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The Feast of St Vincent de Paul

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Referendum on October 14th 2023 on the Voice to Parliament will be a critical moment in the life of our nation. It will have implications for what kind of society we want ourselves to be.

I believe that just as a YES vote to the Referendum in 1967 (which recognised First Nations People as part of the Australian population) was, a heart-felt YES to the Voice is a YES to a better future for Australia. Indeed, a more civilised and gracious response to a history littered with violence is hard to imagine.

For despite much progress since European settlement, we must redress the near destruction of our First People's ancient spirituality and culture. The Church was regrettably complicit in this.

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.

It is unacceptable that there should exist a growing divide between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians. The Closing the Gap Report makes this painfully clear. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Peoples are the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in Australia.

We cannot be comfortable with the status quo when it is linked to the oppression of the past. I believe we must be guided by the principles of social justice and address the legacy of dispossession that places our Indigenous People in an entrenched institutional and intergenerational disadvantage. It is the work of the Gospel community to create policies and practices, institutions and culture in which "the lowly are raised and the hungry are filled with good things" (Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:52-53).

Pope St John Paul II reminded us in his address: "The Church in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you, the Aboriginal people, have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others." (Alice Springs, 29 September 1986, para. 13) Similarly, we will not be a fully mature nation until the unique place of our Indigenous brothers and sisters is enshrined, celebrated and strengthened.

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, day by day, 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.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv STL DD
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