

Indigenous Youth Suicide

REFLECTION ONE



'Serving Country - Centenary and beyond'

National theme for NAIDOC week 2014

July 6 is **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday** and marks the **beginning of NAIDOC National week**. Its origin dates back before the 1920s when Aboriginal rights groups boycotted Australia Day in protest against the status and treatment of Indigenous Australians. For Aborigines it was called the 'Day of Mourning'. In 1955 it was shifted to the first Sunday in July when it was

decided the day should become, not simply a protest day, but also a **celebration of Aboriginal culture**. This year's theme honours all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who fought in defence of this country. [READ MORE](#)

While there is much to celebrate in this rich culture, it remains true that many Aboriginal communities continue to suffer the ongoing effects of dislocation, disadvantage and dysfunction and these effects are most alarming among the Indigenous youth today. The challenge for us as a nation is to confront this with the urgency it requires now.

Ask any Aboriginal woman or Elder what is the most pressing issue for which we should advocate for change and so focus our prayer; unhesitatingly, they will answer: **'education and good support services for our youth.'** They fear losing a whole generation of young people to petty crime, substance abuse, and suicide. It is easy for us to dismiss these behaviours as "cultural" but that is far from the truth. Suicide was unknown among Aboriginal people prior to white invasion. Appalling living conditions, abuse, homelessness and past traumas have led to a **suicide rate that by far exceeds that of non-Aboriginal people and is among the highest in the world.**



So let us make this plight of Indigenous youth in our country the focus of our fervent prayer for the month of July.

PRAYER

Holy Father, God of Love
We accept with gratitude the gift
Aboriginal people bring to us in their rich culture.

May we acknowledge the shame of our history,
and the pain of displacement and loss
suffered by our Aboriginal brothers and sisters.

Guided by your Spirit help us as a nation
find ways to improve the quality of life
in Aboriginal communities
and restore dignity and hope to the youth.



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REFLECTION TWO

...what has been done cannot be undone. But what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow.

John Paul II spoke these words in an address to the Indigenous people gathered at Alice Springs on 29 November 1986, and twenty-eight years later that call is even more urgent. Punishment in prison or detention centres with no supporting rehabilitation is known to create repeat offenders. It is both costly and ineffective and too often results in suicide, By the time aboriginal youth involved in petty criminal behaviours come before the courts it is often too late. But despite the deaths, no effective suicide prevention strategy has been put in place.



Monies spent on failed policies could be better directed. **Prevention and early intervention are the key principles** to build into policies at all levels of government followed by action taken to create a change in the circumstances that give rise to the alienation or marginalization of these young people. This is a mental health issue, and must not be sacrificed in the forthcoming budget.

Empower and adequately resource Aboriginal communities where possible, especially the Elders, to handle healing programs for youth to reconnect them with their cultural identity, and pass on cultural knowledge as the basis for building self-belief, self-confidence and self-respect. This would go some way to help deal with their trauma, along with government support for culturally-appropriate job pathways and work opportunities. [MORE](#)

None of this is easy, but it is possible. So let us to continue to pray with courage and conviction that the situation for Indigenous youth can be changed.

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Acknowledgements:

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Page 1 - Image 1: Harry Alfred Pitt, winner of the National NAIDOC Poster competition.

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