

Campfire in the Heart / Dreaming in the Heart
A Report by Charles Balnaves

In February / March of this year the Yarra Deanery was custodian to two message sticks for about a month. The message sticks were passed through all the parishes, primary schools and secondary schools of the deanery. We were only part of a year long journey through over 600 parish and school organisations in Victoria. Each place took custodianship of a message stick and in the end over 100,000 Catholics touched a message stick and made their contribution to the message which was taken to Alice Springs in October to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's visit in 1986.

I was privileged to go on a five day pilgrimage to several Aboriginal sites near Alice Springs and to participate in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) triennial assembly. I have returned from these events freshly energised and recognising more than ever the unique ways in which the Creator Spirit has gifted the original people of Australia.

The pilgrimage took us to Charles Creek, Altunga, Santa Teresa and Ngkarte Mikwekenhe. As I travelled and camped and saw successively a town camp, a site of forced resettlement, a vibrant present-day settlement and the Alice Springs Aboriginal Catholic Ministry I became aware of the continuity and history that still exists despite the disruption, pain and loss of social cohesion which has occurred.

While we were in Santa Teresa I met Agnes Palmer, a daughter of one of those forcibly moved from Charles Creek to Altunga (a site near the photo to the right). When I stopped and talked to Agnes and looked into her eyes I could feel the thousands of years of spiritual life that she has inherited. She is a Spiritual Healer. I can't explain it. She isn't a medium or a clairvoyant. She isn't a charlatan. She sits and carefully focuses herself and the person she speaks to through a smoking ritual and then she quietly allows her spirit to reach out and talk with the other. Her words of advice following this were simple but profound for each of those she helped. Here is reconciliation working in ways I could never have imagined.



The pilgrimage stopped and visited Emily's Gap, a European name for a site that has long been a focus for ceremonial activity for the Eastern Arrernte people. This is a gap in the East MacDonnell Ranges which is no more than 20 meters wide but is over 50 meters deep and exposes the most stunning rock formations, some of which are covered with rock art (see to the left) depicting the Caterpillar Dreaming of Yeperenye, Ntyarlke and Utnerrenyatye.

I stood quietly on this sacred ground and reflected on the richness of the oral history and the depth of understanding of the local environment which is encapsulated in this somewhat abstract drawing. To those that know, the art tells a complex story of the geography, means of survival and the tribal customs of those living here. This is a spiritual place. A cathedral in the open.

The NATSICC Assembly was also a success for me. Certainly the sessions all started late and ran over time and the opportunity for setting common directions seemed absent. However, the depth and breadth of capability present in the 400 Aboriginal people present from across the country gave me hope for the future and I met such a lot of wonderful new people. Evelyn Parkin from Stradbroke Island, working to

rebuild a community; Kay Mundine who was there with Pope John Paul II spoke in 1986; the Victorian Aboriginal Catholic Council members who are all seeking to grow their leadership capabilities.

There is still a long way to go before Australia can properly say that it has joyfully accepted its original people and their culture. However, it is clear that the slow process of growing leadership is bearing fruit.

The pilgrimage and the assembly have left me with an abiding sense of hope, mostly because the leadership I saw at the assembly springs from faith in Jesus Christ.

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