



Furthering the Ideal

Archbishop Francis Carroll Canberra - 1 March 2005

I well remember the excitement building up as we prepared for the 1986 visit of Pope John Paul II to Australia. Nowhere was there more enthusiasm and expectation than among the Catholic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as they planned their massive movement to the centre of Australia.

I believe that the visit and the Pope's words exceeded expectations. His standing there in face of the rising wind and developing storm, determined to complete his address, was a powerful image and his words gave great heart and encouragement to Indigenous Catholics and many others beyond the Catholic community. They certainly sounded a challenge and entrusted a responsibility to the Catholic Church in Australia which was readily applicable to other Christians and to the nation itself.

The Holy Father's words, from his point of view, were not one off. In many of his overseas visits he spoke of the specific rights and needs of Indigenous peoples and pointedly challenged national and Church authorities to act with justice and compassion in responding to the injustices of first nation people by dispossession, oppression and continuing discrimination of many kinds.

Certainly he has never forgotten the Aboriginal and Islander peoples of Australia. Every five years the Bishops of Australia pay a visit - the Ad Limina visit - to Rome to meet with the Holy Father and his advisors. On every visit, the Holy Father has not failed to enquire about the situation of Indigenous peoples both in Church and State.

Especially in private conversations he has with each Bishop, he has expressed pleasure when progress has been reported and continued to encourage and challenge us to welcome and as well as to play the role of advocacy on their behalf in regard to government policies and practices.



In 1998, as part of the preparation for the Jubilee Year of 2000, Pope John Paul II invited the Bishops of Oceania to Rome for the Synod of Oceania. All the Bishops of Australia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, New Zealand and the Pacific Island nations of Polynesia and Micronesia, met together for about three weeks. Later on, the Pope responded to the discussions and the recommendations that flowed from the Synod in his post synodal apostolic exhortation, called ***Ecclesia in Oceania - The Church in Oceania***.

Responding to the interventions of a considerable number of Bishops, the Holy Father wrote at some length about the history and issues surrounding Indigenous peoples throughout the region. He did not hesitate to make mention and express particular concern for the situation in Australia. He wrote ***"In New Zealand, and even more in Australia, the colonial and post colonial policies of immigration have made the Indigenous people a minority in their own land and in many ways, a dispossessed cultural group."*** The Holy Father did not hesitate to address the ***"Sorry debate"***. ***"The past cannot be undone, but honest recognition of past injustices can lead to measures and attitudes which will rectify the damaging effects for both the Indigenous community and the wider society. The Church expresses deep regret and asks forgiveness where her children have been or still are party to those wrongs. Aware of the shameful injustices done to 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."***

Participating Bishops, and the Pope in his authoritative response, spoke a great deal of the need for authentic inculturation of the Gospel and the Church. Quoting words from his 1986 address at Alice Springs, he wrote ***"The Church invites all people to express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to their heart and minds."***

The approaching celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Pope's Alice Springs address, asks us to review what progress there has been since then - and repent for what could have, but has not been done - and to see what is yet to be done to fulfill



what was probably the central statement for the Church in John Paul's original address. ***"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."***

Personally, I am very conscious of my limitations in addressing these questions. Most of my experience is within the Catholic Church, although that has been broadened by our Church's membership of the NCCA and my being a member of its Executive.

Clearly there has been progress in some areas and for this, we should be grateful. Equally clearly, that progress has been slower than it should have been within the Catholic Church, the Christian Churches as a whole, the general Australian community and at political and government levels. At times, promising signs of progress have appeared, only to be replaced by old attitudes of apathy and inaction. I believe the popular movement towards reconciliation is an example of this. Sir William Deane spoke of this in April 2003: ***"The impetus and enthusiasm of the movement for Aboriginal reconciliation, at both grassroots and national levels have diminished since the halcyon days of Corroboree 2000 in this city (Sydney). He went on: "That is perhaps surprising in an environment where, as a nation, we seem to be losing our way. Standards seem increasingly to be determined by opinion polls rather than principle."***

I know that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, established by the Australian Catholic Bishops in 1992, as a ***"new partnership with our Indigenous people"*** has played an increasingly important role in the life of our Church and the thinking and decisions of the Bishops. Its annual National Conferences have done much to keep alive and advance Indigenous spirituality of faith, life and expression. Each year it produces liturgical materials for the celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday so that ***"Our sense of belonging as Indigenous Australian Catholics will be enhanced by the immersion of our culturally appropriate rituals and symbols within the ethos of the Australian Catholic Church."***



NATSIEC is clearly an integral part of the NCCA and is able to give it a stronger and clearer leadership in dealing with Indigenous matters. The Pilgrimage of Reconciliation that left from this very site on its journey to Uluru in the Jubilee Year 2000, although largely ignored by secular media, was major initiative of the Churches in that year.

The development of Indigenous participation in Church community life and the development of genuinely inculturated liturgies, prayer and the appropriate provision of other services, would seem to be uneven across the Churches. There are wide differences also between areas where there is a majority, or a significant number of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples and those with smaller minorities, usually of urbanised people. In the former, much more has been done by way of inculturation and the development of local leadership. I am sure that many good examples could be quoted in this regard. Only a few days ago I read an account of the dramatic increase in school enrolments and participation in the Wadeye community (earlier referred to as Port Keats).

A number of Churches can point to a greater number of ordained ministers and pastoral leaders. For a number of reasons, this is an area of continuing concern for the Catholic Church, particularly in terms of priestly ordination.

The development however of the permanent Diaconate with married men being ordained, has been a great step forward and we look forward to further development.

In the more urbanised areas, Catholic or other Church ministries seem to go through successive periods of prospering or being in decline. In my own Archdiocese for some years there was a strong Catholic Aboriginal ministry, but it declined because of the movement away of key personnel and the loss of the networks and associations they had developed. The lack of financial and other resources was also a real factor as it probably has been in many instances in the Church in Australia.

Looking to the future, much still needs to be done to further the ideal expressed by John Paul II that the Church in Australia would become fully the Church Jesus wants



because the original Australian peoples have made their contribution and that contribution has been joyfully received.

I hope and pray that the preparation for the celebration of the Anniversary of the Alice Springs manifesto, if I may call it that, will encourage the Indigenous peoples themselves to renew their spirit and efforts - that Christian Churches would renew their resolve and increase their commitment - that the Australian people would demand national leadership in recognising the unique place that the first peoples of this land rightly hold in Australia and that the recognition and righting of injustices, would ensure that they truly feel at home in their own land and especially in the Christian family.