

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

The Pope in Alice: 25 years on

FRANK BRENNAN | NOVEMBER 28, 2011

On this day 25 years ago, 12 of us Jesuits were privileged to join thousands of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who met with Pope John Paul II at Alice Springs.

Two nights before, we had camped at Uluru. On the way to Blatherskite Park, where the Pope was to speak, I was invited to accompany a busload of people from Kununurra and Turkey Creek in the Kimberley because they did not have their own priest with them. The community leaders gave me a red T-shirt which depicted their Dreaming. We all wore yellow headbands and waited patiently for the Pope's arrival.

He had been delayed by the breakdown of his Mercedes Popemobile, which was unsuited to the hot conditions. Workers resorted to throwing iced water over the engine but failed in their attempts to get the vehicle running. Eventually the Pope arrived on the park's Caterpillar Dreaming track in the back seat of a plain white Australian Ford sedan, which was more becoming than the foreign vehicle.

There had been months of planning and negotiation about this meeting on the Yipirinya Dreaming track. People came from all over Australia.

There had been some consternation early in the planning because the offices for the papal visit had been donated by a major mining company. But Aboriginal leaders were assured that the Pope's message would not be qualified because of the generosity of the corporate sector.

A week prior to the visit, there was unresolved conflict between the Church's national advisory committee of Aborigines and Islanders preparing the visit, and the local Aboriginal community. The committee wanted only Aboriginal and Islander children to have access to the area where the Pope would be welcomed. But they heeded the call of the local Elders with the result that Alice Springs children of all races who shared in the local Dreaming were permitted to participate.

The Alice Springs Mayor said, 'It's wonderful. The Aboriginal people are doing the right thing. It's not the locals that have caused any problems. It's people from the south who wanted to segregate the races.'

The tension between the local church community and national Aboriginal church leaders evaporated by the time the Pope kissed the tarmac at Alice Springs airport. He was welcomed by eight traditional owners who greeted him in Arrernte language. Among the group were the late Wenten Rubuntja and Charles Perkins.

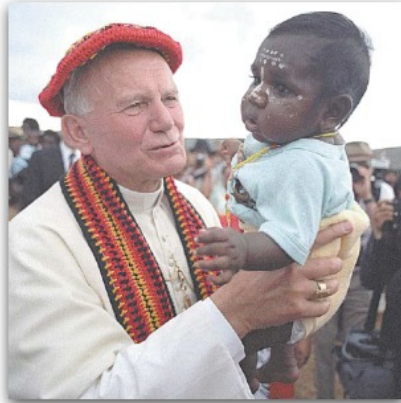
Protocol dictated that the Pope could not be attired in the Aboriginal colours. But Vatican rubrics gave way to local custom when he was presented on the Dreaming track with a crocheted stole and beanie in black, red and yellow. Being the consummate performer on the international stage, John Paul graciously received the gift and wore the accoutrements for some distance along the track.

Then Louise Pandella from the Nauiyu Community at Daly River made her way to the barrier and handed her baby Liam to the Pope. The Pope held Liam up to the cameras which captured one of the iconic shots of John Paul II. When I rose at 4am in Minneapolis 19 years later to watch the papal funeral, the major US television networks used the photo several times during the course of the broadcast.

Along the track, the Pope met the nation's most respected Aboriginal leaders, who presented him with a shield inscribed with an aspirational message. The director of the Alice Springs based Central Land Council, Patrick Dodson, who had left the priesthood, respectfully stood in the background to spare His Holiness any embarrassment.

The Pope received numerous other gifts including a copy of the 'Our Father' in the local language of the Stradbroke Island people, who had been the first Indigenous Australians to receive Catholic missionaries.

While the Pope was still on the Dreaming track, I was approached by a throng of international media who asked my opinion of the Pope's **speech**. Not having heard it, I was in no position to answer. They had read copies on the papal jet once they had taken off from Darwin and regarded the comments on land rights as very hot news. For many of the international journalists, this was to be the big story of the visit.



At the end of the track, the Pope made his way up to the stadium while storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. Behind him was a mural by Wenten Rubuntja depicting the Caterpillar Dreaming and the mountain gaps around Alice Springs.

As the Pope completed the lengthy speech, he took a large gum branch, reached into a clay coolamon which later would be used in the Alice Springs church for baptisms, and blessed the people with water.

It was at that moment that the lightning sounded and the heavens opened. All of us in the crowd were convinced that grace and nature were one and indivisible at that moment in the red centre. The *Centralian Advocate* reported that 'as an electrical storm was threatening the gathering of about 4000 people, most of the thunder was coming from the podium'.

The Pope later confided to Bishop Ted Collins, 'I think the people prefer meeting me rather than listening to me. But I had to say it all because otherwise it could not be published.' The mainstream media picked up the Pope's remarks about land rights, self-determination and reconciliation.

But he put even more demanding challenges to the Australian Church when he enunciated the place of Indigenous Australians in the life of the Church, and when he outlined the relationship between Christian faith and Aboriginal culture and religious tradition.

No one would claim that the Pope's speech was a catalyst accelerating the positive developments and putting a brake on the negative reversals in Australian Church and society these last 25 years. But it still embodies the most noble shared aspirations of Aboriginal Catholics and those wanting to see Aborigines take their place in the Australian Church.

The speech undoubtedly painted too rosy a picture of the role of the missionaries, glossing over the failings, including assimilationist mindsets and the evil of sexual abuse. Only recently has the Church come to appreciate its failings in adopting assimilationist methods such as removing children from their families and placing them in dormitories, and in using English exclusively rather than local languages.

The speech gives too optimistic a reading of the prospects of Aboriginal Australians taking their rightful place in the Church without the likelihood of Aboriginal priests or bishops in the foreseeable future. And it too simplistically glosses over some of the disconnection between Christianity and some of the core beliefs and practices of traditional Aboriginal religions.

It has been very helpful to have the Pope offer the encouragement that there need not be any conflict between Christian faith and Aboriginal culture. But Aboriginal culture is often founded on religious beliefs which find and express God's self-communication outside of Christ and the Church's sacraments.

I recall a funeral of a well respected Aboriginal leader in the Kimberley. After the church service, the Elders took the body for a ceremony which was no place for the priest or other outsiders. No participant presumed the religious business had been confined to the church and that all that occurred thereafter was purely cultural. The body and its bearers moved seamlessly from one religious world to another, the bearers and the onlookers respecting the sacred space of each world.

The abiding grace of the Pope's speech is incarnated in those words in which he revered the Aboriginal identification with country and the daily Aboriginal reality of suffering and marginalisation. He touched the deep Aboriginal sense of belonging, embracing the hope in their suffering. He conceded in the spoken word and by his charismatic presence that the Dreaming is real, sacramental and eternal.

He retold the story of Genesis in Aboriginal voice. He relayed the calls of the post-exilic prophets to the contemporary powerbrokers and poor of Australia. He spoke poetically of things he knew not, knowing that those listening had endured the flames:

If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the 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 this rebirth is now!

Everyone present knew that he understood, and more than many who had spent a lifetime in this place.



Fr Frank Brennan SJ is professor of law at the Public Policy Institute, Australian Catholic University and adjunct professor at the College of Law and the National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University.

SUBMITTED COMMENTS

BRIAN DOYLE | 28 NOV 2011

Aw, lovely piece, and what a pleasure to be reminded of a huge moment, a holy moment. "The body and its bearers moved seamlessly from one religious world to another, the bearers and the onlookers respecting the sacred space of each world..." Might that not be the very secret of the world to come, when Catholicism, as John Paul himself said, mends the fences with other Christian faiths, and reaches out as brother to other religions, and a world broken into many religions actually begins to tip to a world in which religion is a way of living, rather than an excuse for causing death?

LOUISE JEFFREE, SYDNEY | 28 NOV 2011

I loved encountering these detailed memories.

Sometimes one doesn't respect a vocation unless one challenges its current witnesses to live it better. Reading a copy of JPII's speech to Catholic school teachers in Australia that year greatly inspired me, 2 decades later, to become a teacher. Especially the profound call to live the witness of married relationship, rather than de facto arrangements. This proved to be true when my students startled me with their searching question: "Who do you love, Miss?" I couldn't answer it, but lived the longing that it derived from until I married within the next two years.

Praise and thanks be to Abba, Our Father and to you, Fr Frank, for your witness to memory and to the relational way of being a priest.

FR DON COUTTS MGL | 28 NOV 2011

Good on you Frank

ANNE LANYON | 28 NOV 2011

Dear Frank

Thank you for remembering this extremely significant speech with such personal engagement. I believe that Aboriginal Catholic Ministry is a gift to the Australian Church that is not recognised nearly enough. The section you refer to in your comment "But he put even more demanding challenges to the Australian Church when he enunciated the place of Indigenous Australians in the life of the Church, and when he outlined the relationship between Christian faith and Aboriginal culture and religious tradition." should be taken on board by every diocese and every parish community. I recommend the speech to readers. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia_en.html
Anne Lanyon

UNCLE PAT | 29 NOV 2011

I find the failure of the Mercedes Popemobile to adjust to the climatic conditions of Central Australia symbolic. Even baptism with ice water couldn't get it going.

I don't know what to make of the Australian Ford coming to the rescue on the back of the Caterpillar Dreaming truck but like the parables of Jesus I shall leave it to those who have ears to hear let them hear. And those who have eyes to see, let them see.

DENIS FITZGERALD | 29 NOV 2011

Let's hope that the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's engagement with Aboriginal people in Alice Springs strengthens all of us in our ommitment to proper respect and recognition of their role in the church and the world.

Thanks to Frank for taking us back to the time and the place - both reminding us of what was said and done, and leading us to consider the situation today, with its hopes and complexities, in light of that picture from 25 years ago.

HARRY WILSON | 29 NOV 2011

We all like to recall 'significant moments' and Brennan is no different but one normally reflects on what the point of it all was too, and whether, given the passage of time, it was either worth doing in the first place or whether it would still be relevant 'today'.

There is something quite ridiculous about the Pope coming to Australia anyway, but going to Uluru?

What on Earth for? Cheap publicity for a declining power? Handing out metaphorical glass beads to the natives?

I have not been to Alice since the 1980s but it was a violent dump then and seems not to have changed much since then. And that's the whities that live and work there.

If this visit was worth a cracker it would be reasonable to expect some form of positive change to have flowed from it, so where is it?

PHILLIP | 29 NOV 2011

I am going to refer to Morris West's autobiography which gives you as the instigator of the Pope's speech.

SHANE WOOD CFC | 29 NOV 2011

Thank you, Frank, for this wonderful reminder; it is filled with reality checks, reminders of promise and unrealised hope. I wish also to recall the memory of one who did much to try to bring about more comfortable and proper space for Aboriginal people in the Church - Fr Kevin McKelson sac who passed away yesterday in Melbourne. His great liturgical and language work has yet to be fully appreciated, and certainly not appropriately recognised in these days of liturgical regression. Maybe there is still hope for some future change of heart.

BILL MCMAHON | 29 NOV 2011

Frank's call on the Pope's speech is a good one. A detailed account of its evolution is in Morris West's autobiography "A View from the Ridges"(1996)
The chapter is "Keepers of the the Dreaming"

I understand, Morris, Pat Dodson and Phillip Hoy MSC made the initial draft after which everyone and his dog had a go at!

PENELOPE | 29 NOV 2011

Very surprised to see two women mentioned here: Louise Pandella and "Alice". One behind a barrier and the other as a place.

HARRY WILSON | 29 NOV 2011

Penelope, are you sure the reference to 'Alice' is the place, and not the book?

I suspect the latter.

GAI | 29 NOV 2011

Very good, Frank, but I thought you might tell Liam's story too.

BRUCE SWAIN | 29 NOV 2011

I may be mistaken but I am reasonably sure that I read in a Perth or Darwin Diocesan Publication that the young aboriginal boy that Pope John Paul II is holding (photograph in this article) has since committed suicide. How many more suicides can the Church afford to be nothing more than commentators.

JAN WATSON | 29 NOV 2011

I note that the Pope "put even more demanding challenges to the Australian Church when he enunciated the place of Indigenous Australians in the life of the Church, and when he outlined the relationship between Christian faith and Aboriginal culture and religious tradition."

As Frank Brennan says, we have a way to go.

A young relative, fresh from a Buddhist retreat, was surprised to hear of Aboriginal meditative practices. One such, dadirri, is described on Yarra Healing: Towards Reconciliation with Indigenous Australians. You can find it on the website of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne, the theme of a proposed prayer-time /reflection for students, which also includes an extract from the Pope's 1986 address.

It is a treasure to access and use alone or in groups that meet for prayer and meditation.
<http://www.yarrahealing.catholic.edu.au/celebrations/index.cfm?loadref=18>

Home : [RSS / Podcasts](#) : [Christmas Raffle](#) : [About Us](#) : [Work experience](#) : [Help - Site Map](#) : [Advertise/Contribute](#) : [Eureka Street writing awards 2011](#)
: [Contact Us](#) : [Donate](#)
© 2011 EurekaStreet.com.au