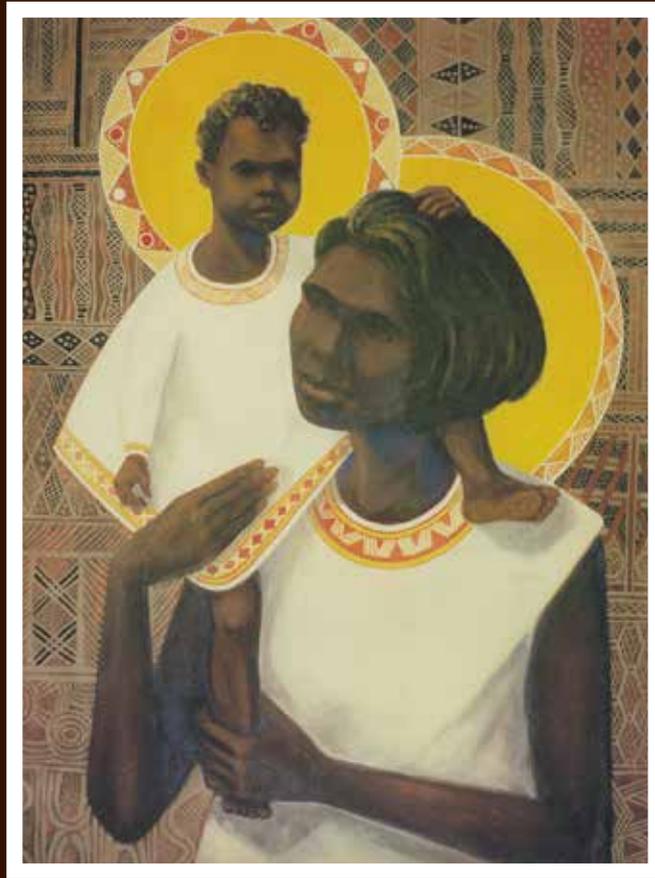




AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Peoples



Because of her, we can!

Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Sunday 2018



Ngabuny's life by Benita Everett, from the Christof Collection, Diocese of Broome

THE DECISION OF THE HOLY FATHER, POPE FRANCIS, to have inscribed in the General Roman Calendar this year, "The Memorial of Mary as Mother of the Church", was well received in Christian circles. Significantly it recognises the importance of Mary in our life and devotion echoing, as it does, in some manner the voice of Jesus dying on the Cross as he tells the disciples - "Behold your Mother."¹ Further, just as the Disciples of Christ were bound to His Mother so the faithful have found in Mary one who "has her maternal mission to carry out"² for our benefit. For this we shall be ever grateful, anxious "to plant our life firmly on three great realities: the Cross, the Eucharist and the Mother of God."³

In Australia, in the course of the history of inter-race relations, a great travesty of justice has left its mark, a dreadful slur upon our character as a nation. This burden of grief is born still by many of our First Nation peoples and was made possible by Acts of Parliament and the practices of governments. The forceful separation of Aboriginal children from their families and the placing of them in institutional care, mistakenly 'for their own good,' was a policy almost universally held by others as an appropriate thing to do. Today we know how mistaken that opinion was in its entirety. By way of contrast the National Apology, published just ten years ago, has acknowledged the need for change in order that the "healing of our nation" might begin while the injustices perpetrated in the past must "never, never happen again."⁴

One cannot help but be saddened by the countless stories of mothers sorrowing for their children taken from them, never to be seen again. The story of Margie comes to mind who has a childhood memory of being driven off in a truck by a policeman while her mother lies in tears on the road behind. Or Tillie who, as an adult, went searching through records in Government departments for information on her estranged mother, and then eventually discovered the elderly woman in an aged care home suffering from advanced Alzheimer's disease.

The societal upheaval and social dislocation wrought by the hideous Stolen Generation policies continues as an inter-generational problem affecting still the well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. So too has the effects of blatant racism, practised since the earliest days of European settlement, taken its toll on the vitality

and self-worth of Australia's First Peoples. The enslavement of Aboriginal people by the pastoral and pearling industries is well known as is the wholesale occupation of their lands and their banishment from traditional country. The burdens borne by Indigenous people since the beginning of Colonial times has been nothing less than a pitiful disgrace that weighs heavily upon the moral responsibility of this nation to do better.

Despite all the horrendous stories of injustice and the untold thousands of chapters that could be written on the matter, it is heartening to recognise the mothers who have battled and largely succeeded in holding Indigenous families together. Despite predictions to the contrary, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to survive and to maintain a significant place in this Commonwealth of Australia. And for that we rejoice in humble gratitude.

A few years ago, in one outback town, a group of Aboriginal women gathered with their local priest to discuss the purchase of a statue of Our Lady for the Parish Church. Among the women were mothers who had lost sons to road accidents, suicide, alcohol, kidney disease, violence and long terms in prison. They were grandmothers who now cared for the younger children left behind. They were their custodians dedicated to providing for the youngsters something of a stable life. When given a number of holy cards depicting various images of Mary - Our Lady of Lourdes, Fatima, Walsingham, Carmel, Guadeloupe and the Pieta - they unanimously chose the Pieta, Michelangelo's statue of the Blessed Mother with the broken body of her son Jesus which lay upon her lap, cradled in her arms. It was an image they were familiar with after countless experiences of tragically losing their own sons. The sentiments expressed in the image of the Pieta resonated most profoundly with them for good reason.

The Pieta is a prayerful image of motherhood to be nurtured, supported and prayed for in our community. The loving care that this masterpiece portrays cannot be separated from the sorrow of the reality it represents. And yet mothers, like Mary, the Mother of the Church, in their maternal mission assist others to rise above the tragedies and tribulations of life in the knowledge that greater moments await us when in hope and in faith we are brought out of darkness into His own wonderful light.



Jesus dreaming by Nancy Nodea, from the Christof Collection, Diocese of Broome



Holy Spirit in the Desert by Elizabeth Noonie Lulu, from the Christof Collection, Diocese of Broome

The dark abyss of Aboriginal History in Australia, as we know it, has been remarkably bathed in the light that emanates from the goodness, and the heroic efforts, of many people who are driven by a sense of charity and a longing for what is right. Most notably among these people are numerous mothers in Indigenous Communities throughout the land whose love and determination have achieved inspirational things for themselves and their families. In prayerful thanksgiving we salute them and commend them to Almighty God and to the care of Mary, the Mother of the Church, who has steadfastly lived the Beatitudes of Jesus. May these mothers continue to emulate Mother Mary in what they say and in what they do. In the words of the Holy Father, Pope Francis: "She is that woman who rejoiced in the presence of God, who treasured everything in her heart and who let herself be pierced by the sword. Mary is the saint among the saints, blessed above all others. She teaches us the way of holiness and she walks ever at our side."⁵

1. John 19:26-27

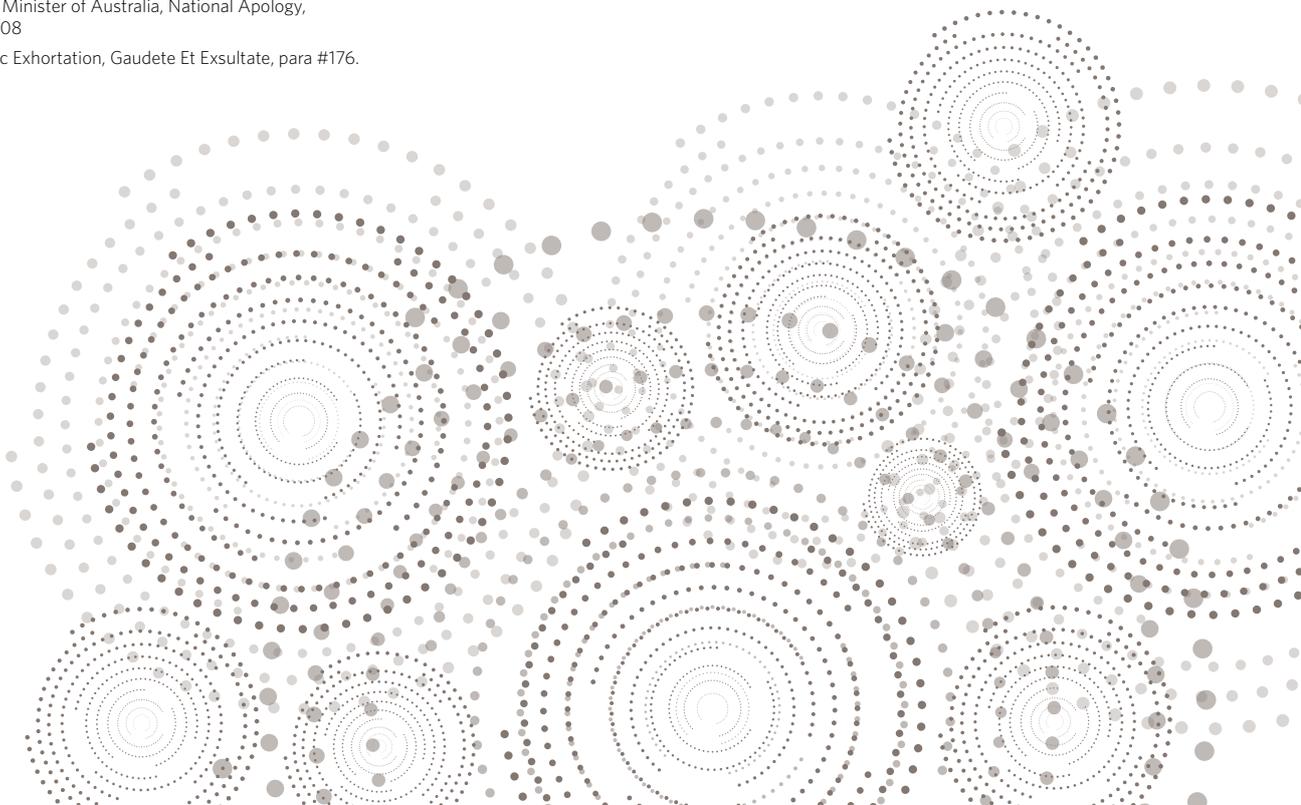
2. +Robert Cardinal Sarah, Rome, *Ecclesiae Mater*, Commentary, p1.

3. +Robert Cardinal Sarah, Rome, *Ecclesiae Mater*, Commentary, p2.

4. Hon Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia, National Apology, Canberra, 13th April 2008

5. Pope Francis I, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, para #176.

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*Cover artwork: Our Lady of the Aborigines by Karel Kupka'
The original of this picture is enshrined in St Mary's Star of the Sea
Cathedral, Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia.*

*Disclaimer: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respectfully
advised that this publication may contain the words, voices, names,
images and descriptions of people who have passed away.*



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