

## **A call to peace and non-violence**

*“Jesus Christ was the greatest non-violent practitioner that ever lived”* said Mahatma Ghandi, one of the century’s most prominent peace activists. Yet, years after the death of Ghandi and more than 2,000 years after Christ, we live in a violent world; and an increasingly violent Australian society.

The Gospel of Matthew says that “You have heard that it was said; An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’...You have heard it said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” ... (Matt 5:38, 43-44)

It is with this scripture passage that the Catholic bishops of Australia break open the theme for this year’s social justice statement which was launched on September 14. *“Violence in Australia: a message of peace”* was the topic agreed on by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, in response to a growing violent culture in Australia.

The statement is broad; focusing on a wide range of ways in which violence plagues society – ranging from domestic violence in the home; to violence on Australian streets; to racial violence against indigenous people, refugees, asylum seekers and international students. It focuses on specific incidents of violence and sees them as part of a broad problem. It discusses the personal roots of violence; violence in the family and in the community. The statement leaves no stone unturned, treating each subject carefully and examining ways in which violence penetrates Australian culture, looking at examples from football, to alcohol, to drugs, to depression, vulnerability, poverty, racism, the media, to social structures. It then shifts to a focus on Jesus, speaking of him as the great peacemaker, as one who went to the margins, and who ultimately was crucified and rose again. A Christological emphasis in this second part of the statement is powerful, denouncing violence in its words.

*“The Son of God did not fight fire with fire, did not take control, but went to death for us. God, however, fought death with life, violence with peace”*, reads the statement.

At the launch, social justice workers, religious and lay people of faith gathered at Mary Mackillop place in North Sydney to listen to some views on and briefly discuss violence in Australia, and the steps being taken towards peace.

The Welcome to Country was given by Elsie Heiss, coordinator of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in the Archdiocese of Sydney, who spoke emotively about the violence of racism which still exists in society today. In tears, she read a moving prayer of NATSICC (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council), which speaks of the pain and suffering of indigenous people, even today.

Bishop Christopher Saunders, Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice statement paid tribute to all who had worked together in the preparation of the statement.

The Statement was officially launched by her Excellency Marie Bashir, the Governor of New South Wales, whose moving address continually went back to Jesus.

“Violence is not only an interpersonal trauma, it is, in our society a social problem of great concern”. Her Excellency spoke of the creativity of forgiveness and drawing inspiration from the many people who show that peace is possible. She spoke about Mary Mackillop and her example of peace and good will in the face of adversity; and lamented the growing prevalence of domestic violence and psychological vulnerability. In finishing, she quoted Pope Benedict reminding the group that he too exhorts us to peace in our daily lives. “Rather than measuring our lives by what the world gives us, what we feel we are entitled to, we must instead measure our lives by what we can offer.”

The response to the launch was given by Brendon McKeague of the peace and non-violence movement Pace e Bene. He spoke of a constant transformation which we are called to— candidly admitting that just because he was an advocate of peace and non-violence, did not mean that he was always non-violent. The humility of this admission was touching and encouraged each of those gathered to examine the ways in which we are violent – in our words, actions, thoughts and dealings with others.

*The Social Justice statement is now available on the website of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference [www.catholic.org.au](http://www.catholic.org.au); or copies can be ordered from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. Social Justice Sunday will be celebrated in parishes across Australia on 23 September, 2010.*