

## **REPORT RE PILGRIMAGE TO ALICE SPRINGS** **27<sup>th</sup> September to 8<sup>th</sup> October 2006**

Before a group of 21 CFAR (Catholics for Australian Reconciliation) set off for our Pilgrimage to the Little Flower Mission at Charles Creek, Altunga and Santa Teresa Mission – where we were joined by 8 more people, much prayer had gone into the planning. Through this Pilgrimage, we desire to make a difference for our Aboriginal People. We were yet to be confronted by the lies and deviousness of Government: Territory and Federal, the racism of non-Indigenous people and the resilience of the older generation of Aborigines. We were yet to learn about the unexpected, detrimental effects of the 1967 Referendum with the ensuing loss of jobs and livelihood and the on-going effects of the Stolen Generation for the future through lack of ‘mothering’ skills.

The Assembly itself was hailed a great success by the 13 Bishops present but the people themselves felt very much curtailed by the Church bureaucracy. Strangely, this has been seen as an advantage by some of their number as they are inspired to be more active in pursuing the ideals given them by Pope John Paul II and reiterated to a lesser extent by Pope Benedict XIV.

There were several spiritual experiences, particularly at Altunga, Santa Teresa with Agnes Palmer and at Uluru. In each of these places the presence of the God: Father, Son and Spirit, was tangible.

Two meetings with An-An Bensted, a friend living in Alice Springs, were great. The knowledge which she and her husband Mark have of the Aborigines, compelled An-An to say the Aborigines in Alice Springs “are the poorest of the poor!” When questioned why, An-An said they were poorer than the people on the dump-sites in Manilla because our Aborigines have been **stripped** of their dignity. They were given no assistance to change from a nomadic people to living in the current world of today, therefore they have extreme difficulty in getting employment because of lack of education and live from handout to handout.

The Government of Alice Springs had ensured that ‘Opal’ petrol only could be bought. This petrol has no odour so cannot be used for sniffing. Since our return, in late November it was announced that the Government is going back to other types of petrol because ‘the consumers had asked for it’. This will cause devastation in the Aboriginal Community. We heard how on the 1<sup>st</sup> November 2005, the Aboriginal Learning Centre was told there would be no funding for education in 2006. The children had to be ‘mainstreamed’. Seventy-one children were enrolled at the Learning Centre. Most of these children were brought in from the outer areas by their grandmothers who then spent the day at the Centre. Of the seventy-one students enrolled only forty made it to the local Primary School in 2006 and by the end of September twenty of these had dropped out. Recently a new rule has been brought into the school saying that all students **MUST** wear shoes. A further ten have dropped out of school. Of the original seventy-one students enrolled, only ten are being educated! What is going to happen to these youngsters who are left idle in the immediate future let alone down the years? They will turn to shop-lifting, drugs, alcohol and vandalism. There will be another generation growing up without

supervision and direction so they, too, will not be able to cope in the future when they have families of their own. Gradually they will be destroyed as a People.

## **SNIPPETS OF INSIGHT**

### **1. Yurala Tourist Resort at Uluru**

Yurala is the residential resort for tourists at Uluru. When the land around Uluru was returned to the local People, the Arrente, the Northern Territory immediately asked for a tract of land back in the form of a ninety-nine lease, with conditions. This was taken to the Supreme Court and the Government won. The Judge ordered the people to do as the Government had asked as they had been given a lot 'gratuitously'. Shortly afterwards this land was sold to developers for a tourist resort and the Aboriginal People get none of the proceeds!

### **2. Vision of Our Lady**

A vision of Our Lady to one of the local men in 1938 was written up and presented to the Apostolic Delegate with gifts to give to the Holy Father.

### **3. Forgiveness.**

A youth committed suicide outside Santa Teresa Mission a few days before our arrival. His girl-friend had broken up with him and he could not cope. The girl went into hiding because of 'pay-back'. The aggrieved family went to the family of the girl and asked them to pray with them at the site of the incident. The girl no longer had to stay in hiding but went to Alice Springs to get away from the area and was drinking herself 'silly'. The supernatural love of God overcame the natural desire for retaliation.

### **4. Outback Wedding**

Vicki and Trevor were married at Emily's Gap, Alice Springs where the ancient rocks towered hundreds of metres above the dry creek bed. The Wadeye women from Port Keats had asked to dance Vicki into her Wedding Ceremony. This was very powerful! The women painted Vicki's face the Wadeye-way, in yellow ochre.

Tamara, Vicki's daughter, gave Vicki away with the words: "One can never give your mum away, but you can entrust her in the love of others. Today I entrust Trevor with the care and love of my mum and may God always keep them strong in the love of each other. Please take care of her because she is the only one I have got."

At the end of the beautiful ceremony, the newly-weds were again danced out of the area. After the speeches at the Reception at Heavitree Gap where we were all staying, Kay, Graeme and Roy Mundine, life-long friends of the Vicki's family, gave Vicki and Trevor a water Blessing with water blessed by Pope John Paul II in 1986. Again, this was very powerful in its prayerfulness and meaning. The western celebration of removing the blue garter and the throwing of the floral bouquet seemed so superficial after the previous ceremony!

## 5. Goodness and Evil

We have negated the workings of the Spirits of Good and Evil in our Western world. We do not speak of them but talk of 'ethics' or 'morality'. The Spirits are very much alive in the Outback. We were conscious of the Good Spirits working with us but know the bad Spirits are very much alive in discrimination, condemnation and racism. Several Pilgrims experienced the presence of the 'Spirits' around us while on the Pilgrimage. We had been told at the Learning Centre that 'the Spirits' would be watching us to see we did what is right .

## 6. Future Generations

The only hope for the present generation is that they are given back land which is significant to them so that the Elders can gradually rehabilitate them to the spirit of their Ancestors. At present the young are wandering around like 'lost souls'. In their present state they have little hope of getting 'in touch' with whom they are. They are in an 'alien' land.

## 7. Community Reconciliation - Alice Springs - Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2006

The atmosphere of the Assembly was inclusive, everyone was welcome, one didn't have to be an Aborigine. One of the high-lights for me was the *Community Reconciliation*. The name was intriguing, what was to come?

Bishop Chris Prowse led the Healing and Reconciliation Ceremony while Fr Matt Digges was the MC for all the Liturgical ceremonies – many of the Aborigines felt it should have been the Tiwi Deacons who did this.

The Tiwi women started the Ceremony with a Reconciliation Dance which was followed by a Healing dance and song by the Balgo women. Four Balgo women Elders were invited to the front to pray for healing over whom ever came forward. The whole congregation gravitated towards them. At the same time, the Bishops and Priests were hearing individual Confession / Reconciliation. When the Bishops and Priests were ready they returned to their places with the exception of Archbishop Bathersby from Brisbane, who immediately moved forward to be prayed over by one of the Elders! Other Bishops and Priests took his lead. This public statement **that healing is not only found in the Ordained Ministers** was very powerful. Healing is found in the whole Church. Next day Vicki Walker told Bishop Prowse that the Church has got it wrong! If he wanted to know what true healing was, he needed to visit Agnes Palmer, an Arrente Elder at Santa Teresa 150km away. Agnes prayed before anyone approached her for healing, she would 'smoke' the person, then gently ask if the person he or she wanted to know what she, Agnes, could see. At the conclusion, before the next person sat down, Agnes would cleanse the seat on which the previous person was sitting with smoke, before prayerfully prepare herself for the next person.

The Bishop was asked if the Clergy prepared themselves before they heard each persons' confession or was a case of 'in-and-out'. Bishop Prowse went to see Agnes at the end of the Assembly. We only heard he found the experience 'good'.

**8. “Pass It On”**

The Victorian contingent had a last minute inspiration to pass the Message Stick from person to person instead of one person carrying it up the aisle of the covered area! As each person passed the Stick to the next, he or she called out loudly: **“Pass it on!”** This was our caption for the relay around Victoria. Being different from the carrying of the other Message Sticks, this action was one of the high-lights of the Assembly.

**9. NCC**

The National Council of Churches in Australia introduced the slogan: *“I love you and there is nothing you can do about it!”* as a form of greeting. Can we really go up to people and say this? Have we the ‘freedom’ and ‘nerve’ to do so?

**10. Courage**

One of our number had an extremely bad accident in 1975. The recuperation took **five years!** Although hindered by walking with two crutches, we were all so inspired by the grit and courage shown by Joan. She took part in everything she could without a murmur or grumble. Such resignation to what the Lord wanted from her! Many of us would not have had the persistence to attempt what Joan achieved. Her husband Jo was attentive but not overbearing. They both gave each other their ‘space’.

**11. Happy Memories**

A parting injunction was to: *“Take our happy memories with us!”* It was more than happy memories we took. We took the desire to make a difference because of our disturbing experiences. This is good as it spurs us on to work for social justice in Australia first and also in the world.

**12. Cultural difference - Learning**

Over 10s of 1000s years of survival, the traditional Aborigines of today still learn from their grandparents. Their parents are still learning! How does this fit with our society of inexperience?

**13. The Centre**

Uluru was uplifted from the earth 150 million years ago and formed from the erosion of Kata Tjuta which has been eroded to 36 domes.

**14. Trust**

The experience could give one a sense of hopelessness. Christ’s Resurrection enables us to strive to make a difference in the world, to uplift humanity.

**15. Roy Mundine**

Roy is an old Elder now. He is illiterate but his wisdom and gentleness is obvious. He has such a gentle nature and fills one with hope. Roy has eleven children, two of whom are very active for their own People. They have acute intellects and an incredible knowledge of Aboriginal and white history and culture. They can see so clearly what must be done to help their people. Are we ready to listen?

## **16. Referendum**

One would think the Referendum of 1967 would be to advantage of our Aboriginal People. It was only in Alice Springs that I really 'heard' the effects of the Referendum and the aftermath of the ensuing forty years.

A proud, skilled People were put off their jobs because they had to have equal pay and not just hand-outs. There was no preparation for this new world. Extended families found themselves scrounging on the streets as their livelihood had been taken away from them and they could not find employment. What was meant to bring all Australians together became a curse for our Aboriginal People. They were no longer allowed to live in their traditional way because they were 'trespassing' on land taken from them, they could not hunt for food so became beggars and vagrants in their own land because of US.

## **17. Overseas Orphans**

At Santa Teresa, each day the Parish Priest goes around the mission picking up recyclable cans and so on. This way he makes \$40 a bale. Each year he sends about \$2000 overseas for the orphans in needy countries. Some families are good about gathering their cans to help others. Containers were put outside the Mission entrance but the problem was the wind and the cars would blow the containers over and the mess was worse.

## **18. Little Flower Mission**

The Little Flower Mission grew in three stages: Charles Creek from which the people were taken because of 2 cases of meningitis in the community and the fear the disease would spread throughout the town of Alice Springs. Altunga, the barren place where the Aborigines were taken by the army in the middle of the night and left in the scrub, received its name from an Arrente word meaning 'bad water' as it was discovered that the water where the People were taken was 'bad' from cyanide poisoning as a result of mining. And the last stage was going overland to Santa Teresa which is still operating.

## **19. Inaccuracies**

There are inaccuracies in the museum at Arltunga. A remarkable fact is that our Aboriginal People lived on the land for 10s of thousands of years and in less than 200 years of white settlement the land was no longer habitable!

## **20. Feral Animals**

We had been camped for nearly 24 hours at the old Little Flower Mission and the rangers had been up and down the 'road' all day. After several of our party had been to the 'Bush Hotel' we were suddenly accosted by the Park Rangers and asked to move. We said we had the permission of the Arrente People but this was not believed. We told the rangers we had been sent on our way with a Smoking Ceremony, all to no avail. We were accused of being like 'feral animals', destroying a sacred site. The rangers admitted they had no jurisdiction over the mission site but were looking after the interests of the people and the concrete could crack under the weight of the vehicles. A compromise was met. The book on the managerial arrangements at Lake

Mungo was mentioned, one ranger had read it from cover to cover. He didn't really believe that Vicki had written 90% of it.

### **21. Charles Creek**

Charles Creek today has no water, no gas, no electricity but the people are meant to live there and at 18 other camps. The Local Government says the Aboriginal People have to supply their own needs but, as they cannot get jobs to earn money, how can they live with the dignity they wish? How can people lift themselves out of such squalor with no assistance?

### **22. Male Elders**

At the Assembly both Graeme Mundine and Mark Bin Bakar spoke of the fewness of men taking leadership roles, their traditional place in the community. Our 'progressive' society has done this to them! They have been stripped of their dignity and our 'modern' society of TV teaches the youth not to respect their elders. Somehow the Aboriginal male members must find their place in society again. **We** must empower them.

### **23. Healing Centre**

The Healing Centre at Santa Teresa is a very holy place. Agnes Palmer led us in prayer and then prayed over several people. Only if the person wished, did Agnes say what was in the person's life. Agnes did not know us but was 'spot on' in what the Spirit told her about each person. Some of our number noticed how the smoke, from the tiniest fire I have ever seen, swirled so differently as each person sat before Agnes – around the floor, around the person or straight up to the Lord.

### **24. Caterpillar Dreaming**

We were in the Land of the Caterpillar Dreaming. All around the formation of the hills and ranges looked just like caterpillars.

### **25. Employment**

Many of us were horrified not to find Aborigines employed in the town. Aboriginal Rangers were employed at the Desert Park but I saw no others except for the dancers at Heavitree Gap.

### **26. Racism**

In many shops, the Aborigines are forced to put their money on the counter when paying as the shop assistants will not touch the hands of an Aborigine!

### **27. Pre-date Christ**

The Aborigines knew the Spirit long before Christ came onto the earth. The Spirit was always with them.

### **28. Silence**

The immensity of Uluru, its grandeur, its sacredness compels many people to speak with hushed voices. I found that the crunching of shoes walking on the made paths was an intrusion into the silence I needed in such a place.

### **29. Tourists**

As the 'tourists' 'ran' up the rock at Uluru, they were noisy and obtrusive. They showed no respect for the wishes of the Aboriginal People that the Rock should not be climbed, they were not attuned to the 'sacredness' of the place. The tourists fell into two categories: those who had no respect for the wishes of others and those who were over-awed by the place even if they could not grasp the spiritual significance and were anxious to follow any given directives.

### **30. Rock Wallabies**

A delightful pastime at Heavitree Gap was to watch the rock wallabies in the early morning and evening. Some of them would feed out of peoples' hands.

### **31. Men's Business**

The high hill behind Heavitree Gap Resort was where Men's Business traditionally took place. Guests were asked not to climb it. One person inadvertently followed a rock wallaby up a little way and was bitten by a dog. Coincidence?

### **32. Prayer of the Elders**

At the Assembly I found myself asking different Elders to pray to the Holy Spirit that the Lord would work through me to open the eyes of my people to what we have done to our Aboriginal People and try to help them regain their dignity and respect in themselves.

### **33. Spite**

We heard of how squatters and settlers would fence off their land and bar the Aborigines from their traditional hunting grounds. When the Aborigines killed a sheep or head of cattle, their water-hole would be poisoned. This back-fired as the water-hole could no longer be used by the sheep or cattle. The accusations were not always correct but apologies were never given.

In some strange way this reminded me of the poem: 'For the want of a nail' and the consequences of our actions.



"For the want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for the want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for the want of a horse the rider was lost, being overtaken and slain by the enemy, all for the want of care about a horseshoe nail."

-- **Benjamin Franklin**

34. The Park Ranger leading the Mala Walk was not an Aborigines but had been well-trained by them. He was most respectful of their culture and passed this respect on to the people he led. This was a wonderful example of and ancient and modern culture working together with respect for each other.

### **35. 'Suicide' Branches**

In times of drought, 'stress' the gum tree will 'select' the branch which is to be 'dropped' so the rest of the tree has a chance at survival. Our Aboriginal guide could not explain how the tree does this but it happens.

### **36. Up-Side Down Country**

We are an 'up-side down country' because our desert rivers run underground (not always above ground) our trees grow 'roots' in the air (boabs) and our country is known as 'down-under'.

### **37. 'Needs of Men and Women'**

A woman only needs three implements when gathering food: a coolamon, a digging stick and a head-ring to steady the coolamon on her head. The men need all sorts of boomerangs, spears and other implements to go hunting.

### **38. Cross-Generations**

At the Assembly, the youth were 'separated' from the rest of the Assembly so they could plan for World Youth Day in 2008. This 'western way' was essential but the youth also need to be with the Elders so they can learn their wisdom. The Aborigines are an 'oral' People in essence. They absorb their learning by being with the Elders.

### **39. Sorry Business**

The Balgo Dancers were missing from the Assembly because they were in **Sorry Time. Nothing** will disturb this spiritual time when it is required. In the Western tradition events often over-ride the needs of people.

### **40. Cultural Tension**

The Assembly organizers hired a firm to cater for all the needs of the Assembly. This caused tension as they had not understanding of the health and medical needs of Aborigines. Many of the attendees had to be taken to hospital because their dietary and nursing needs were not met because of lack of facilities.

### **41. Cross-Culture**

The Maori guests at the Assembly brought 3 gifts which were presented to 3 Arrente Elders with the customary rubbing of noses!

### **42. Cultural Misunderstanding**

A scarf and beanie were presented to the Pope, Benedict XIV, through his Delegate. Pope John Paul II had also been presented with these. It is not appropriate for other white people, including Bishops, to wear such items to be at 'one with the people'.

### **43. Confirmation**

I was consciously engulfed by the Gifts of the Holy Spirit at Confirmation while on Pilgrimage and at the Assembly. The Gifts of Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Knowledge, Fortitude (Courage and Strength), Piety (Prayerfulness) and Fear of the Lord (Awe) were constant companions which I witnessed in those around me and understood **within myself**.

#### **44. Power of the Moment**

- i) The entertainer at the evening meal gave an excellent explanation of reptile life, together with demonstrations but a couple of 'throw-away' statements were racist against Japanese and German tourists. We could not let this pass so reported it to the Manager and also wrote our complaints in the 'Request Box'. In our racially aware culture of today we were compelled to act.
- ii) Several of us also drew the attention of Management to the fact that we saw no Aboriginal staff. The resort could become a forerunner of this in the community of Alice Springs.

#### **45. Whale Rider**

The spirit of the young girl in the film *Whale Rider* was evident in some of the Youth. We need to **empower, encourage and nurture** these young people in any way we can to work for their People.

#### **46. Night Stars**

As we were away for 'no' moon and a new moon, the stars were bouncing out of the sky as the night was pitch black. Never before have I been conscious of stars being coloured – red, blue, green, yellow, orange.

#### **47. Night Atmosphere**

We had been told the Spirits would be watching over us but I didn't realize that they could be 'seen' as stars through out tent or as 'glows' of moving light. Others had other experiences. There was a warm, comforting feel about their presence.

The experience left me feeling helpless, somber, wrung out! But because of my faith in Christ we have to keep hope and trust in the Lord. Our main work is to change the attitudes of the non-Indigenous people.

As with much of the information about Aborigines, a great deal of sifting of information, of reading between the lines, of listening to the people present at the time, what they had been told and what was passed down has to be pieced together like a jig-saw. It is very difficult to come to the **truth** as we 'see' it.