

Reflection by Bishop Christopher Prowse (Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne)

November 2006 marks the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's first visit to Australia as Pope (26 November 1986 - 1 December 1986). IN his hectic six and a half days with us he visited so much of our country and delivered numerous talks and homilies. One of his talks remembered so fondly over this visit was his address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders at Alice Springs in the Northern Territory (29 November 1986). The purpose of this article is to re-present the essence of the Pope's address. It will assist the re-appropriation of the challenge and teaching the Pope offered. So many of the challenges presented 20 years ago in the address are still current issues today.

1. The Meeting itself

Just before a consideration of the text itself, a few comments regarding the style and tone of the speech itself may be helpful. The uniqueness of the visit resides not merely in the content of the speech itself, but also in the manner in which it was presented. Firstly, it is significant to note that the Pope did not address his words primarily to Australian politicians or even the Australian people as a whole. He travelled to a city in the centre of the Australian desert and spoke directly to the Aborigines themselves. Secondly, rather than addressing his words solely to Aboriginal Catholics, he spoke to all Aborigines as one people rather than as separated individuals, isolated groups or clans. Thirdly, the tone of the speech was gently encouraging, affirming, hopeful and respectful. There are no patronising overtones in the speech. Fourthly, when he does address his comments directly to Aboriginal Catholics, he applies Vatican II and post-Vatican II principles of missiology directly to Aboriginal culture. When these four points are combined and are joined with the content of the speech itself, the Pope's meeting represents a watershed in the Australian Catholic history's relationship with the Aboriginal people.

2. Content of Address

2.1. Aboriginal Culture

In the first section of his discourse, the Pope expresses the Church's esteem and love of the Aboriginal people and culture. the Pope calls for the preservation of Aboriginal culture:

Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear...Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages must never be lost.

He then isolates some characteristics of the culture in which he observes are "indications of human strivings" and an openness "to the message of God's revealed wisdom." Such characteristics include: "spiritual closeness to the land", "a quietness of the soul" that was taught by "The silence of the bush", a kinship bond that "spoke of your reverence for birth, life and human generation", an understanding of law "as a guide to living fairly with each other". Parallels can be drawn between these characteristics and the "Dreamtime legends" and the traditions of "those of Jesus and his people." Clearly, the address up to this stage is eager to affirm the uniqueness and value of Aboriginal culture and to indicate that there are many "points of agreement" with the Christian Gospel. Such an approach opens the way for further respectful dialogue.

2.2. Culture Clash

In the next section , the all important aspects of the meeting of two cultures from 1788 till the present are considered. The main point raised in this section is the clear Papal affirmation that the effects of past racist attitudes continue in the present.

John Paul II notes that the Aboriginal culture, so long isolated from contact with other cultures, "was not prepared for the sudden meeting with another people, with different customs and traditions". The shock of such an encounter by a people whose "traditions, the organisation of their

lives, and their attitudes to the land" were so different had lasting effects. The Pope then states: "The effects of some of those forces are still alive among you today." He then exemplifies such present effects by recalling that many are "dispossessed of your traditional lands and separated from your tribal ways". Others have "no real place for campfires and kinship observances except on the fringes of country towns." Still for others "work is hard to find, and education in a different, cultural background is difficult." Using strong language, the Pope then adds: "The discrimination caused by racism is a daily experience."

Despite all such continuing hardships, the Aboriginal people have, according to the Pope, endured courageously and must now renew the roots of their ancient culture. During such hardships, the Pope recalls the teachers, doctors, professionals and simple folk who have shown Aboriginal people "the good example of their charity and fraternal solidarity." Also, in this context, he introduces the contribution of the "the missionaries of the Christian faith." In commending their assistance in health, education and social services, he says:

Whatever their human frailty, and whatever mistakes they may have made, nothing can ever minimize the depth of their charity. Nothing can ever cancel out their greatest contribution, which was to proclaim to you Jesus Christ and to establish his Church in your midst.

Opening up this topic allows the Pope to recall the contribution of Archbishop Polding of Sydney to the land question. By so doing, it is made evident that some of the first people to recognise the equality of persons were the missionaries. On the vital issue of land rights, the Pope declares "The Church still supports you today." The address makes it clear that "land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination." We cannot pretend that the past did not exist. He mentions that Christian people are saddened to realize, "many of them only recently", that "Aboriginal people were transported from their homelands into small areas or reserves where families were broken up, tribes split apart, children orphaned and people forced to live like exiles in a foreign country." Once again the address makes it clear that the legacy of this history has present day effects that require reconciliation. A just settlement of the existing reserves "still lies unachieved", whilst "The urban problems resulting from the transportation and separation of people still have to be addressed". The future demands a present attentiveness to "just and mutually recognized agreements with regard to these human problems, even though their causes lie in the past." The Pope counsels that such agreements are to be based on "the dignity and growth of the human person", that they "must be implemented without causing new injustices", and that the Aborigines themselves must work actively as artisans of their "own dignity of life." This important section offers fresh insights on racist attitudes and their social consequences and orientations for future engagement. It is clearly a disappointment for those who assume that as past racist laws are being dismantled, present and future responsibility for the past is diminishing. The Pope's address makes it clear that our past history is continuing to have a present discriminatory impact on Aboriginal people.

2.3. Future Challenges

The final section of the address is directed towards the future. Emerging principles of inculturation in the Catholic Church are evident in the text and are applied to the Aboriginal culture. Consequently, the address proclaims that the Gospel of Jesus "esteems and embraces all cultures". It not only "supports them in everything human" but also "when necessary, purifies them" Importantly, the Gospel "invites you to become, through and through, Aboriginal Christians." The Church unites herself with this Gospel renewal of Aboriginal culture and also "invites you to express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to your Aboriginal minds and hearts." By allowing the Gospel to "seek out the best things of your traditional ways...you will come to realize more and more *your great human and Christian dignity.*" Finally, the Pope directs the Aboriginal people to work actively for reconciliation and forgiveness with all Australians. The Church is not to assume a passive role in this reconciliation either. There must be a reciprocal reconciliation. In probably the most quoted passage by Aboriginal people and Church statements since the address was first delivered, the Pope then states:

You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.

The tone of this third section appears to be somewhat different from what preceded it. In the first two sections the tone seems to be characterised by carefully discerning the legacies of the past and offering important distinctions. This is done in a pervading sense of compassion with those who have suffered. It is firm in demonstrating solidarity with the Aboriginal people. It dismisses attitudes and policies which have resulted in the perpetuation of discrimination. At the same time it expresses a sense of urgency to effect new and just agreements. In this last section, however, without sacrificing such elements, the address does seem to become more of a proclamation or a call to the renewal of Aboriginal culture within the uplifting and strengthening embrace of the Christian Gospel.

Such reflections, in a sense, may serve as a point of departure for acknowledging John Paul II's speech remains, even after 20 years, a key for future pastoral action with Aboriginal people. Its tone, style and content, as elaborated above, seem to offer themselves in such a manner.

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