

EDITORIAL
**Respecting & Celebrating Aboriginal & Torres
Strait Islander Peoples**
June 2009

As we prepare to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday on 5 July, let us reflect on the nature of respect.

Respect goes much deeper than a surface level listing of positive attributes or achievements. It is more than a vague positive feeling towards someone or something. Respect is not mere tolerance of others and their ways, nor is it a paternalistic concern that pushes its way on others.

To respect a person or a culture is to honour them, to reverence the presence of the living God active in and through them. Respect proceeds from a stance of equality and acknowledges the capacity and the right of others to decide and to act.

Respect and partnership require the consistent exercise of subsidiarity as well as solidarity.

Perhaps we are more easily moved by fellow feeling arising from our shared dignity as human beings to want to help others - to reach out and do things for them - than we are to the challenging enterprise of real partnership and respect.

Our impulse of solidarity is incomplete if it does not challenge unjust arrangements of power and status, simply leaving others in the role of passive objects of our decision making and action. Such 'solidarity' undermines the dignity of those whom it sets out to help.

To be truly in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities we may need to let go of attitudes of knowing best or being the ones who will help fix things. Could it be that these are really ways in which we hold onto power over others or a sense of our own superiority?

Do we have the humility to learn the languages, stories and ways of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

A recent meeting of Indigenous Christian leaders considering the Federal Intervention in the Northern Territory stressed the need to listen to and hear the stories of Aboriginal people, and to respect the right of Aboriginal peoples to make their own decisions:

“...we assert the right of Aboriginal Peoples to negotiate agreements as equal partners who have the right to make their own decisions. We resist any attempts to return to a paternalistic mind set where Governments, or Churches, tell us what to do. Aboriginal Peoples have fought against such injustices in the past, and we believe that blanket responses and policies, such as the Intervention, are as disempowering as were those protectionist days. As a nation, we need to support Aboriginal Peoples to work on solutions that lead to positive outcomes... Government must negotiate agreements which respect the right of Aboriginal Peoples to take responsibility for achieving negotiated outcomes.”¹

This is a strong call to us all to honour and practice the principle of subsidiarity. It is a challenge to become real partners in sharing the responsibility to act.

Let us not celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday with a tokenistic 'blackwash' for one day. Let us take the opportunity to consider our next steps in understanding, acknowledging and respecting the world's oldest living culture in the everyday operations of our parishes, schools and communities.

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¹ NATSIEC Forum Statement
http://www.ncca.org.au/data/page/3784/NATSIEC_FORUM_NTER_Statement.pdf Accessed 15 June 2009.