



# NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ECUMENICAL COMMISSION

Media release 5<sup>th</sup> April 2005



## Pope John Paul II - a Man of Hope for Indigenous Christians

"In the death of Pope John Paul II we have lost a tremendous leader and a champion for Indigenous rights", said the Executive Secretary of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC), Graeme Mundine.

"Pope John Paul II was a great friend to Australian Indigenous Peoples. In November 1986, the Pope personally requested to meet with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples while he was in Australia. At Alice Springs, the symbolic heart of the Nation, he spoke specifically to us. His words were a gift of great hope and inspiration to us", said Graeme Mundine.

"In his speech he recognised the problems that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have endured. The Pope spoke of the Indigenous experience being like that of a tree in the midst of a bushfire. He said, 'The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside 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. The time for this rebirth is now!'"

"Recent events at Palm Island, Goondiwindi, Port Augusta and Redfern, the ongoing problems in areas such as health, employment, incarceration levels and education, and the dismantling of ATSIC show that the fires of injustice are still burning strongly", Mr Mundine said.

The Pope also said, "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 Pope's comments are still relevant almost twenty years later. In the lead up to the anniversary of the Pope's address, NATSIEC is undertaking a series of theological forums entitled "The Light of Australia Talks". Indigenous Christians have been questioning whether the Indigenous contribution has been truly joyfully received. We have endured the flames, but have we been reborn? Can our hearts also burn with hope and a renewed sense of justice as we walk together on a new road?" Mr Mundine asked.

"Next year NATSIEC will be celebrating the twentieth anniversary of this significant occasion at its ***Dreaming from the Heart*** event. Indigenous Christians from many denominations will gather in Alice Springs in October 2006 to draw inspiration from the Pope's words, to reflect on the past twenty years and look to the future".

"Following the Pontiff's death we will also remember His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, as a man of integrity and great faith. We remember fondly his support of and love for the Indigenous peoples of Australia. May he rest in peace," Mr Mundine concluded.

---

Graeme Mundine is the Executive Secretary of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). The Pope's speech and further details regarding *Dreaming from the Heart* are available at [http://www.ncca.org.au/natsiec/theology/dreaming\\_from\\_the\\_heart](http://www.ncca.org.au/natsiec/theology/dreaming_from_the_heart).

**For further comment - Graeme Mundine 0419 238 788**