

**Statement to Synod of Bishops on the Family 2015 from
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Your Holiness, your Eminences, brothers and sisters.

I am Chair of Catholic Social Services in Australia where people do much of the pastoral work of the Church with families and individuals who are distressed, lost, broken or despairing. We acknowledge the sacredness of the family and we travel with its sadness and messiness. Daily, we celebrate the apostolic value of the lives of families and in so doing we evangelise. On behalf of my colleagues I beseech you that with your gifts and with witness to Christ's word you can discern the doctrinal as well as the pastoral to enable those we accompany in their agony and brokenness to feel less alienated from our Apostolic Church.

Briefly I address paragraph 79 (Culture) then 110 (Accompaniment).

Culture

In Australia our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are our most marginalised people coming from multiple language groups with differing belief systems and family traditions. For most of them the idea of the family as it is represented by Church teaching is alien. For some, the matrilineal system means they have many mothers. The child is reared in a kinship group. Women play a dynamic role in their kinship world and they expect them to be visible. In the words of one of their leaders:

"By not having women visible on the Altar and in the life of our Church, we are concealing our mothers, sisters and daughters from view".

In welcoming the Gospel they ask not to be re-colonised by our Church as they have been by our nation's forebears. The challenge for our Church is to formally and institutionally incorporate cross cultural dialogue and adopt systems with Indigenous Australians that honour and do not violate their culture.

Accompaniment

My second point relates to those who have suffered at the hands of members of our beloved Church itself. I have worked for forty years with people who have experienced sexual abuse in families at the hands of an adult – usually a man and often a father. For twenty of these years this work has also involved dealing with the results of sexual abuse of children by Clergy and Religious. All sexual abuse is connected to the abuse of power.

I sit on the Truth, Justice and Healing Council of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference. The horrific evidence of abuse of children in families and institutions and our failure to respond adequately to this has left the Church in Australia (and of course elsewhere) in deep pain. The primary agony is with the victims and their families. The other level of agony is with the Clergy, Religious Congregations, pastoral care workers, faithful families and those who are deserting the pews. In the words of Pope Francis, "as we all pray for and receive the grace of shame" we need local and collective ways of meeting all these victims and their families and each other in our garden of agony and to listen deeply. From our failings and the accompanying pain, we have the opportunity to learn collectively and doctrinally and indeed to re-engage with and accompany the thousands of families who we have lost. In so doing we will indeed enrich our joyful Church family...THANK YOU.