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The Indigenous Australian Catholic Journey

Fr. Gerry Hefferan at the Hearts are Burning gathering in Brisbane, 3 May 2005

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 (Pope John Paul II, Alice Springs, 1986)

Background

I believe we have a long way to go in Australia to fulfill the Pope's words. I offer some observations and record some of the history.

The Pope's Address was not in isolation, but was a part of several opportunities to address Indigenous peoples across the world. Some of the areas and dates were:

Address to the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon, Manaus 10/07/1980

Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Guatemala, 07/03/1983

Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada, 18/09/1984

Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Ecuador, 31/01/1985

Address to the Indigenous Peoples of Australia, 29/11/1986

Address to Native Americans, 14/09/1987

Events and contributions before the Pope's 1986 Address

First Catholic Mission to Aborigines in Australia - Stradbroke Island off the coast of Brisbane 1843-7, and the first baptisms in 1844. Over the last century, with no resident priest (only periodic visits), it has been a small group of Catholic Aborigines who passed on the Catholic faith in Aboriginal ways. Catholic staff at the local benevolent asylum also helped in the early 20th century. When the Pope walked the dreaming track in 1986 before delivering his address, the first presentation was from Catholic Aborigines from Stradbroke Island who gave him a copy of the Lord's Prayer in a local Aboriginal language of Moreton Bay



First Church support for land rights in Queensland in the period 1875-1880, as Fr. Duncan McNab visited Aboriginal communities, consulted them and tried to adapt an existing law, the Homestead Act, to provide some possibilities for Aboriginal people to have title within their own lands. He knew there was no possibility of getting a new law through parliament at that time. The first Aborigines to apply for 640 acres each, were James Diper, William Watiman Nilapi and Charles Diper Ghepara. This makeshift step was denied after a change in Government in Queensland in 1876.

Pope Paul VI's visit to Sydney 2/12/1970 and his comments on Aboriginal Culture. This intervention by the first Pope to visit Australia, aided the call for the Australian Catholic Church to open itself nationally to the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Australian Catholic Bishops decision in January 1972 to establish a National Catholic Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Later in 1972 the Bishops agreed to establish the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council (AICC), formally set up in September 1973. The International Eucharistic Congress was held in February 1973 with its 2 Aboriginal Conferences and the Aboriginal Liturgy. The day before the liturgy, 52 Queenslanders met, of whom 35 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. George Hassall from Rockhampton chaired the meeting. Three Queensland Bishops attended.

The first Queensland Catholic Aboriginal and Islander Conference was convened in January 6-11 1974 at Yeppoon. Charles Watson from Brisbane had suggested one of the topics be 'Aborigines and the Church'. This led to frank discussion on the shortcomings of the Church. Bishop Faulkner of Townsville said that 'the Church as represented by the priests and religious present was still very much a learning community, conscious of its need to become better informed.'

In the 1980s, Mrs Laurel Blow served for some years as Executive Secretary of AICC in the Brisbane Archdiocese. She edited a quarterly newsletter 'Talkabout' so that local Catholic Aborigines, parishes, and interested people would be aware of local



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initiatives. From the mid 1980s there were AICC groups in Brisbane, Cherbourg, Stradbroke Island, Inala, Acacia Ridge and an occasional meeting at Hervey Bay. Mass was celebrated at Windsor, Cherbourg, Inala, Dunwich and on a 5th Sunday of the month Archdiocesan AICC meetings at Yarraman, Windsor or other venues. At Holy Rosary at Windsor there was a spirit of ecumenism with Pastor Henry Collins, Rev.Keith Warner, Aunty Jean Phillips, Pastor Bird and other Aboriginal leaders participating. Aunty Beryl Wharton, Lorelle Watcho, Rosemary Bell, Joan Hendriks and Mary Zalewski were some of the Ministers for Communion. At Cherbourg, Uncle Alec Landers, Swampy Fisher and Tom Long (Tucker) would reflect on Aboriginal legend before the Bible readings were proclaimed. The main wall of the church was painted with stories of creation.

The first Aboriginal Eucharistic Ministers in the Brisbane Archdiocese were appointed, with a roving commission to the communities of south-east Queensland, 9/11/1984. In 1985 Mrs Rose Thaiday (Townsville Diocese), Miss Rosemary Graham (Brisbane Archdiocese) and Mr Bill Toby (Rockhampton Diocese) represented AICC at the Oceania Lay Congress on Aboriginal spirituality and issues in the church.

Events and contributions after the Pope's 1986 Address

Ngutana-Lui - Aboriginal and Islander Cultural Studies Centre was opened officially on 18 March 1989 in Inala, Brisbane after many years of work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics and Brisbane Catholic Education.

Murri Ministry was established in 1983 in the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane with Ms Ravina Waldren becoming its first ministry worker. Less time was to be devoted to administration of hostels and more time to ministry, especially baptisms, funerals, pastoral visits to youth detention centres, justice advocacy and other areas. Queensland Churches Together set up an advisory group on native title in 1993 which later became the QCT Aboriginal Partnership Group with Mrs.Joan Hendriks becoming its first coordinator. Its foci included spirituality, reconciliation and education.



In 1993 the resource "A Spirituality of Catholic Aborigines and the Struggle for Justice" was published in Brisbane. Local Aboriginal contributors included Joan Hendriks, Etta Attel, Flo Bargo, Rosemary Bell, Rose Borey, Noeleen Campbell, Rae Clevens, Ian Delaney, Graham and Marilyn Dillon, Phyllis Donovan, Albert Dynevor, Partrick Jerome, Evelyn Parkin, Ernie Trevaskis, Ravina Waldren and Zita Walsh. The editors were Joan Hendriks and myself. Tribute was also given to the contributions of Catholic Aboriginal elders who had died, including Arthur Bond, Sylvia Iselin, Bethel Delaney, Myrtle Thompson, Phylis Hall, Nellie Close, Rose Currie, Joan Costelloe and Celia Martin. Two printings were sold out. Each parish in the Archdiocese had a copy.

Opportunities for the present and future include

2004 Scope and Sequence Chart in Queensland Catholic Schools on Justice and Peace issues

In the areas of land, globalisation, environment, human rights and social science there is the contribution to society and also to how the Church analyses and addresses social justice issues. There is a new international resource in the church called 'The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church' (Vatican edition 2004) by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. It states in section 471 that 'the relationship of indigenous peoples to their lands and resources deserves particular attention, since it is a fundamental expression of their identity. Due to powerful agro-industrial interests or the powerful processes of assimilation and urbanisation, many of these peoples have already lost or risk losing the lands on which they live, lands tied to the very meaning of their existence. The rights of indigenous peoples must be appropriately protected. These peoples offer an example of a life lived in harmony with the environment that they have come to know well and to preserve. Their extraordinary experience, which is an irreplaceable resource for all humanity, runs the risk of being lost together with the environment from which they originate.'

Follow up from the Archdiocesan Synod

Growing spirit of ecumenism in Queensland

With a decreasing number of clergy and religious, the Archdiocese is looking more to a coordinated approach to lay ministry in some areas.



Continuing to explore present and new avenues with the Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission, Queensland and Brisbane Catholic Education Offices, Multicultural Pastoral care, Centacare, Seminary, ACU National Brisbane Campus, Caritas Brisbane Office, Church Network for Youth Justice, Social Action Office, Towards Healing, Catholic Mission Office, Catholic Prisons Ministry, YCS, YCW, NET, School Campus Ministries and other youth ministries

Increasing avenues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theologies.

Scriptural contributions could include among many other points:

1. Lamentations (two thirds of Psalms and the Book of Lamentations)
2. Gospels as good news
3. Creation passages
4. Suffering Servant themes of Isaiah and connections to Gospels
5. Ways of teaching, compared to Matthew's 5 teaching passages
6. International feminist hermeneutic in scripture
7. Issues of poverty, sharing, inclusiveness eg. Luke, Acts, James and the 3 equality references of Paul
8. Relationships and images in all Gospels
9. New Testament insights into healing - Samaritans
10. Paul's insights into openness to gentiles, the Council of Jerusalem
11. Acts of the Apostles - the storytelling, resolution of differences, and sense of continuity
12. Relationship between realm (Kingdom) of God and church
13. Ritual eg. Tobit

Reconciliation and factions and frustrations

post September 11 - issues of fear and preoccupation with overseas events

post Mabo/Wik High Court cases - some issues more visible eg. women's issues

- recognition of differences individually and communally
- lack of understanding of internal difference (a major contributor to the loss of goodwill)
- overcoming notion that land rights is solved
- domestic violence awareness
- regional agreements

post Fitzgerald Inquiry - issue of trust



Church sexual abuses revelations - issues of justice, trust, process, healing, hypocrisy

Polarisation in some parts of the church concerning change, theology and inclusiveness

Regression in human rights nationally - eg 'reconciliation' watered down to 'harmony'

Change at Redfern church - symbol of church not listening

Rebirth of a national AICC in the 1990s - chance to coordinate nationally

Reconciliation program of QCT yet ongoing funding issues

Conclusion

Sharing of contributions joyfully does happen but not enough. We need to acknowledge the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the past and present, to name them as part of our ongoing journey. The journey can take many directions. I became involved in AICC through AWD and Concerned Christians in the 1970s, through chaplaincy in 1984, and maintained through friendship and kingdom of God values since 1990. What I received through the Murri Community, I was able to pass on, in monitoring in South Africa in 1994 and within the context of advocacy for justice in East Timor in the last 11 years.

At one of the Queensland AICC Conferences, Fr. Frank Brennan warned that the Hawke Government was about to break several of its promises, due to pressure from the Western Australian Government at that time. People were shattered. The promises had been promoted in the national media and the Federal Minister had written to all church ministers, outlining the promises. Such hope had been raised. There was a feeling of expectation at the Conference, only to be warned that the Government would renege. Yet that night, people sang and told stories. There was such a wonderful sense of community and hope for the future, even though the Commonwealth Government had sacrificed principles for power. I learnt that night about survival, pride in culture, humble and hope-filled spirituality, planning for the long term, the value of community and relationships. That night I received a wonderful contribution. It has pointed me to a deeper understanding of the Bible and been a memory I could draw on in the struggle for East Timor (since 1990 I have been in two parishes, both twinned with parishes in Timor and a few trips during the years of persecution).



Thank you for the opportunity tonight. God Bless. May the preparations for next year's 20th anniversary be a coming together in giving and joyfully receiving.

Appendix - Australian Bishops' Statements have included:

Bishop Polding's reply to the NSW Parliamentary Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines 10/9/1845

Australian Catholic Bishops Statement 1869

Pastoral Letter of the Australian Catholic Bishops 1980

Press Release by the Australian Catholic Bishops on Land Rights 5/3/1986

Indigenous people 10/12/1992

Media Release by the Catholic Bishops of Australia for the International Year for the World's Indigenous people 10/12/1992