

Brisbane Archbishop backs Uluru Statement and an indigenous voice in the Constitution

By Mark Bowling

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BRISBANE Archbishop Mark Coleridge has publicly endorsed the Uluru Statement From the Heart – an historic commitment by the Catholic Church to back indigenous leaders from across Australia demanding a constitutional voice.

“Only a heart of stone could allow the indigenous peoples to become aliens, exiles, and refugees in their own land,” Archbishop Coleridge said during Mass for First Nations leaders and parish representatives at the Santa Teresa Spirituality Centre in Ormiston, east of Brisbane last Friday.

Standing on Quandamooka country, Archbishop Coleridge, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, gazed across Moreton Bay to Stradbroke Island (Minjerrabah), site of Australia’s first Catholic mission to First Nations peoples, set up by Italian Passionist Fathers more than 170 years ago.

“God is going to take out of us that heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh – the heart of Jesus... that recognises the other as a human being,” he said.

“What has been done to the indigenous peoples of this land could only have been done by denying that they were in fact human – they were at best perhaps subhuman.

“A heart of flesh says no to that, absolutely no.”

Speaking just days before the start of the first assembly of the Church’s historic Plenary Council of Australia, Archbishop Coleridge described the poor health and incarceration rate indigenous Australians – the highest in the world – as “a national disgrace”.

A key theme of the Plenary – the first to be held in Australia since 1937 – is ‘renewing the Church’s solidarity with First Australians’.

Following Mass, Archbishop Coleridge formally endorsed the Uluru Statement From the Heart, a landmark document signed by 250 indigenous leaders in 2017 and invited all Australians “to walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” towards a better nation.

“... I call on all people of goodwill and good intention to support the journey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by endorsing the Uluru Statement From the Heart and putting it into action in every way possible,” he said.

The Uluru Statement, , calls for the establishment of a ‘First Nations Voice’ in the *Australian Constitution* and a ‘Makarrata Commission’ to supervise a process of ‘agreement-making’ and ‘truth-telling’ between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Archbishop Coleridge held a public dialogue with Quandamooka man Dean Parkin, a signatory of the Uluru Statement and a campaigner for a referendum on whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should have a Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Australian Constitution.

“The key thing is to give voice to those who have been previously unheard,” Mr Parkin said.

He said a Voice in Parliament would not be a third chamber, but rather an advisory body to parliament that would give indigenous people a say on the policies and laws that impact their lives.

It would ensure MPs and government are better and more appropriately informed in its approach to Indigenous affairs policy and law-making, leading to better outcomes for indigenous people and more efficient use of government funds, Mr Parkin said.

“My highest ambition for it is that it brings those voices of the community frontline, grassroots... to the forefront... giving voice and giving power to those who are most affected by the decisions,” he said.

“We need to bring those health workers in Halls Creek, justice workers in Mt Druitt, the people on the streets, the people that know how these things actually work in the communities – they need to be at the table.

“That’s when we’re going to see real changes. It’s going to frighten the hell out of a few bureaucrats sitting there very comfortably at the moment.”

The Instrumentum Laboris (Working Document) of the Plenary Council that will start its first assembly on October 3 affirms the Church’s commitment to “honour and acknowledge the continuing deep spiritual relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to this country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation”.

One of the 16 sets of questions that will be asked of 280 clergy, religious and lay members participating will be: “How might the Church in Australia open in new ways to Indigenous ways

of being Christian in spirituality, theology, liturgy, and missionary discipleship? How might we learn from the First Nations peoples?"