

## The struggle for justice continues.

By Fr. Andrew Hamilton SJ, published in pray.com.au 18 May 2024

The theme for National Reconciliation Week, 'Now More Than Ever', is a reminder to all of us that, the fight for justice and the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must continue.

Last year many of us celebrated National Sorry Day (26 May) and **National Reconciliation Week** (27 May-3 June) as signposts along a sunlit path to the Referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. This year we may honour them as scorched huts surviving on a landscape devastated by fire after the loss of the Referendum. They still bear their long history, but less as a celebration of progress than as a summons to struggle and to rebuild.



In such a bleak landscape it is worth recalling the occasions celebrated by the two events. National Reconciliation Week recalls the Referendum held on 27 May 1967. It held that Indigenous Australians must be recognised as part of the population and that the Commonwealth government could make laws for them. The irony is that the Commonwealth government has used the Referendum to make punitive laws against them. The Week also recalls the 1992 Mabo High Court decision that recognised the existence of native title, the April 1997 Report *Bringing them Home* that examined the forced separation of Indigenous Australian children from their families, and the 2008 Apology by the Prime Minister to Indigenous peoples for the removal of their children.

These events offer some encouragement to continue to fight for 'what needs to be done now more than ever'. They also point to the continuing conversion needed in Australian society. The bad-tempered public conversation during the Referendum revealed the continuing existence of prejudice against Indigenous Australians and the refusal of many Australians to accept the reality and effects of the dispossession of the First Peoples and the consequent need for reconciliation.

The 2028 Closing the Gap agreement between Australian governments and Indigenous representatives acknowledged and deplored the gap in health, wealth, education, employment and in other matters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They also set targets for change. A 2024 review showed that only in three areas, two of them local and legal, have there been any improvement in key areas. In other areas that directly impinge on human lives and form the principal concern of many Indigenous Australians, such as the lessening of the number of children removed from their families, adults detained in the justice system, and the number of suicides, the numbers show deterioration. It seems certain, too, that the number of children detained under the justice system will increase after recent legislation in some states.

The defeat of the Referendum and the substantial failure to close the gap between the living conditions of Indigenous and other Australians mean that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders this Reconciliation Week and Sorry Day will be less days of celebration than of grief. There must also be a time of sober commitment by all Australians to the unfinished task of Reconciliation.

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