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## The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

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When we started this journey, we knew it would not be easy. We knew that there were many hurdles to overcome. This has been the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples for over 200 years. Our strong culture and spirituality have helped us to survive through challenges, and an unsuccessful outcome to the Voice to Parliament referendum is just another challenge that we will face with dignity, respect and without losing hope.

Throughout this journey we, the members of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) have placed an emphasis on fostering respectful dialogue and providing Catholics with information to help them make their decision. We are proud to have maintained the stance that all people are created equal in the image of God and thus deserve to be respectfully treated, regardless of their stance on the referendum question.

Guided by the Catholic social teaching principle of Subsidiarity, we (along with most First Australians) saw the value in a mechanism for our voice, and the voices of our children and grandchildren to be heard in Parliament and the potential for tangible outcomes to improve the day to day lives of our people. We also acknowledged that this was not the only way forward, but a step on the journey of Reconciliation.

We accept that, for a variety of reasons, the Australian people have decided that an enshrined Voice is not the way to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Constitution, or see it as useful to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples gain an equal footing on metrics such as life expectancy, health and socio economics. What we must not accept is that this signals the end of the journey. Statistics from the Closing the Gap strategy show that we cannot maintain the status quo. We now call on those that espoused alternatives to champion Indigenous-led ideas and initiatives that will address these practical issues, and for all people in this country to work for reconciliation.

Fear, confusion, and misinformation has impacted relationships between communities, families and friendships. The biggest tragedy we face as a nation is to hold onto resentment and disagreements, allowing them to fester and divide us further. As Colossians 3:13 says, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Embracing this spirit of forgiveness can pave the way for shared healing and unity.

As we look towards the future, we are heartened by the impact and response to the ***One Journey, Together*** website. 30 Catholic organisations, including the peak bodies for Catholic Health, Education and Social Services, congregations and groups articulated their support of the Voice and will be valuable allies as we move forward in our shared work of reconciliation.

The path of reconciliation and unity is a long one, but it is one that we must tread with unwavering faith and determination. The challenges we face are not insurmountable, and

with the collective strength of our communities and the guidance of our faith, we can envision a brighter future for all.

*"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* Romans 15:13

With this hope in our hearts, we, the members of NATSICC, will continue to advocate for the rights and dignity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We are certain that our family, the Catholic Church continues to walk alongside us. As Chaplain to NATSICC, Bishop Charles Gauci joins with us in these thoughts and prayers and hopes that "we be open to the Holy Spirit's guidance so that we can grow together in the way Jesus teaches us."

We believe that together, with love, understanding, and the grace of God, we can build a future where every individual is recognized, respected, and cherished.

18 October 2023

