

One family, many faces

The issue that won't go away

Australia is not alone in its struggles to live in harmony with its Aboriginal people. The presence of indigenous populations all over the world poses a strong challenge to societies.

At times the issues appear so complex and problematic that we can lose heart. A loss of heart is dangerous—we start to give in to anger and a sense of powerlessness.

This is where Pope John Paul II's approach is refreshing. Affirming, forward-looking and focusing on Spirit-filled gifts and possibilities, his addresses to indigenous communities encourage us all to 'keep going' in our dream of reconciliation. If we proceed in hope, faith and love we cannot fail.

This issue of Landmarks presents themes from the Pope's addresses to indigenous communities around the world.

John Paul II's approach

How does John Paul II approach the concerns of indigenous peoples? He responds not as political referee or academic theorist, but as a pastor. His prime concern is with reconciliation, bringing people together in mutual respect and love. More specifically, he is concerned with what we Christians can do to promote reconciliation since this is a key task of our mission in faith.

Human history is marred by the violent conflicts of civilizations. Conscious of the futility of such conflicts, our present-day challenge is to overcome the bitterness of the past and to construct a new world. While past injustices must be appropriately acknowledged, preoccupation with the past will not bring about reconciliation. We must look to the future.

Solidarity is a key theme in John Paul II's approach, just as it is a fundamental principle of the Church's social teaching. Solidarity means identifying with our neighbor as a brother or sister in our human family. Christians see humanity as sharing a common origin and destiny. Christ came into the world for all, died and rose for all, drawing humankind into a movement towards God's kingdom. The kingdom is not only a future reality, it finds expression in our present social relations. In building this kingdom, solidarity must be more than a principle. It must translate into a new social order of justice and equality.

To the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

Alice Springs, 29 Nov 1986

'Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear. Do not think that your gifts are worth so little that you should no longer bother to maintain them. Share them with each other and teach them to your children. Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages must never be lost.

'Take heart... If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush fire sweeping through timber. 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. The time for rebirth is now!'

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Reconciliation...

We belong to one human family

John Paul II calls all peoples to:

1. Eliminate prejudice

A new social order cannot evolve without changes in structures and policies. But it requires more than this. It calls for a profound change in attitude. Racial prejudices run deep. Any real change must involve a change of heart. The Pope calls us to reassess our relationships and reject every hint of attitudes of superiority or inferiority. Such attitudes, giving rise to fear, bitterness and a sense of powerlessness, have done grave damage. Descendants of both indigenous peoples and colonizers 'are called to learn from the mistakes of the past' and 'work together for reconciliation in justice and mutual love.' (Phoenix, 14 Sept 1987)

2. Work together

Genuine recognition of racial equality leads us to seek ways for different peoples to work together so that the rights of all are respected. This includes the right of peoples to appropriate economic, social, political and cultural

development. The devastating impact of conquest and occupation on indigenous populations is clear. John Paul II speaks of a 'debt of justice' of the rich peoples of the world towards those living in poverty. We must now address past injustices by helping entire peoples who are presently marginalized to enter into the sphere of economic and human development.

But beware – not all policies of cooperation are just. John Paul II rejects those policies that attempt to force cultures into one uniform civilization. True unity within the human family must allow diverse cultural expressions to peacefully co-exist and enrich one another. At the same time, a particular cultural expression cannot be cultivated to the point of endangering harmony in society as a whole. A careful balance is required between the interests of specific communities and the good of the whole.

3. Take responsibility for the future

Indigenous peoples are not survivors of a past that must be maintained as it was, whatever the cost. Like all people they are called to be active

Step by step: the healing of a nation

It's one thing to read newspaper headlines about reconciliation. It's another to see it, literally, in your own backyard. Well, not mine, but my friend Peter's backyard. It was at a dinner held one summer's evening on Pete's back verandah that I found myself to be one of three 'white' people among twelve or so other guests – all of Aboriginal descent.

Pete's work in Aboriginal education in the early '90s led him to collaborate with Aboriginal communities and the university to establish a new teacher training program specifically designed for Aboriginal people. Aware of the alienating 'white, western' mindset of the education system, the challenge was to design a program culturally attuned to Aboriginal needs and gifts; an ambitious project given the minefield of sensitivities involved.

Now, nine years after that first intake of trainee teachers, part of the original group gathered to renew old friendships. As teachers working in schools and community positions, the fruits of their training are in turn helping other people to 'bridge the gap' between white and black, privileged and underprivileged. For me, the night was a fascinating education. Everywhere I heard stories – family stories, work stories, 'remember when' stories... Funny, sad or poignant, together they formed a modest but significant chapter in our State's history of Aboriginal relations.

I was in the company of groundbreakers, quiet change makers. These people had risked failure, ridicule and suspicion to participate in something new; something that held hope for a better Australia.

They pioneered. They made a difference. (TP)

To the Indians of Guatemala

Quezaltenango, 7 March 1993

'The Church wants to stay close to you and to raise her voice of condemnation when your dignity as human beings and children of God is violated; she wishes to accompany you peacefully as the Gospel demands, but with resolve and energy, in achieving the recognition and the promotion of your dignity and your rights as persons.'

'For this reason, in this place and in a solemn way in the name of the Church I ask government authorities for legislation which effectively protects you from abuses and offers you the surrounding and adequate means for your normal development.'

Today's task

To the American Indians

Phoenix, 14 Sept 1987

'I encourage you, as native people belonging to the different tribes and nations in the East, South, West and North, to preserve and keep alive your cultures, your languages, the values and customs which have served you well in the past and which provide a solid foundation for the future. Your customs that mark the various stages of life, your love for the extended family, your respect for the dignity and worth of every human being, from the unborn to the aged, and your stewardship and care of the earth; these things benefit not only yourselves but the entire human family.'

participants in forging their own future. They must find their place in the community on an equal footing with others, without sacrificing their distinctive qualities and traditions which are part of their identity and enrich the wider community. It is impossible for indigenous peoples to preserve their ancient ways of life in isolation, and so they must take control of the movement which brings them into modernity. There are dangers in such a step; dangers of losing part of the human heritage which these civilizations represent. Conciliation of different interests must always protect the dignity of peoples. The Pope points to the conditions which will allow this to happen:

'Today people are realizing more and more clearly that we all belong to the one human family, and are meant to walk and work together in mutual respect, understanding, trust and love. Within this family, each people

To the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon Valley Region

Iquitos, 5 Feb 1985

'You cannot close yourselves to others.... Defend, of course, your forests, your lands and your culture... but without forgetting your common state as children of the same God, which repudiates violence, vengeance and hatred. See in other races, peoples and nations who share the same sky, rivers and forests with you what they truly are: brothers and sisters in Christ, ransomed by his precious blood, called with you to a peaceful coexistence.'

preserves and expresses its own identity and enriches others with its gifts of its culture, tradition, customs, stories, song, dance, art and skills.' (Phoenix, 14 Sept 1987)

4. Seek the truth

The Church upholds the principle of religious liberty and teaches that acceptance of faith must occur in freedom not coercion. Unfortunately, when we look at the history of the Church, we see that some Christian missionaries did not always heed such principles. Then again, other missionaries became champions of 'peaceful conversion' and defended indigenous communities against the transgressions of westerners.

The Church also teaches that salvation comes through Jesus Christ and that Christians have a duty to make Christ known to the whole world. What kind of relationship, then, should Christians have with indigenous populations?

John Paul II applies the logic of faith: Given that Christ draws all people to himself, both Christians and the followers of traditional religions are subject to the influence of grace. Such grace invites both groups to be challenged and purified in their awareness of the divine and to seek an ever-deeper understanding of the one and only truth.

Thus, while Christians feel called by the Lord to make him known to all peoples, their proclamation should never be one of coercion nor closed to the presence of the Good News in the followers of other religions. Rather, their sharing of their faith with others should always include an appreciation and affirmation of the gospel values at work in a particular culture. To invite a person to become a Christian does not demand conformity to a foreign culture, but an invitation to discover the expression of Jesus' words and values in one's own culture.

As Pope John Paul II said to the Aboriginal community in his 1986 Australian visit:

'The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks to all languages. It esteems and embraces all cultures.... You do not have to be people divided into two parts, as though an Aboriginal had to borrow the faith and life of Christianity, like a hat or a pair of shoes, from someone who owns them. Jesus calls you to accept his words and values into your own culture.'

Indeed, indigenous expressions of gospel values challenge and illuminate the faith of all Christians. In this way, we grow together in the one truth.

Tomorrow's promise

A crisis is an opportunity

The marginalization of indigenous peoples has a long history and it is a problem that will not go away. Its re-emergence in our times as a hot political and social issue only underlines the need that it be addressed in a lifegiving way.

Today's crisis is also a tremendous opportunity. In the challenge of restoring to indigenous peoples their fundamental rights lies an invitation to understand more deeply who we are as a human family and to revisit the values we live by and the truths we profess.

Christians must unite their efforts with those of all people of goodwill to bring about a genuine and lasting spirit of communion. In the spirit and message of Jesus Christ we have a magnificent beacon lighting the way forward. By witnessing to faith, hope, and love may we reflect this light for all to see.

A memory

It was in Darwin just after the war. I was an eleven year old primary student and I remember the Aboriginal kids from the reserve would arrive at school each day on the back of a cattle truck. A lot of the white kids wouldn't sit next to them—but I did. We were told by the teacher: 'This is equal-opportunity education'. And in my young mind I recall thinking: 'Wait a minute, this doesn't look very equal to me.' (Joan)

To the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

Alice Springs, 29 Nov 1986

Let it not be said that the fair and equitable recognition of Aboriginal rights to land is discrimination. To call for the acknowledgement of the land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination. Certainly, 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.

Dear Aboriginal people: the hour has come for you to take on new courage and new hope. You are called to remember the past, to be faithful to your worthy traditions, and to adapt your living culture whenever this is required by your own needs and those of your fellowman. Above all, you are called to open your hearts ever more to the consoling, purifying and uplifting message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died so that we might all have a life, and have it to the full.

Table topics

In my own neighborhood...

- In what ways have I seen prejudice at work?
- In what ways have I seen reconciliation at work?
- Pair up with someone of another ethnic group and swap stories and insights.
- What's it like being (Italian/ Aboriginal/Vietnamese/...)?
- Tell a story about growing up in your culture.
- Name some of the unique strengths of your culture.

For the grace to see each person as a member of our human family and a child of God, we pray to the Lord.

