



The Jesuit Theological College Acknowledges the Wurrundjerri People with a Plaque

Introduction

On 20 October 2006 the Jesuit Theological College in Melbourne held an important ceremony. A plaque was erected as a sign of acknowledgement of the Wurrundjerri people, on whose land the College and Jesuit residence stands.

Aboriginal Elder, Betty Pike led the blessing ceremony. The Rector of the College, Michael Smith sj, explained why the College and Jesuit Community had undertaken this action.

Acknowledgement of the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian society is an essential step in the process of reconciliation. Remembering the past enables us to move forward with new commitment to living in right relationship with one another.

This ceremony took place twenty years after Pope John Paul II's landmark speech in Alice Springs. It is a sign both of continuing commitment to the action for justice which John Paul called for, and the reality that much remains to be done.

Betty Pike's Blessing

The plaque bears the following word from Aboriginal Elder Betty Pike:

To all who walk this land,
May you stand tall as a tree
Be as gentle as the morning mist
And be as strong as
The earth under your feet.
May the warmth of the campfire
Be in you and may
The creator spirit
Of the Wurrundjerri people
Always watch over you.

(Adapted from Australian Blessing, E. Pike 2003)



Betty Pike & Michael Smith blessing the plaque.

At the official blessing of the plaque Betty said:

"For Aboriginal people today, the Spirit of the Dreaming is still strong with us. It is very important that ritual is forward-looking as well as backward looking. Each time we perform these ancient rituals, we connect our spirit with those of our ancestors – their spirit is reborn and becomes strong in us."

"Holy Spirit of the water, as we pour this living water over this plaque, may all who pass by remember and give thanks to our First People and their descendants."

Michael Smith's Speech

I welcome Elizabeth Pike, who will be leading us in this ceremony. Betty is a Nyoongah woman from south-west Australia. We Jesuits have been blessed to have her working with us on a number of projects, including her writing for Madonna magazine over a number of years. Most recently, she worked with Brian McCoy and Anne Elvey and others on the special Indigenous issue of the *Pacifica* journal, in which she also shares some of her story.

This place, Jesuit Theological College, is both a residence for Jesuit students and faculty, and a centre for our ministry of theological and philosophical education. And it is both the community and the ministry which have supported the placement of this plaque. I would like to acknowledge especially the work of Fr. John Wilcken in suggesting and promoting this project, as he has promoted various aspects of the College's attempts to engage with Aboriginal concerns, especially his initiation, along with Vicki Walker, of a course on Christian Theology and Australian Aboriginal Religions. We also to thank Jub, who so beautifully constructed this monument, along with Ardi and Younsu.

Earlier this month, Betty was in Alice Springs at a gathering of Aboriginal Catholic people to celebrate 20 years since Pope John Paul met there with Indigenous Australians. It is good for us to be able to bless this monument in this 20th anniversary year. This plaque is about remembering - remembering the history and the people of the land on which we live and work. But it is not simply a remembering which looks to the past. As Pope Benedict wrote to this month's gathering in Alice Springs, "The art of remembrance ... is not just an occasion of simple recollection. It renews purpose."

That's what we seek to do today - as a community and a ministry, to renew our purpose, to renew our commitment to Aboriginal reconciliation. In that same message to the Alice Springs gathering, having encouraged and challenged Aboriginal people, Pope Benedict went on to address these words to the wider Australian community:

"Much has been achieved along the path of racial reconciliation, yet there is still much to be accomplished. No one can exempt themselves from this process. ... Only through the readiness to accept historical truth can a sound understanding of contemporary reality be reached and the vision of a harmonious future

espoused. I therefore again encourage all Australians to address with compassion and determination the deep underlying causes of the plight which still afflicts so many Aboriginal citizens. Commitment to truth opens the way to lasting reconciliation through the healing process of asking for forgiveness and granting forgiveness -- two indispensable elements for peace. In this way our memory is purified, our hearts are made serene, and our future is filled with a well-founded hope in the peace which springs from truth."

It is in this light that I now invite Betty to lead us in this ceremony.

For Reflection & Discussion

- Do you know the name of the original owners and custodians of the land on which your Church, school, workplace or home stand? Your local Aboriginal Catholic Ministry or Aboriginal Land Council could be approached to help you find out.
- How might reflection on the history of the ownership, use and care for specific pieces of land on which we now live, work or worship help us to work towards more just relationships between Indigenous Australians and the rest of the community?
- Michael Smith referred to memory, acknowledgement and renewed purpose. What roles do these play in the sacrament of reconciliation? What might this suggest for reconciliation between groups in society?
- The Jesuit Theological College and Jesuit Community chose to erect a plaque on a local piece of rock. Are there other symbols of acknowledgement that could be used?
- How might you identify and consult with appropriate Elders as part of the process of deciding on a symbol of acknowledgement and any words to be used?
- Does your faith community celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday (the first Sunday in July)? This might be an appropriate time to conduct a ceremony unveiling and blessing a symbol of acknowledgement or to start the process of community consultation about making such acknowledgement.