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MEDIA RELEASE

'NO' VOTE DISAPPOINTS AND CONCERNS

St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia has expressed disappointment and concern over the negative outcome of Saturday's referendum on enshrining an advisory First Nations voice in the Australian Constitution, saying it risks fuelling the divisiveness seen during the campaign.

'More importantly though, the decision not to enable First Peoples to have a greater say in government decisions impacting on their families and communities runs the risk of further disempowering them,' said the Society's National President, Mark Gaetani.

'Catholic social teaching principles, which are a guiding light for the Society, note that a yardstick by which to tell whether justice is effectively present in a given situation is to ask: Is real responsibility being exercised by the people most affected by the decisions that are being made? Are they allowed to share in the decision-making?

'A constitutional Voice would have enabled Australia's First Peoples to have much greater input to governmental decisions that affect them.

'A lot of commentary in the leadup to voting caused us, one of the many faith-based bodies advocating for Yes, concern. The Voice would have provided a properly constituted and well-structured way of influencing policy and improving outcomes where they matter – in the daily lives of the almost one million Australians of First Nations heritage.

'No would not mean eliminating the gaps in mortality and morbidity rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It would not mean an end to young Aboriginal kids going to jail or falling behind in their education. But these are among the goals we should work for.'

'We can only hope and pray that the Albanese Government will put even greater effort into developing ways for First Nations people to provide meaningful input into the development of policies that impact on their wellbeing and advancement, even without a formal Voice process.

'As one door closes, another often opens, and this decision could provide a strong incentive for the Australian Government to enact and implement policies that are informed by what is best for the original inhabitants of this land.'

Mr Gaetani added, 'The Society has long-standing connections with the First Peoples of Australia, and we are well acquainted with the disadvantage they continue to experience. Depending on the location, between ten and twenty per cent of all people assisted by the Society identify as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

'We understand their pain and know there have been few significant improvements in their socio-economic conditions over the decades, despite changes of governments and policies.

Mr Gaetani added, 'Our position on the Voice referendum was based on the values of our founders who two centuries ago showed courageous advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable, the powerless and the many others who needed not just a loaf of bread, but equality under the law.'

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia consists of 45,000 members and volunteers who operate on the ground through over 1,000 groups located in local communities across the country.

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