

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time A
Fr. Bill Edebohls
8.10.2023

Amidst all the noise - what 'voices' are you listening to? What 'voices' are informing you, as you prepare to vote on next Saturday's referendum?

Charles Gauci is the Bishop of Darwin and the Northern Territory, leading the Diocese with the largest proportion of indigenous Catholics in Australia. So, I thought, this is a voice worth listening to.

Let me read a little of his recent pastoral letter on the 'Voice to Parliament'.

Dear Friends, Brothers, and Sisters,

For some time now, I have been convinced that I will cast a 'Yes' vote in the upcoming Referendum on the Voice.

I am well aware that not everyone will share my perspective, and I wholeheartedly respect the right of others to hold differing opinions. I will never presume to dictate how you should vote; you must follow your own conscience and convictions. My decision has been reached after careful and prayerful reflection on the teachings of the Gospel.

It's crucial to recognize that a 'Yes' vote will not resolve all issues at once. Instead, I view it as another vital step toward healing and reconciliation. It fundamentally signifies the inherent dignity of our First Nations people.

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters had no say in the colonisation of their land being declared terra nullius. They had no voice when their lands were taken from them, and many of their family and social structures deliberately destroyed in many instances. The Stolen Generations, where children were taken away, happened without their consent. They were insufficiently consulted on matters such as the intervention and various other issues. Today, significant disparities persist in many aspects of life between our First Nations people and the wider community.

Challenges like overcrowded housing, unemployment, lower life expectancy, health disparities, and various other disadvantages persist within their communities. While we embrace a multicultural society where we collectively work for the common good, we must also acknowledge that our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have an ancient and enduring presence in our nation's fabric. Because of this, I believe they deserve a unique recognition of their rich and enduring cultural heritage within society.

Let me emphasise that I am not attempting to tell you how to vote. This is my personal viewpoint. I encourage you to carefully consider the multifaceted dimensions of this Referendum and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in making this significant decision. Regardless of the outcome, I implore everyone to remain committed to working together for the greater good. My hope is that we can continue to collaborate, striving to enhance the lives and walk alongside our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters.

Yours in Christ,
+ Charles Gauci

Let me pick up one phrase of the Bishop's letter: "you must follow your own conscience".

There have been many disappointing aspects in the lead up to this referendum – from all sides of politics - and whatever the result - both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition share some culpability that this referendum has become so divisive.

What has disturbed me most in the campaign is not the racism, or even the Nazi social media posts, for Australia has always had a racist underbelly, however we might pretend otherwise, and sadly there will always be that element of evil in humanity that wraps itself in Nazi flags and salutes, while gutlessly cowering behind a mask.

No, what has disturbed me is the slogan: *"If you don't know – vote NO!"*

It disturbs me because this is the slogan of dictators and autocrats. It is corrosive of democracy and ultimately destroys democracy. It is the cry of autocratic elites who would prefer to keep you both ignorant and powerless.

In any country or society that treasures democracy the only valid slogan is not *"If you don't know – vote NO!"* But, *"If you don't know – LEARN!"* *"If you don't know – LEARN!"*

And that is what brings me back to the Bishop's comment of conscience. All Catholics are obliged to inform their conscience which is why ignorance is never a moral or ethical defence. And conscience isn't just what makes you feel good – it isn't a backup plan for your pet beliefs or political prejudice. No one should be voting in next weekend's referendum without doing a little homework.

Conscience, is that still small voice of God that whispers within your heart – and you have the responsibility to inform yourself, through listening, studying, discussing, praying, reading the word of God – so that you can better discern that still small voice of God that speaks from deep within your soul.

At the very least every Australian should have read the 'Uluru statement from the heart'. The statement from indigenous elders from across the nation that seeks recognition and reconciliation through a Voice to Parliament – the statement that has led us to this referendum.

For this reason, I have reprinted the statement in today's Newsletter and if you go to our parish website there is a series of articles available from various Catholic organisations and leaders that may help inform you.

Let me conclude with the words of another bishop, Vincent Long Van Nguyen, the Bishop of Parramatta:

.... Enabling our First Nations People to have a say on the issues that affect them is a matter of the heart, common sense, and justice. Six years ago, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was issued from the physical heart of our country. The First Nations leaders invite us to join them on a journey of hope. They speak about the painful reality that so many of their children face. They describe this reality as "the torment of our powerlessness". The Voice to Parliament is one significant step which will empower them to participate in the process of ending this torment.

It will also acknowledge the unique place that First Nations People have. They are not another cultural group or interest group like migrants who have come to this country,

for a better life or as farmers or miners or small business people. They have a relationship with this country that no other group of Australians has. They have lived sustainably and cared for the land, waterways, plants and animals for over 60,000 years. Non-Indigenous Australians are beneficiaries of their rich heritage, wisdom, culture and spirituality.

Whatever the outcome of the referendum, we must continue the work of justice, healing, reconciliation and recognition of our First Nations People. We need to walk with them, and work with them to bring about change for the better – for their people and for all of us. Strengthening our relationship with our Indigenous brothers and sisters is integral and indeed critical to the strengthening of the whole nation....

The Uluru statement from the heart concludes with an invitation from our indigenous elders: “We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.”

It’s a pretty simple invitation.