



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Relations with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

Solidarity: On the road to justice

25 June 2015

Media Release

Governments at the State and Federal levels must become serious about the immense shortage of housing stocks in townships, instead of contemplating how they can make it worse by forcing more people from remote areas into town-zones already suffering from serious deprivations, according to the Bishop of Broome, Christopher Saunders.

In his statement to Catholic parishes across Australia as the Church prepares to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People on Sunday 5 July 2015, Bishop Saunders said, 'The crime rate in townships is far greater than in remote areas, as is serious drug abuse. Needles are not found lying around in bunches in remote villages as they are in regional townships.

'The original argument in favour of closing off funds to many remote communities was an economic one. There is not enough money to pay for the homelands, it was said. It is simply amazing how it is in this country that whenever governments over-spend or income shrinks, it is always the poor who pay to rectify the fiscal shortfall.'

Rural Australia is in a depressed state and the Aboriginal people in rural Australia are better off when living on traditional lands, than in exile away from it, the statement reads.

'There is no evidence to suggest that leaving traditional homelands for life in towns will benefit the people presently living in remote villages. It is a fact that life is better in the remote villages than in the fringe dwelling settlements,' Bishop Saunders said.

'When this nation realises that more rather than fewer resources are needed to meet the needs of Aboriginal people in this country, then, and only then, will we begin to overcome the challenges before us. Then might we effectively whittle away the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people who suicide, who are in gaol, are unemployed, are suffering ill health, are homeless, are under-nourished and who are oppressed by the effects of poverty and a poor education.'

Sadly, it appears that history repeats itself. Just when we thought that there was light at the end of the tunnel - the result of legal judgements like Native Title and Wik, and just when the Homelands Movement had proved a boon to displaced traditional owners, the ominous noise of negative change and repression is heard yet again.

There are numerous examples of Aboriginal people in Australia who have learnt to live above the quagmire of defeat. But, there are many, many others who live below a robust capability.

Bishop Saunders declared that 'Non-Aboriginal Christians must stand in solidarity with their Aboriginal brothers and sisters, while Aboriginal Christians are called to be determined, not to falter, no matter the obstacles that rise up to make a just way difficult. In faith and through prayer, the energy needed to seek justice, to right what is wrong and to find a new, positive way forward is at hand.'

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