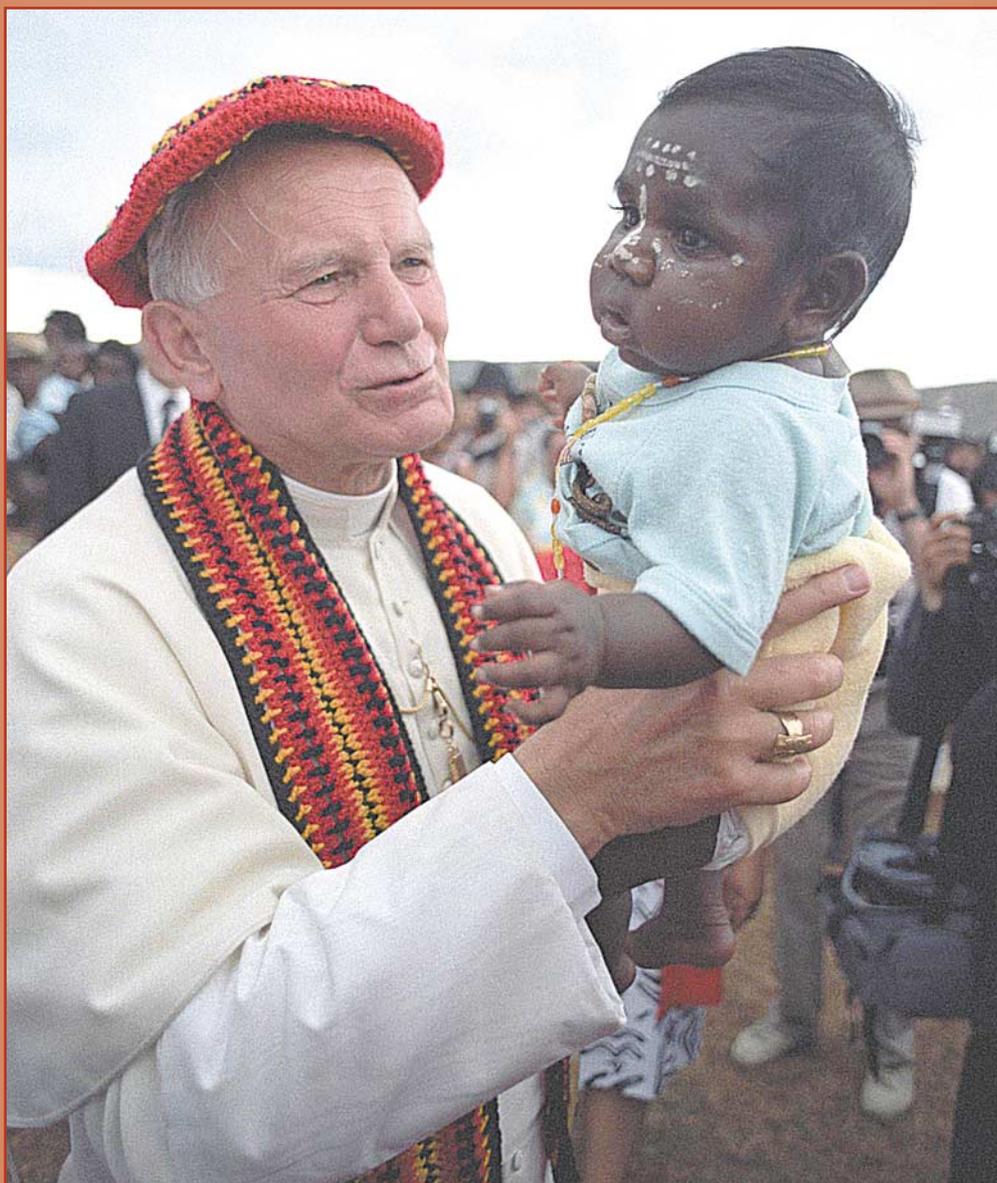


**Social Justice Sunday Statement 2006**

# THE HEART OF OUR COUNTRY

*Dignity and justice for our  
Indigenous sisters and brothers*



*Reflections on Pope John Paul II's 1986 Address to  
Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*



**Australian Catholic Bishops Conference**

## Chairman's message

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, I present the Social Justice Sunday Statement for 2006, *The Heart of Our Country: Dignity and justice for our Indigenous sisters and brothers*.

This statement recalls the historic speech by His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders at Alice Springs on 29 November 1986. Its full impact and significance is still being realised, as the nation, the Catholic Church and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to travel the path towards true respect and reconciliation.

The Bishops have frequently commented on issues relating to Indigenous peoples, twice in the major Social Justice Statements. In 1978 *Aborigines – A Statement of Concern* was published, then in 1987 an ecumenical message, *A Just and Proper Settlement*, which anticipated the Bicentennial celebrations of 1988. These statements addressed the dispossession of Indigenous people that took place as a result of European settlement and colonisation of their land and the need for a just resolution of the painful consequences.

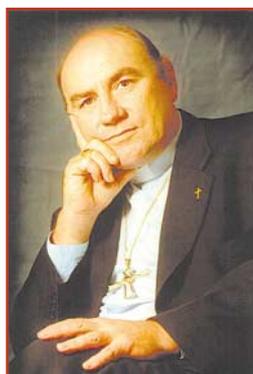
The assurance of Pope John Paul II to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, that *the Church esteems and loves you, and how much she wishes to assist you in your spiritual and material needs*, finds a resounding echo in the address of his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, to Australia's new Ambassador to the Vatican, in May 2006.

*In regard to the Aboriginal people of your land, there is still much to be achieved ... Commitment to truth opens the way to lasting reconciliation through the healing process of asking forgiveness and granting forgiveness – two indispensable elements for peace. In this way our memory is purified, our hearts are made serene, and our future is filled with a well-founded hope in the peace which springs from truth.*

The 2006 Statement recalls the generous reply of Vincent Lingiari when ownership of traditional Gurindji land in the Northern Territory was restored to his people in 1975:

*Let us live happily together as mates, let us not make it hard for each other.*

In this spirit, the Catholic Bishops' Social Justice Sunday Statement for 2006 promotes hope for reconciliation in our country today.



With every blessing

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Christopher A. Saunders".

Christopher A. Saunders, DD  
Bishop of Broome  
Chairman  
Australian Catholic Social  
Justice Council

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference thanks all who have been involved in the drafting, editing, and production of the 2006 Social Justice Sunday Statement, including Br Shane Wood cfc, Ms Margaret Zucker and members of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. An electronic version of the Statement is available on the ACBC website at [www.acbc.catholic.org.au](http://www.acbc.catholic.org.au) and the ACSJC website at [www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au](http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au)

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**Warning** – this document may contain images of deceased persons

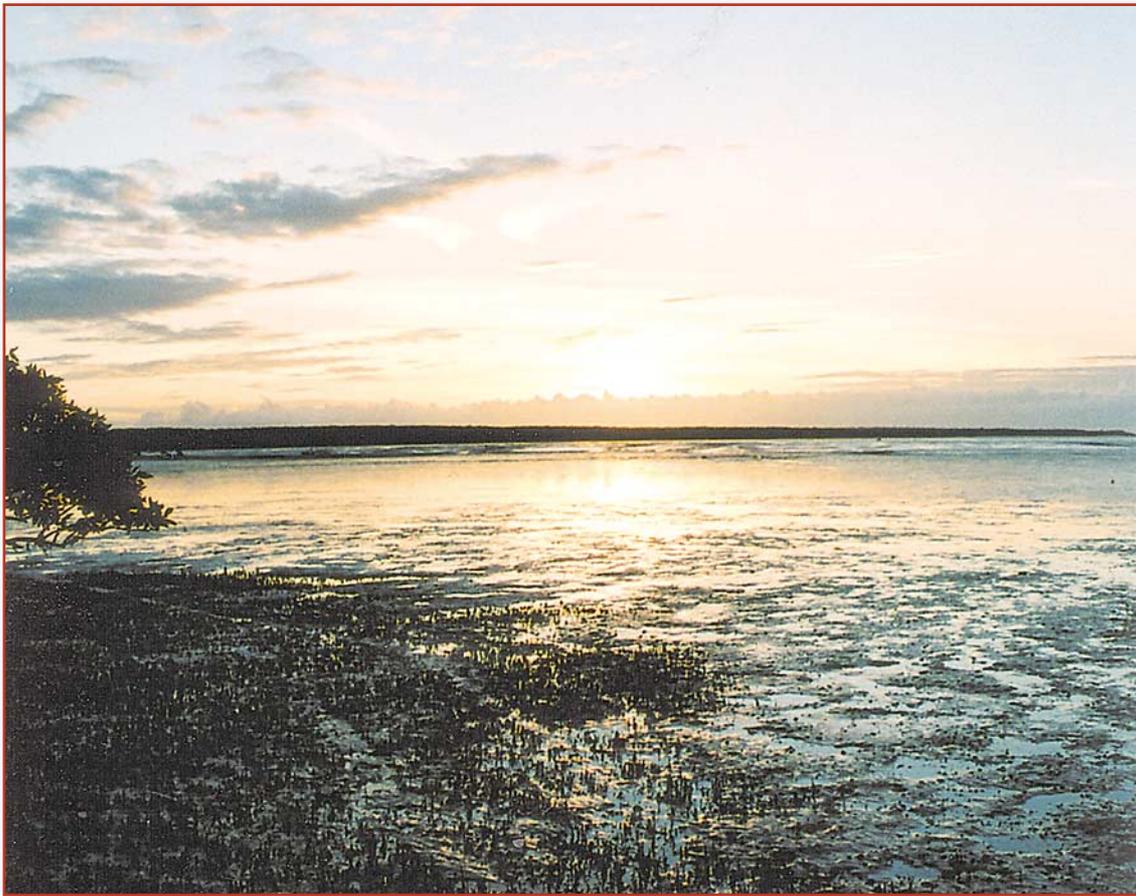


## AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is the permanent assembly of the bishops of our nation and the body through which they act together in carrying out the Church's mission at a national level. The ACBC website at [www.acbc.catholic.org.au](http://www.acbc.catholic.org.au) gives a full list of Bishops Conference commissions as well as statements and other items of news and interest.

# THE HEART OF OUR COUNTRY

*Dignity and justice for our Indigenous sisters and brothers*



Kimberley Community Profile/CAS

*Thousands of years before Moses, his eyes dimmed with age, looked over the river of Jordan, my ancestors lived on these very sand hills and looked across Roebuck Bay to the other side of Yawuru country. From the Dreamtime, Creator Ancestors came to the Yawuru people and entrusted in us sacred law and culture. My ancestors have continuously maintained and practised that law and culture, and it continues to the present day.<sup>1</sup>*

## The Message Stick

A significant way for Aboriginal Australians to maintain and pass on their ancient culture was through *Message Sticks*. These wooden sticks were marked with symbols and were shown to the Elders of each group that the carriers, young males, met on their journey. The bearer was then allowed to pass.

From ancient times, the Message Stick has been used to call people from different tribes together. Now, as the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Melbourne tells us, 'The call to embrace Australia's Indigenous peoples is issued to the whole Church and the whole nation in nine "Pass It On" Message Sticks bearing symbolically the messages of the Pope's 1986

statement.' The sticks are similar in size and bear symbols of Christ, of the Pope's 1986 message and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Message Sticks involve the interpretation of the Pope's message in liturgy, song, dance, story, activities and other ceremonies. They are calling us to commemorate in October 2006 the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's historic speech at Alice Springs.

The Message Sticks carry an invitation to all of us to celebrate the message of hope and reconciliation in our local communities. They also carry with them the call to reflect on the message delivered by Pope John Paul II and to evaluate the extent to which we have responded to that message over the past 20 years.

How should we respond to this call? How can we joyfully receive this message in our local community?



Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne



## What was the message in 1986?

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, it is a great joy for me to be here today in Alice Springs and to meet so many of you, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia. I want to tell you right away how much the Church esteems and loves you, and how much she wishes to assist you in your spiritual and material needs.<sup>2</sup>*

The full impact of these words spoken 20 years ago is still being realised, as the nation and the Catholic Church continue to explore the path to reconciliation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.

Vicki Walker of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Melbourne commented:

*Just the initial fact that the Holy Father wanted to come to Australia and meet the Aboriginal people came as a shock at first. They never had a leader ask them to be who they really are and who challenged the Catholic Church to joyfully receive the Aboriginal people ... He challenged Aboriginal people to make their contribution to the church as Aboriginal people. We no longer had to take the foreign ways of our culture and heritage and adapt them. He encouraged us to live out our Aboriginality.<sup>3</sup>*

Pope John Paul II identified four very important issues when he spoke to the Aboriginal people in Blatherskite Park at Alice Springs:

- He challenged all Australians to ensure the preservation of Indigenous cultures and to keep working for an inclusive multicultural Australia.
- He called us to seek and explore the points of agreement between Indigenous traditions and those of Jesus and all his people.
- He praised the way the Indigenous peoples had cared for the land and then challenged us to learn together how to preserve our fragile environment.
- Finally, by naming past hurts and continuing injustices, John Paul II confronted us as a nation with the need to move towards true reconciliation.

As we mark the 20th anniversary of that remarkable day in 1986, what can we say we have achieved in these four areas, and what is still left to be done in taking up the challenges that Pope John Paul II placed before us all?

*'Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear ...'*

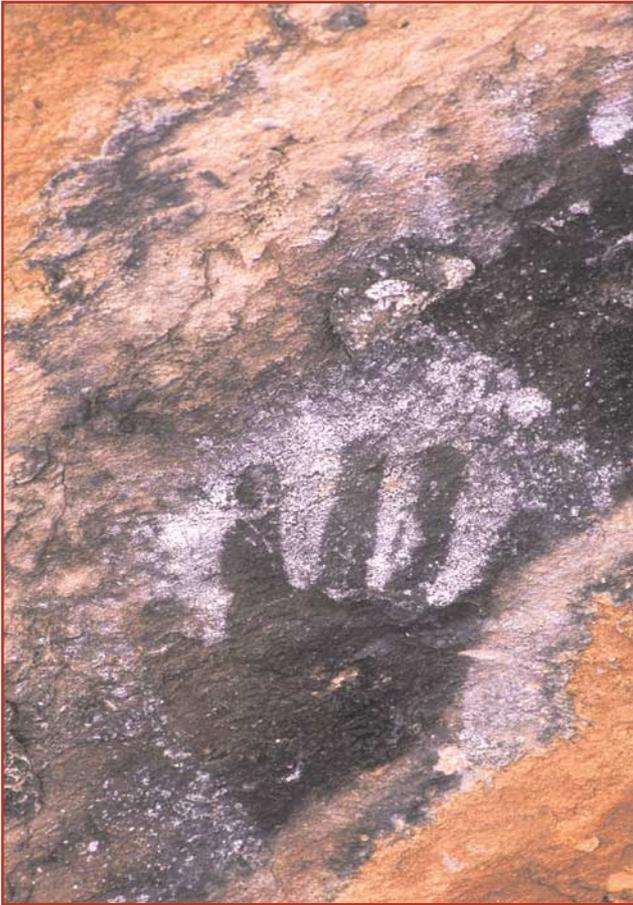
**John Paul II, Address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, 1986**

Australia is now a truly multicultural society, but the arrival of Europeans and other groups of settlers did not bring multiculturalism to this country. A language map of Australia shows the number of cultures, languages and ways of seeing the world that were present in this land for millennia. The land was covered by trade routes linking different peoples; the Message Stick was a tool that connected various cultures. Relationships between people to the north of Australia and Aboriginal people have continued for hundreds of years. Many people have experienced the welcome of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

For example, in response to the cultural exclusion experienced by the recent wave of refugees and asylum seekers, Indigenous people at Adelaide's Otherway Centre have responded with great generosity in providing a welcome to a large group of Afghani refugees. This has involved providing support as well as a strong interfaith experience for both sides. This example of welcome to the stranger given by the Indigenous people demonstrates their commitment and contribution to the broader community's culture of welcome and acceptance.

How welcome then are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our faith communities?

When John Paul II spoke in 1986, he was expressing his appreciation of the value of all cultures, but especially the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. For the most part, however, until very recently non-Indigenous Australians have



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*Mt Grenfell historic site.*

*‘It is the Church’s task to help indigenous cultures preserve their identity and maintain their traditions.’*

been less attentive to the particular needs of Indigenous peoples, who have often been made to feel like unwelcome strangers in their own country.

The message to give the original Australians a special place in our efforts at building a truly multicultural society was reiterated by Pope John Paul II in 2001 in his message to the Church in Oceania after the Synod in Rome. He wrote:

*... it is the Church’s task to help indigenous cultures preserve their identity and maintain their traditions.<sup>4</sup>*

He made special mention in this context of the ‘Australian Aborigines whose culture struggles to survive’.<sup>5</sup> In more recent times, many Church leaders and organisations sponsored by or officially connected with the Catholic Church have been writing, speaking in support of and working alongside Indigenous people to assist them in their efforts to preserve language, history and culture.

One such effort in Walgett, New South Wales, is assisted by Christian Brother John Giacon, who initiated the Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay Language Program with Uncle Ted Fields and Aunty Rose Fernando. The Aboriginal community, with the

support of prominent Elders such as Uncle George Rose, endorsed the promotion of the program across the community and now the language program is offered at pre-school, St Joseph’s Primary School, Walgett Public School, Walgett High School and TAFE. A textbook and word list has been published and a CD and music book released.

The Catholic schools in the remote communities of the Kimberley in north-west Australia continue their commitment to ‘two-way learning’, where teachers become learners of local Aboriginal languages and culture, and students and parents become teachers. At the same time, the schools aim to involve the local community members in the school curriculum through language lessons, ‘bush trips’ and other excursions.

The publication in 2001 of *A Piece of the Story*, a national directory of records of Catholic organisations caring for children separated from their families, was initiated by the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission in conjunction with the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC). It was produced as a resource for people seeking information about



themselves and links to family, and for organisations assisting former residents with personal and family searching. This was a practical attempt to assist Indigenous people in particular to reconnect with their family and their culture and is proving a very valuable resource.

Melissa Brickell, Chairperson of NATSICC, and a member of the Sorry Day Committee at state and national levels for the past decade, speaks of the significance of this initiative in helping people to reclaim the heritage and dignity of their culture:

*You have to know who you are; who's your mob and where you come from to know where you are going.<sup>6</sup>*

We as Church need to continue to work with Indigenous people to provide encouragement, support and resources to keep strong those elements of culture and history that they wish to preserve. This will not be a one-way process.

Aboriginal artist and teacher Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, from the Daly River in the Northern Territory, has shared with non-Indigenous people what she calls a 'special quality' that her people possess. She believes that this unique gift

*is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians ... dadirri ... inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.<sup>7</sup>*

Perhaps the acceptance of this gift from our Indigenous sisters and brothers will assist us as a Church and as a nation to recover that part of our Christian tradition that we call 'contemplative' and 'reflective'. This may be the antidote we desperately need to overcome our culture of 'busyness'. Miriam-Rose expressed the hope that 'the spirit of dadirri that we have to offer will blossom and grow, not just within [our own people], but in our whole nation'.<sup>8</sup>

Are we prepared to receive these gifts with respect and joy? They have the potential to strengthen the culture of both the giver and the receiver.

*'It is wonderful to see how people ... find points of agreement between their own traditions and those of Jesus and his people ...'*

**John Paul II, Address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, 1986**

Until recently, the same effort that was directed towards migrant Catholics has not always been made to help Indigenous Catholics find a welcoming place in the broad Australian Catholic Church. For many of Australia's Indigenous people, painful memories remain of separation from family, country and culture that led them to be placed in the care of Church-run institutions. Still, many were grateful for the care they received at the hands of caring and compassionate priests, brothers and sisters. As Keith Kitchener would say gratefully of Beagle Bay, Western Australia, many years after his time with the missionaries there:

*It's no use getting angry about the past – they sent us to a good place; the old Irish nuns put backbone into us.<sup>9</sup>*

For others, however, the experience was not as positive, and reconnection with church can be a slow and painful journey.

Pope John Paul II's address in Alice Springs followed an established pattern of affirmation for the many cultures that make up our world and our Church. This pattern was proclaimed and celebrated by the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*). The bishops of the Council exhorted those taking the message of the gospel to other lands to

*reflect attentively on how Christian religious life might be able to assimilate the ascetic and contemplative traditions whose seeds were sometimes planted by God in ancient cultures already prior to the preaching of the gospel.<sup>10</sup>*

*Dreaming from the Heart Assembly - Alice Springs 2-7 October 2006*

**The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council promotes and celebrates the cultural identity of our peoples across the nation.**

**By Living and expressing in all its endeavours the spirituality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic peoples.**

**Through this expression and recognition of our cultural identity we will find our rightful place within the Catholic Church in Australia.**

**WWW.NATSICC.ORG.AU**      *Donations welcomed*      NATSICC Youth Councillor Maree McCarthy



AP via AAP/Itsuo Inouge © 1986 The Associated Press

*‘Are we prepared to receive these gifts with respect and joy? They have the potential to strengthen the culture of both the giver and the receiver.’*

There was no need to surrender all that was precious in one’s culture in order to take on the Gospel of Jesus. Pope Paul VI had told Aboriginal people in 1970 that they possessed ‘a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask you to renounce’.<sup>11</sup> However, some Aboriginal people have had a deep fear that this would happen if they embraced Christianity. While it might have been fear of the unknown, as well as the inappropriate assumption of white superiority on the side of the missionaries that led some of them to be dismissive of Indigenous culture in the past, for Aboriginal people, there was

*fear for the complete loss of culture. Some still have a remnant of it, but so many are living in a vacuum, lost and wandering in a darkness they don’t understand.*<sup>12</sup>

Pope John Paul II in 1982 emphasised, on a global level, that:

*The Church’s dialogue with the cultures of our time (is) a vital area, one in which the destiny of the world ... is at stake.*<sup>13</sup>

Boniface Perdjert, from the Wadeye (formerly Port Keats) community near Darwin, was the Deacon assisting Pope John Paul II during the ceremony of Beatification of Mary MacKillop in Sydney in January

1995. Deacon Boniface has also expressed the vital importance of his culture:

*God did not begin to take an interest in people with the incarnation of the Son, nor with Abraham ... So we must recognise, we must use the things of God that are in our culture ... We are called to love God and each other with whole mind, heart and soul. So we must give ourselves to God as an Aboriginal people. This is what God wants or God would not have made us what we are.*<sup>14</sup>

So what efforts have been made to ensure the success of this dialogue of cultures in Australia in relation to Indigenous peoples?

Many efforts have been made to bridge the gap between the largely Western European culture of the Catholic Church in Australia and the cultures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

These efforts or ministries had their beginnings in various ways, such as the appointment of Father Eugene Stockton as a chaplain to Aboriginal people in Sydney, and the work of Father Ted Kennedy and Mrs Shirley Smith (‘Mum Shirl’) over many years among the Aboriginal people at the Redfern parish in Sydney. During the 20 years after Pope John Paul II’s speech, Aboriginal Catholic ministries or councils in



many dioceses throughout Australia have been established, becoming a significant force in this dialogue of cultures.

Inspired by John Paul II's visit to Alice Springs, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council was established in January 1989. In 1992 the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference officially recognised and welcomed it as the national representative and consultative body to the Church on issues concerning Indigenous Catholics. The road has not always been a smooth one, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people now have a recognised place at the discussion table. The vision of NATSICC, inspired by the words of Pope John Paul II, is that it

*promotes and celebrates the cultural identity of our peoples across the nation by living and expressing in all its endeavours the spirituality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic peoples. Through this expression and recognition of our cultural identity we will find our rightful place within the Catholic Church in Australia.*<sup>15</sup>

There are many examples of cultural dialogue at the local level. One is the formal covenant made between the St Martin de Porres Aboriginal Community and Holy Spirit Parish in Darwin. Members of the Aboriginal community recognised that they needed to 'have a church of their own where they could celebrate Mass in their own way'.<sup>16</sup> St Martin de Porres community member Margaret Thompson explained:

*Aboriginal people tend to stand back ... And they thought they were not good enough. It goes back to the upbringing on the missions, where we learned to do things differently ... Previously, in other churches, we couldn't say 'We want this.' We didn't have a voice. At St Martin de Porres we had a chance to celebrate the way we wanted. Suddenly we had a priest who would listen to us.*<sup>17</sup>

As the gospel story of Jesus and his meeting with the Canaanite woman at the well teaches us, the place of meeting of two cultures can be a place of respectful dialogue and can be the place of deep and lasting learning and the enriching of faith (Matthew 15:21-28). The Canaanite woman was an excluded person, possibly on more than one account. She was from a non-Jewish culture; her daughter was 'tormented by a devil'. Jesus is moved to change his focus by this foreigner and the persistence that her faith gives her. His sole focus on the 'lost sheep of the House of Israel' was widened by this exchange to include all those who expressed a sincere and humble faith.

Nungalinga College in Darwin is another example in the Northern Territory of a successful attempt to bring Indigenous and Christian spirituality together. The College's vision is:



Kimberley Community Profile/L. Holden

**Above:** The home reading program of the Kururrungku Catholic Education Centre at Billiluna.

**Below:** Bishop Christopher Saunders and students from Ngalangangpum School after their Confirmation ceremony.

**Right:** Madonna and Child, Richard Campbell/Reconciliation Church, La Perouse



Kimberley Community Profile/P. Cowan



*‘Through this expression and recognition of our cultural identity we will find our rightful place within the Catholic Church in Australia.’*

*... to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people empowered and self-reliant, freed from dependence and oppression with our culture strong. As a Christian college we seek to build up our people, our Church and our community.<sup>18</sup>*

Nungalinga is a partnership of the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting churches and provides training for Indigenous ministers and leaders throughout Australia. The College offers courses designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to life and learning, including courses in theology and ministry. It provides a model that has proven very popular with Indigenous people and may be able to be replicated elsewhere.

How can our awareness be raised and some place of dialogue be established in our local parishes?

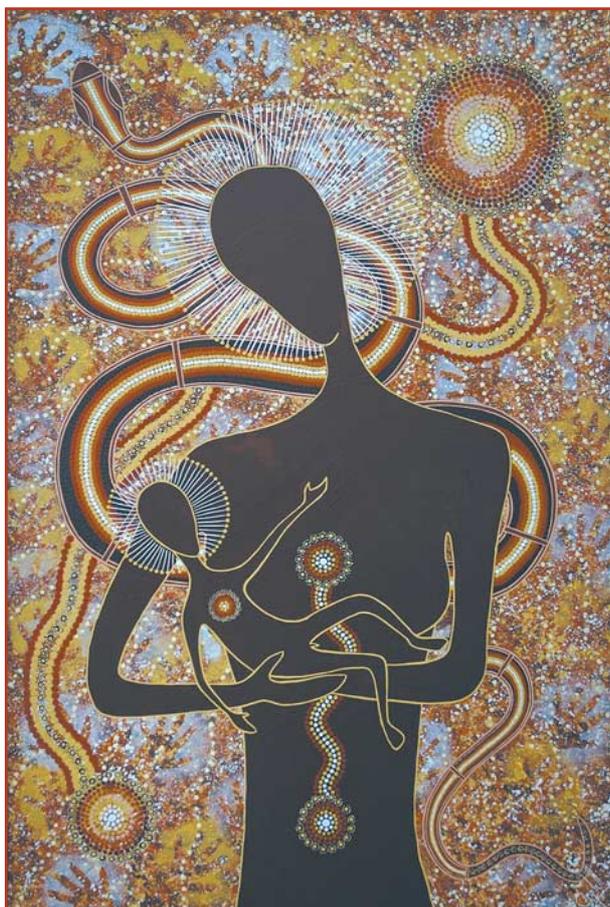
Simple yet very meaningful expressions of acknowledgement and welcome can be part of our liturgies and meetings. Acknowledgement of the local Indigenous people who cared for the land on which our churches and schools are now built, either by a plaque or with a form of words at the beginning of gatherings, is a growing practice.

How many of our Books of the Dead, used for remembrance in November, record Indigenous people who died at the hands of police, soldiers or settlers in bloody confrontations? Do our Prayers of Intercession have a regular place for our Indigenous peoples? Do our parishes pay more than scant attention to Aboriginal Sunday, NAIDOC Week and National Sorry Day? Where a parish has no Indigenous members, the community might consider how it can make links with Indigenous people and appropriately acknowledge Indigenous culture.

While there have been many steps taken, there is still more to be done. Have we yet really created a place where open and respectful dialogue on spirituality and religious ritual can take place with Indigenous people? Are we still dismissive and uncomfortable when we hear something like the obituary of Warren Rubuntja, a man who was present on that day in Alice Springs when John Paul II came?

*Christianity was always to remain a strong influence on Rubuntja – but deeply enmeshed in Arrente religious and world views. For Rubuntja, there was a catechism in which Jesus has rights to heaven through His father’s father – Aknganentye – and to this world on earth through His mother’s father – Altyerre – in which His traditional country was Bethlehem.<sup>19</sup>*

Are we able to find a place to dialogue with someone who speaks of the Dreamtime as here and now? Some years ago, for example, Eddie Kneebone emphasised that



Madonna and Child by Richard Campbell/Reconciliation Church, La Perouse





*all living things are part of [the Dreaming], including the souls and spirits of the ancestors that are in the trees, in the animals.<sup>20</sup>*

These are the challenges that still echo for us in the words spoken 20 years ago by the 'Pilgrim Pope' in Alice Springs.

### *'You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land ...'*

**John Paul II, Address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, 1986**

The message of Pope John Paul II finds an echo in the words of the late Big Bill Neidjie, a senior Elder of Kakadu National Park and a traditional owner of the Bunitj estate in northern Kakadu, when he said of his relationship to his country:

*I feel with my body. Feeling all these trees, all this country. When this blow you can feel it. Same for country ... you feel it, you can look, but feeling ... that make you ... Our story is in the land ... it is written in those sacred places, that's the law. Dreaming place ... you can't change it, no matter who you are.<sup>21</sup>*

The third important message that John Paul II brought to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 1986, and through them to the rest of us as well, was the duty of looking after the land:

*Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves. You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it, and then walk away from it. You realised that your land was related to the source of life.*

The message was not just about looking after the land for the sake of what it can give us or enable us to produce. It was about a 'spiritual' value that exists *in the land* itself.

Just over 10 years before Pope John Paul II spoke in Alice Springs, there was a significant recognition in the Northern Territory of the wrongs that had been done in taking away the lands that traditionally belonged to the Gurindji mob. Restitution came about as a result of a long fight by their leader, Vincent Lingiari, who knew the close spiritual connection that he and his people had with the land and therefore the deep hurt and loss that had been inflicted by the removal of the people from their land at the time of colonisation and the subsequent spread of the pastoral leases. Former prime minister Gough Whitlam promised the Gurindji people that 'this act of restitution which we perform today will not stand alone ... we are determined that Aboriginal Australians everywhere will be helped by it'.<sup>22</sup>

Vincent Lingiari responded with typical generosity and hope:

*Let us live happily together as mates, let us not make it hard for each other ... They took our country away from us, now they have brought it back ceremonially.<sup>23</sup>*

In 1986 in Alice Springs, John Paul II called on those who had the power to give proper recognition and restitution for the taking of land. He defended this position strongly when he said that

*to call for the acknowledgement of the land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination.*

Have we made any progress in relation to land issues? Since the 1986 visit, the Native Title legislation has made a significant difference to the position of Aboriginal and Islander Australians. At 31 December 2005, there had been 80 native title determinations in Australia, comprising 62 claimant determinations, 17 non-claimant determinations and one compensation determination.<sup>24</sup> In addition there are 229 registered Indigenous Land Use Agreements.<sup>25</sup> There are a further 624 applications for native title yet to be completely determined.<sup>26</sup> Fred Chaney, board member of Reconciliation Australia and a Deputy President of the Native Title Tribunal, commented:

*Native title has meant the recognition of rights arising from Aboriginal law and custom. Its recognition has done more to shift the power relationship between Aboriginals and the settler society than any other factor. Around Australia Aboriginals are at the negotiating table as of right. Imperfect as it is, this new culture of negotiation is the greatest shift in the position of Aboriginal people since white settlement.<sup>27</sup>*

Any changes in legislation should preserve these basic rights. The place of land in Indigenous culture is far more profound than the notion of possession or ownership. As the well-known Aboriginal leader, Pat Dodson, said:

*Many Australians don't know how to think themselves into the country, the land. They find it hard to think with the land. We Aboriginal people find it hard to think without the land.<sup>28</sup>*

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples knew what the ancestors of Jesus knew: you can't continue to exploit the land and the sea if you want them to be fruitful for the next generation. God has given the land as a sacred trust; it demands respect and care. This was the reason that the Jews of ancient times instituted the Year of Jubilee that freed slaves and restored ancestral lands and ensured that the land itself was allowed to remain fallow one year in every seven (Leviticus 25: 2-4).



AAP/Chris Graham © 2004 AAP

*‘How can it be that in this land of plenty, the average life expectancy of Indigenous people is 17 years less than for non-Indigenous Australians?’*

Michael Long leads the Indigenous Policy Walk from Victoria to Canberra.

Our own Christian tradition is rich with evidence of respect for the whole of creation, going back to the Psalms, the parables of Jesus, the writings of St Francis and many of the medieval mystics.

Much of our Western religious spirituality seems to have lost touch with this aspect of our tradition. The message delivered in Alice Springs in 1986 continues to challenge us to work together with the Indigenous peoples to recover it, for our own sake and for the sake of the earth itself. Pope John Paul II highlighted the spiritual dimension of the relationship of human beings to land when he said that in their ‘closeness to the land’ the Indigenous peoples

*touched the sacredness of man’s relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves.*

It is hoped that through recalling the message of Pope John Paul II, Australians will be inspired to form new partnerships, Indigenous with non-Indigenous, that will help us all to rediscover the traditional respect and care for creation that we need so urgently today.

Can we, ‘together as mates’, recommit ourselves to care for the earth that sustains us? Could this be the project that helps us to understand each other better and to reach true reconciliation?

*‘Past hurts cannot be healed by violence, nor are present injustices removed by resentment.’*

**John Paul II, Address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, 1986**

Primary among the ‘hurts’ referred to by John Paul II was the removal of children from their families. This is seen by many today, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, as the root cause of many of the sufferings that continue to be endured by large numbers of Indigenous people.

John Paul II called for the ‘just and proper settlement that still lies unachieved’ in relation to the removal of children. He called specifically for ‘just and mutually recognised agreements with regard to these human problems, even though their causes lie in the past’.

These ‘human problems’ continue to manifest themselves in social and economic disadvantage and community dysfunction that can be captured in statistics related to health, employment and incarceration. These statistics read like those from a Third World country. In 2001, the Indigenous population comprised 2.2 per cent of the total Australian population, yet the unemployment rate for Indigenous people was at least three times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous Australians.



The statistics related to the health of Indigenous Australians are appalling: lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, higher hospitalisation for preventable diseases, lower infant birth weights, alarming rates of death from diabetes and kidney disease.<sup>29</sup> How can it be that in this land of plenty, the average life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 17 years less than for non-Indigenous Australians?

Behind the statistics are real human beings whose disadvantage in this area could be prevented with political will and relatively moderate resources applied in the right places.

Former prime minister Paul Keating, in his groundbreaking Redfern address some six years after the Alice Springs visit, made the first public admission by a national political leader that non-Indigenous people were responsible for this state of affairs because of past actions:

*... it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.<sup>30</sup>*

In the same year as the historic visit to Alice Springs, the Federal Government initiated the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. At that time, Indigenous people made up 14 per cent of the total prison population. In 2004 this figure had risen to 21 per cent.<sup>31</sup>

On 26 August 1999, Prime Minister John Howard moved a 'Motion of Reconciliation' in the Parliament. His motion, which was carried, included the words that the Parliament

*expresses its deep and sincere regret that indigenous Australians suffered injustices under the practices of past generations, and for the hurt and trauma that many indigenous people continue to feel as a consequence of those practices.<sup>32</sup>*

This was seen as a positive gesture and one that would move the reconciliation debate and the reconciliation process further along the road. Unfortunately, the practical outcomes do not seem to have matched the desires expressed at that time or the commitments that people made by their 'bridge walks' in 2000.

Professor Mick Dodson is a member of the Yawuru people in the Broome area of the southern Kimberley region of Western Australia. Currently Director of the Australian National University's National Centre for Aboriginal Studies, he was Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. He has expressed the challenge succinctly and starkly:

*Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and understanding of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination.<sup>33</sup>*

In a nation that enjoys a vibrant economy, where governments boast of their careful financial management, the question remains: why have we not been able to eliminate these dire circumstances from the everyday experience of many Indigenous people?

As Pope John Paul II commented 20 years ago:

*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.*

It would seem that the remedies are well within our economic reach. The message delivered in Alice Springs continues to challenge us to positive, decisive action today.



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*‘What can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow.’*

## Reclaiming the message

Part of the message delivered by Pope John Paul II to the Bishops gathered in Rome in 2001 included an apology for the part played by the Catholic Church in past injustices suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples:

*The Church expresses deep regret and asks forgiveness where her children have been or still are party to these wrongs. Aware of the shameful injustices done to the indigenous peoples in Oceania, the Synod Fathers apologised unreservedly for the part played in these by members of the Church, especially where children were forcibly separated from their families.<sup>34</sup>*

John Paul also appealed to governments to do their part and

*to pursue with still greater energy programs to improve the conditions and the standard of living of indigenous groups in the vital areas of health, education, employment and housing.<sup>35</sup>*

The challenge is now ours to move closer to achieving a new reconciliation. How can we bring these things together? What will this reconciliation

look like? Back in 1996, Pat Dodson offered this vivid image of reconciliation:

*The river is the river and the sea is the sea. Salt water and fresh, two separate domains. Each has its own complex patterns, origins, stories. Even though they come together they will always exist in their own right. My hopes for reconciliation are like that.<sup>36</sup>*

Pope John Paul II used another familiar Australian image:

*The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn.*

In celebrating the 20th anniversary of the late Holy Father’s address at Blatherskite Park in Alice Springs, we Catholic Bishops of Australia echo his words.

We reclaim the message and pass it on!

\* We wish to acknowledge with respect that some of the individuals quoted in this text have passed away. May they rest in peace.



## What else can we do?

Recalling the Pope's declaration that *the Church esteems and loves* the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, we offer some suggestions for becoming more informed and for individual, parish and community action.

- Read the whole of the Pope's 1986 address at Alice Springs. It can be found at the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council website: [www.acsjc.org.au](http://www.acsjc.org.au)
- Visit the website of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, the national representative and consultative body to the Church on issues concerning Indigenous Catholics: [www.natsicc.org.au](http://www.natsicc.org.au)
- Find out if there is an Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in your Diocese and contact them to learn what they do in the Diocese and if you could help them or be part of their educational programs.
- Work with the local Aboriginal people to erect a plaque in your school or church grounds or on the entrance to the main building to recognise the traditional custodians of the land.
- Invite a local Indigenous speaker to address your next club, group or committee meeting on the issues facing Indigenous peoples today.
- Visit the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's website at [www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/sjreport05/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/sjreport05/index.html) to find out more about the social and economic challenges facing many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.
- Find out more about the 'Make Indigenous Poverty History' campaign at [www.ncca.org.au/natsiec](http://www.ncca.org.au/natsiec) and consider initiatives that could be undertaken in your local area.
- Visit the Reconciliation Australia website at [www.reconciliationaustralia.org](http://www.reconciliationaustralia.org) and find out what is happening around Australia and what resources are available.



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- Host a discussion group in your parish around the issues raised in this Social Justice Sunday Statement about social justice and reconciliation.
  - Become a sponsor of a group like Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR). You can contact them at [www.antar.org.au/](http://www.antar.org.au/) or at the ANTaR National Office, PO Box 1176, Rozelle NSW 2039; tel (02) 9555 6138.
  - Get a copy of the *Earth Charter* and learn about its origin and its principles. Try to find out what Australia is doing in relation to pursuing these principles.
  - Visit your local or school library and search out what information they might have on local Indigenous people, languages, culture, history and sites of significance.
  - Resources for students and teachers, liturgy notes, and other material relating to Social Justice Sunday and issues of Indigenous justice can be found on the website of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council: [www.acsjc.org.au](http://www.acsjc.org.au)
- Valuable educational resources are usually available in your diocese; for example, see the *Justice Education in Catholic Schools* resources of the Archdiocese of Melbourne: [www.jecs.melb.catholic.edu.au](http://www.jecs.melb.catholic.edu.au)
- Find out if your local school incorporates Aboriginal studies in its curriculum. If not, seek to have it considered.
  - Find out how you can become involved in prison visitation or visiting the families of those in prison, especially Indigenous people.
  - Find out about restorative justice initiatives in your area, particularly the Circle Sentencing initiatives in NSW. Does this have application in your area?
  - See if there is a way to become involved in tutoring or mentoring young Aboriginal people in your area.

Together, let us consider how we can meet the challenges of Pope John Paul's 1986 message.



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*The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is  
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roots are still strong. Like that tree you have  
endured the flames, and you still have the  
power to be reborn.*

John Paul II, Address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, 1986



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