

# PEACE AND VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

*Speech at the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Social Justice Statement, Violence in Australia—A Message of Peace, Sept. 22nd, 2010.*

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JESUS' WORDS, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44) set the tone for this Social Justice Statement and the everyday challenge to us in our streets, schools, workplaces and international relations to overcome violence and make space for peace.

It is a very difficult challenge. It is easy to be peaceful with people of peace but not easy when it comes to the so-called 'enemy'. We have often heard the statement especially from the USA and from Israel, 'We do not talk to terrorists!!' This statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops calls us to enact a new script.

The difficulty and challenge of Jesus' words notwithstanding we have some breathtaking examples of forgiveness: the response of the mother of Gearoid Walsh, and Irish tourist who was killed in Sydney in October 2009 after he was punched and fell hitting his head. Despite calls for retribution and revenge, his mother Teresa spoke of the heartbreak she felt for the man who struck her son. She did not want him to serve time in prison. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October 2009, 'Man charged over Irish backpacker's death').

There is the example this week of the family of the young policeman who was killed by one of his colleagues whilst on duty. We have marvelled at the embodied reconciliation and forgiveness of Nelson Mandela in 1970 after 27 years of imprisonment on Robbin Island. The attempts to break his spirit and make him hate-filled failed.

The Social Justice Sunday Statement 2004: *Peace Be With You: Cultivating a Culture of*

*Peace* quotes Archbishop Oscar Romero:

Peace is not the product of terror or fear.

Peace is not the silence of cemeteries

Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.

Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all

Peace is dynamism.

Peace is generosity.

It is a right and it is duty.

And *The Earth Charter* says:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future.

And then:

The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

We have lived and continue to live in a world of holocausts, gulags, killing fields, suicide bombings, and ethnic cleansings. But unless we are willing to embrace the 'enemy', *i.e.*, 'the other', atrocities will only increase as technological advances enable us to harm others even more.

Miroslav Volf, the Protestant theologian says:

Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners...[for] no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion—without transposing the enemy from the sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud

innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 124).

He goes on to say, ‘When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross’ (Volf, *op.cit.* p.129). Our culture can regard giving as losing and forgiving being for wimps. It is difficult to give well and forgive well, but it is not about overlooking faults, injustice and hurts, but the choice to do things differently.

Though love of our enemies is the only attitude that can end the cycle of violence that plagues so many cultures, families and communities, often for generations, the difficult question arises as to how we can forgive when we have been hurt or someone dear to us has been hurt.

This weekend in Sydney at a seminar to celebrate the achievements of the Decade to Overcome Violence (World Council of Churches) one of the speakers, Azim Khamisa, tells how he came to find healing through forgiveness when a fourteen-year-old youth, Tony Hicks, murdered his only son in 1995. Tony was described as mad as hell, without a father and teenage mother with little parenting experience. He found community and solace by belonging to a neighbourhood gang. It gave him pride and an outlet for his anger. Azim’s only son, Tariq, a college (university) student was delivering pizzas two days a week to make some money and he was doing his last delivery when he was shot for the pizzas and the cash he had.

Azim says that when the police came to tell him of his son’s murder, it felt ‘as if a nuclear bomb had gone off in [my] heart.’ Going into deep mourning and despite support from his mosque, he tried to find ways to accept his son’s death. ‘Flickers of forgiveness’ came enabling him to redirect the energy of anger, hurt and loss into finding ways to prevent this from occurring again. He realised that there were three victims in this tragedy: his son, Tony Hicks, the killer, and the community at large. He made contact with Tony’s grandfather, Ples Felix, and invited him to join the



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newly founded non-profit foundation dedicated to ending youth violence—the *Tariq Khamisa Foundation (TKF)*. Both have continued to work to prevent youth violence through education on nonviolence by speaking at schools and other venues with their message.

So we can be and are called to become channels of the giving and forgiving God. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu says in his book, ‘there is no future without forgiveness’.

There are a number of interdependent threats to peace:

- religious intolerance;
- war, violence, and the arms trade;
- environmental degradation;
- economic injustice;
- patriarchy (cultures of domination, hierarchy, and control);
- and oppressive globalisation.

Peace is an irrepressible yearning present in the heart of each person, regardless of his or her particular cultural identity. The truth of peace calls upon everyone to cultivate productive and sincere relationships; it encourages them to seek out and to follow the paths of forgiveness and reconciliation. (Benedict XVI, *In Truth, Peace, Message for the World Day of Peace*, January 1, 2006)

Desmond Tutu suggests that justice fails to be done if we only entertain the concept of retributive justice. Whereas in restorative justice the central concern is to heal breaches, to redress imbalances, to restore broken relationships, to seek to rehabilitate both victim and perpetrator, who should be given the opportu-

nity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured. For religious people it comes down to the belief that each of us is made in God's image.

Jim Douglass, the American writer and peace activist, says that 'The first thing to be disrupted by our commitment to nonviolence will not be the system but our own lives.' I know that my commitment to peace and nonviolence is challenged many times a day. The fact that I am talking about this subject does not mean that I have arrived. Violence does not just occur 'out there. It is very near. It occurs when the weak are dominated and controlled - in families, the work place, schools, our community, and the church; when we allow our fears to fool us into making war against innocent people; when we close our doors to the stranger; when we ignore the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Wherever our commitment to peace and nonviolence lies, peace begins with our everyday relationships and involvements. It begins with each of us; and each of us together. It begins when we respect the dignity of each person and the interdependence of humanity and all of creation.

In 2004 the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a timely social justice statement *Peace Be With You* during UNESCO's Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World and the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence. The word 'culture' suggested

- an environment of peacebuilding;
- a spirituality of action;
- the interdependence of humanity and creation;
- a space where the welfare of all is a high priority;
- where people are valued above consumerism, material accumulation, status and comfort.
- It called for a respect for diversity and the welcoming (not mere tolerating) of difference, equality, empowerment,
- a participation in public life that goes

beyond just voting every three or four years;

- transforming values, attitudes and behaviours that promote peace and strive to transform situations of potential conflict and violence into peace.

'Violence' comes in many guises. This Social Justice Statement: *Violence in Australia: A message of Peace* points to the personal roots of violence in family and community and social structures. Though manifested at all levels of society, it is frequently experienced by those who are powerless, excluded and marginalised such as the homeless, the Indigenous Australians (systematic theft of children from their parents), assaults recently in Sydney and Melbourne on Indian and African students, trafficking in persons for sex and labour. The statement also turns to our faith and how peace can and does triumph over violence beginning with the vision of 'Jesus the peacemaker' leading on to those who follow Jesus and work for peace.

### *Manifestations*

Few Australians admit to racial intolerance. But it does exist. The Cronulla riots in 2005 showed how easy it to scratch racism's itch. Racism degrades the victim, perpetrator and onlooker. It degrades integrity and human rights. 'What else can you expect from one of 'them'? Be it a person who is Jewish, Muslim, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, Vietnamese, Chinese, Lebanese, Sudanese, or a person from some other maligned group of recent decades. From the outset there was fear of the 'other'—and the 'other's' agenda. Racism has no homeland, no borders and no scientific basis. It can occur in the words and actions of parents at sports games. Gay and lesbian people still come in for abuse—and bullying in school. We make comments about people's backgrounds when they do things we dislike—whether driving, not standing in a queue, or unawareness of other unwritten rules.

The Statement addresses politicians and shock-jocks who exploit our fear of the 'other'

in the outback, the Middle East, the Pacific and Asia. The laws we have enacted against our worst tendencies to dabble in behaviour that offends against people of colour, other race, nationality or creed (Racial Discrimination Act, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Act, Racial Hatred Act, Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) were cold comfort to Indian students attacked and robbed recently. And various attempts at explanation amounted to blaming the victim.

It is interesting that Alfred Deakin, the legislative architect of our Constitution (51, xxvi), reasoned:

It is not the bad qualities, but the good qualities of these alien races that make them so dangerous to us. It is their inexhaustible energy, their power of applying themselves to new tasks, their endurance and low standard of living that make them such competitors.

Though violence exists in many situations and relationships; it is often disconnected from our thoughts, actions, attitudes and words: (racist language; put-downs disguised as jokes; scapegoating; excluding people in both school and other places; refusing to listen or dialogue with homosexuals, women, youth, people of other cultures; labeling people; domination and control; bullying; social inequity; detaining asylum seekers and psychological torture; promotion of suspicion; punishment rather than rehabilitation; neglect of Indigenous people and people living with mental illness.

### *No Peace Without Justice*

Peace is not possible without struggling for justice. It includes a just and equitable distribution of the world's resources. We know of the inequalities where over half of the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day. It is war on billions of people. Peace requires real justice. (Robert Jensen, *Beyond Peace, Media With Conscience*, March 17, 2008)

We need to see that violence/injustice/abuse of human rights are not abstractions but the real experiences of suffering and grief. Behind the statistics on poverty, malnutrition, exclusion, homelessness and destitution is a suffering person.

We might need to embrace a global citizenship. A definition of peace needs to go beyond the shortsighted demands of national security to human security that includes a concern for human life and dignity. If we ask a person from the first world about the meaning of security we might hear responses such as more walls, locks, defenses, private security companies, but a person from the third world might say that security lay in health and medicine, education and housing. Archbishop Oscar Romero said, 'the only peace that God wants is a peace based in justice.' But:

- is peace possible when people are made to work in dehumanising conditions?
- is peace possible when finance is available for another prison rather than a school or hospital?
- is peace possible when millions are hungry?
- is peace possible when people do not have a living wage?
- is peace possible when we fail to think sustainably by living in harmony with the natural environment?
- is peace possible when many do not have equal opportunity to access educational, cultural, and financial resources?

This calls for an engagement and participation in civil life through public dialogue and inclusive deliberation so that better systems of living together can be built. It is a compassion coming from a commitment to struggle with and for others so that all may live dignified lives.

Miroslav Volf says that we need to enlarge our thinking,

...by letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as our-

selves, from their perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives. (Volf, p. 213)

We cannot assume that we have a monopoly on the truth. It is a prerequisite to establishing any lasting peace, because it is the only attitude that can prevent a group from taking out their swords with dogmatic judgmental zeal.

Dialogue' is an opportunity for mutual education. We can create a space for peace to happen by listening to each other's stories and finding narratives that do justice to the 'truths' in both. A failure to make peaceful changes possible in our economy, politics, and morality will make inevitable the conflicts that arise from these and other unacceptable inequalities.

We need to view global systems not from the perspective of the dominant and those in control, but from the perspective of society's most downtrodden populations: the culturally subjugated and the economically dispossessed. Dr Mark Peel, a social researcher at Monash University says that they have experiences and stories that many of us never know. They must be able to decide which forms of development are appropriate for their lives, and which forms of materialism are not appropriate.

Despite witnessing distressing levels of poverty, militarism, and consumption, there are some exemplary scenes of human integrity. Peace and justice do not come by waiting to see if others will act. We can be more compassionate. We can be more humane. We can live in peace. Peace has become our most important challenge. Peace cannot be grasped. It is fragile and easily broken. To communicate peace requires a spirit of humility and reconciliation.

It is easy to point the finger but Jesus taught us to love our enemies. He taught us to be peace in a world where it does not exist. If we are not found in places of darkness, then how will the light of peace be seen in the world?

True nonviolence enacts a new script. The bishops' statement tries to do this as it presents to us the vision of the one who was peace and

who is the peace between us. Jesus' teaching provides circuit breakers that reverse the cycles of hostility and violence. We can choose an alternative to the traditional 'software programs' on which our culture operates. It calls us to take initiatives and to jar ourselves and others loose from the 'spell' of violence, the typical action/reaction cycle.

Just as we can take these steps in our personal lives, we can also join with others to confront patterns of violence and injustice at the social or cultural level in this way. Every successful nonviolent social movement has accomplished the task of exposing the offending script of violence or domination it was struggling against and then rewriting that script, enacting a drama that forgoes the typical bad ending for one that is more human and just. Active nonviolence is this process of revision and re-enactment. Active nonviolence challenges us to see and transform the deadly cultural and personal scripts that we blindly rehearse and perform—and produce a drama which is unexpectedly, creatively, and lovingly human.

We can do things differently. We can go against the tide. The scripts of violence can be re-written and be transformed. It requires the creation of a new script that interrupts the violence played out in our own lives and in the world. This new script comes out of conversion. The gospel presents us with the script of love and the Bible continually reminds us that this world is the theatre of God's love. That love lives within each of us and is poured into the world in ever new and concrete acts. It rewrites the 'old scripts' of violence and domination. The choice to play one of these roles in the production of violent conflict—whether emotional, verbal or physical violence in our own homes, in our work places, in the streets, or on the national and international scene—means we remain on the way of suffering and dehumanisation.

Jesus was crucified because of how he ate. Radical inclusiveness evokes a sense of acceptance, warmth, love, healing and happi-

ness. It takes on a different flavour in the strong line from the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Love your enemies’. Yes, they have to be embraced and included—even the most obnoxious characters (Pilate, Herod, Judas). Not only to include but also to forgive. Love of enemies is empty rhetoric if these people cannot be included. This is where we forge the link between the radical inclusiveness and the commitment to nonviolence. ‘Love your enemies’: this is where the rubber hits the road. The gospels take forgiveness to a new level. The story of the Good Samaritan changes the concept of neighbour by offering one without barriers or boundaries. The only landmark is unconditional love: everyone is your neighbour. Preferential treatment is not for the good and holy but for those considered nobodies, the rabble, and the rejected, by the prevailing culture.

### *Church*

It seems difficult for the church to speak with credibility about violence if it does not deal with violence within its own walls. There are alternative stories of subversion, resistance, human equality and radical community in the scriptures that have been muted, dismissed or spiritualised out of harm’s way. Theology has legitimised male dominance, confirmed by a masculine God. We see it in the continued use of language that appears to collude with the frames of violence that serve the powerful and silence the weak and marginalised. This Bishops’ Statement must also be a call to our church communities to be places of courage that offer hospitality, celebrate diversity and confront abuse with honesty, care and integrity. The vision and mandate for the Decade to Overcome Violence calls on us to listen to the stories of those who are the victims of direct and institutionalised violence in the church who might be kept quiet by exclusion, fear and marginalisation. We cannot continue to claim that the violence we do to others and upon creation is sanctioned by God.

### *Media*

Violence in the media affects us in many ways. We can be repelled but then become numb to it in such a way that it does not affect us anymore. As with violence in the home, it can become a way of life. The worst thing that can occur is that it stunts our conscience where it is no longer seen as destructive and accepted as inevitable.

Satish Kumar wanted to walk the world for peace and so walked from Mahatma Gandhi’s grave in Delhi to John F. Kennedy’s grave. At the India-Pakistan border, friends and relatives farewelled and warned them of the dangers of Pakistan - an enemy and a Muslim country. They were fearful that he refused to take money or accept a ride from anyone. Coming through passport control and customs, Satish was amazed to find a young man waiting with garlands of marigold flowers. Having heard of these two Indians walking for peace to Moscow, he wanted to offer them hospitality. This hospitality was replicated as they walked through Afghanistan, Persia, Iran, the Soviet Union, and then Poland, Eastern Germany, Western Germany, Belgium, France, England and the USA. They had passed through many different cultures – Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist among the Russians, Asians, Americans, Europeans, Socialists, and Communists. They found that when we dig down deep and touch the humanity, people are the same everywhere. Satish said: ‘If I went as an Indian with a flag, I would meet a Pakistani. If I went as a Hindu proclaiming Hinduism’s supremacy, I would meet a Christian or a Muslim saying, ‘No, no, no! We have got the best religion.’ If I go as a Socialist I’ll meet a Capitalist. If I go as a brown man I’ll meet a black man or white man. But if I go as a human being I’ll meet only human beings.

### *Eucharist*

For those who participate in the Eucharist two important words emerge. These are: ‘remembering’ and ‘forgetting’. We know that Christ’s

sacrifice overcomes the distinction between friend and enemy by absorbing the violence of humanity. He shows how God overturns our normal expectations of justice, and absorbs the violence we ourselves do and that God overcomes violence by becoming the victim of violence. The resurrection shows us a God who sides with the victim. We too are called to identify with the victims of this; to overcome the opposition between 'them' and 'us'. So at the heart of injustice and violence consists a 'lie'. The lie is that those we ignore, neglect, accuse, condemn, attack, or kill are 'not like us'. They do not share our common humanity. This is the 'forgetting' or 'amnesia' that is opposite to 'remembering' or '*anamnesis*'. The forgetting that the *anamnesis* seeks to undo is the forgetting that occurs when we justify violence. *Anamnesis* means that things are is not the way things have to be. To participate in this remembering is to live inside God's imagination where not even the smallest creature is forgotten (Luke 12:6-7). 'To remember' is to remember that we are one flesh and our existence is bound up with one another. But we tolerate violence when the other is not like me and so able to be demonised. This thinking made possible gross acts of inhumanity [the Crusades, the Inquisition, apartheid, colonisation and enslavement of the African people, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, homophobia, Katrina, Cambodia, etc].

Another aspect of *anamnesis* is 'remembering' the body—knitting together, overcoming the distance between friend and enemy. If we live inside God's imagination, we will see that even the people we most demonise as enemies are made in God's image. Furthermore, they have something to teach us about ourselves. Peace is not achieved by torturing and bombing people. We have made terrorists faster than we can kill them. Only by addressing the underlying causes of terrorism honestly is peace possible. The world did not change

on September 11 but on December 25 when the Word became incarnate in human history.

Peacebuilding is not a passive activity but an action-oriented endeavour that takes time, integrity, ingenuity, commitment, determination, discipline, restraint and sacrifice. We need to adopt a vision of peace and enact it daily with the deep conviction that we can make a difference, and be as Gandhi said: '...the change you wish to see.' It is a radical departure from war and violence that assumes that force can effectively control people or situations. We are called to do something bold, courageous and risky: let us seek answers and question the answers offered by anyone—political leaders, clergy, teachers, family members—who say the answer to violence is more violence. To question their answers is to risk scorn, to be labeled naïve, or impractical. Each of us is a leader. There is no one else.

The Franciscan priest, Father Mychal Judge, who died at the World Trade Center, preaching the day before 9/11 said, 'No matter how big the call, no matter how small, you have no idea what God is calling you to do .... But God needs you, He needs me, He needs all of us.... Not just Christians or Jews, but Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, atheists, the right, the left, everyone.' We all have a role to play. None should be involved in inflaming hatred and prejudice or violating the rights of others or considering oneself superior.

In conclusion, I wish to once again express my delight that the Bishops of Australia have offered another call to peace as they did in 2004. We need to hear this message day in and day out because peace and nonviolence are a daily call and challenge. In conclusion, I believe that this Statement might have had more strength as a message to the people of Australia if it could also have dealt in some small way with violence within the church and how people can feel marginalised or actually be marginalised.