How to Vote on the Voice.”
 - 22 Caritas Australia, *Catholic Social Teachings Card Set*.
 - 23 For example, listen to the first of First Nations leader, lawyer, academic and activist Noel Pearson’s four ABC Boyer Lectures, “Who we were, who we are, and who we can be,” November 4, 2022 <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/boyerlectures/who-we-were-who-we-are-and-who-we-can-be/14095284>
 - 24 Pearson, “Who we were, who we are, and who we can be.”
 - 25 See Miriam Rose Foundation, *YouTube*, “Dadirri (Official Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Video): 3 minute promo,” https://youtu.be/tow2tR_ezL8
 - 26 Stan Grant, “As we debate the Indigenous Voice to Parliament there is one word missing: Compassion,” February 5, 2023 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-05/voice-to-parliament-debate-stan-grant-compassion-is-needed/101928250>