

INDIGENOUS ISSUES... Young People

The Journey of the Cross and Icon in the Outback

BY Adriana Armstrong, a young Indigenous woman from Darwin

The World Youth Day Cross and Icon came to the Northern Territory and travelled to some of Australia's remote communities. I had the privilege of joining the Journey of the Cross and Icon (JCI) team and sharing in the journey of spreading God's word to his people, my people.

Our first visit was to the community of Wadeye, approximately 420 kilometres south-west of Darwin; it is one of the Territory's largest Indigenous communities. Although it doesn't seem far, the journey in the car took some 6 to 7 hours; by the time we arrived I was hungry and very tired.

On arrival I was greeted by an elderly woman who was a prominent figure in the community. On recognising my family connections, she grabbed my hand and led me to the Cross and Icon. I stopped her along the way and explained that this occasion was for her and her people, but she insisted that I go with her; she wanted me to be a part of this with her. It was then I had this overwhelming feeling of love and peace of Christ. I looked down to my hand and she had hold of it ever so tight with both her hands.



From that point on I knew that this occasion would bring healing and rejuvenating to my people. I recall the reading of the message stick, the message spoken by Pope John Paul II to Indigenous Australians in Alice Springs 1986, "The church herself will not be fully the church Christ wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others."

During the procession through the community, people were filled with joy. I could hear the voices of my fellow brothers and sisters praying the rosary and singing. As the procession neared the destination of the cross, the sun began to set over the horizon. A large circle of rocks had been arranged around the cross for the youth to gather.

For those who don't know, Wadeye is notorious for its gang rivalry. Tribal warfare continues to this day and what happened next was a sign that God's presence was all around us. All the tribal groups sat together as brothers and sisters, welcoming this universal symbol into the community. I got goose bumps watching so many different tribal groups together and as one elder commented; this was the biggest assembly of their people that he could ever remember.

The celebration went on for a while and they sung and prayed all night around the cross. Each taking it in turns to touch, kiss the Cross and Icon, just to be in the presence of Mary and Jesus.

The next day we held a thanksgiving Mass with community followed by a quiet prayer with the JCI. Soon the team was back on the road to the next community Palumpa, only half an hour from Wadeye. The whole community came out to welcome us but we were delayed by an hour as the JCI car took a wrong turn! Nevertheless, it gave us the opportunity to meet with the locals and have time to rest. I believed it was a blessing within itself.

Eventually the JCI arrived with a welcoming reception from the locals. The expressions on the faces of the Ngarrmarranya (Palumpa) people were full of excitement. They were so excited that they processed the Cross and Icon in the hot sun to a park nearby to sit and be with Mary and Jesus to pray their own intentions. An elder invited them to touch the Cross and Icon; as they were doing that they played songs in their own language to help them reflect on God's Love.

Having a tight schedule, we were on the road once again completing the next stage of the journey. Our delay had caused us to be late for a Confirmation at Emu Point, our next destination. Mass had already begun when we arrived. The JCI was set up to have it present as the candidates celebrated their sacrament of Confirmation. The people felt privileged to have the Cross that had travelled all over the world with them in a place that many would have heard of, including me.

The people were very receptive in having the Cross and Icon in their home town and the newly confirmed

candidates got the opportunity to carry the Cross around the camp site.

We slowly wrapped up and headed back on the dusty road to Daly River. While on the journey to Daly we had a singing 'Bee' in the back of the troopie. Not only did we share plenty of laughs it allowed us to bond as a team.

A warm dinner awaited us at the presbytery when arrived at Daly River about 11pm. After a little fellowship we headed to our accommodation to sleep it off and rest. We had an early morning rise to get ready for another busy day, beginning with Mass. To our surprise the Cross was a tad too big to fit in the church, so we popped up the roof and just slid it in.

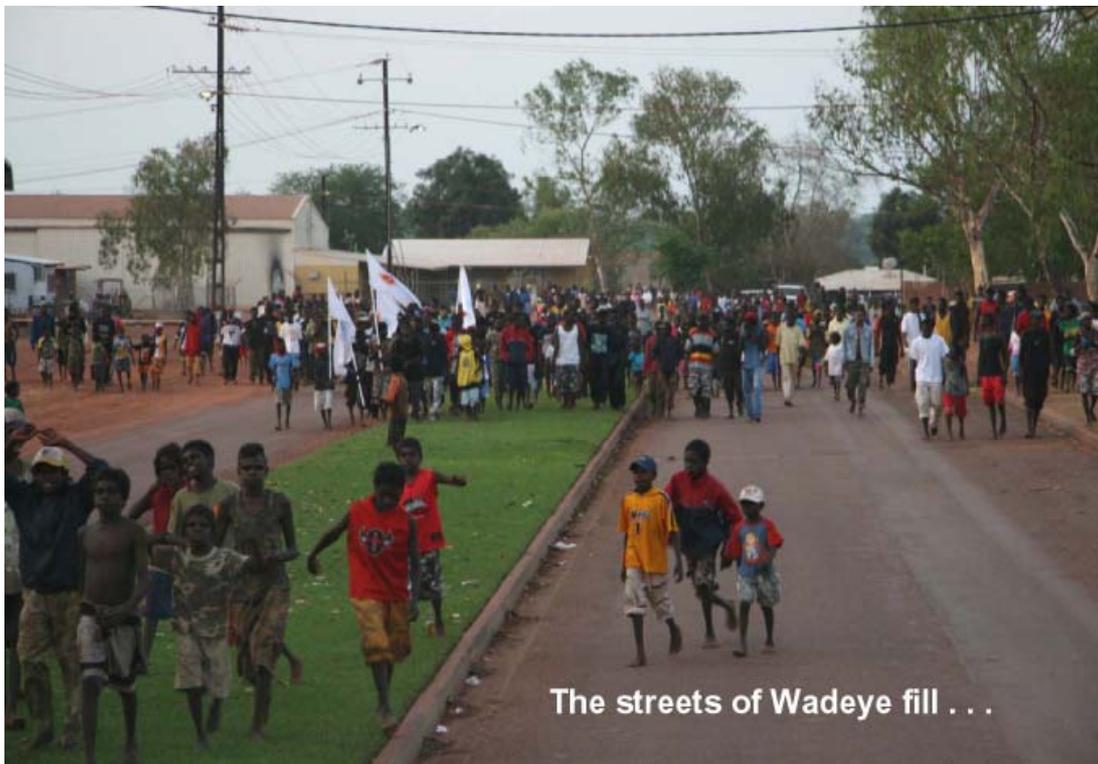
The locals were amazed of how big the Cross really was and wanted know more about who and how the Cross came about. The people enjoyed having an opportunity to bring their faith to the streets Daly River as they did a small procession with cross. Many photos were taken by the locals and the children seemed to be very ecstatic about having their photo taken with the big Cross.

Seeing the Cross go on the Ghan I wondered about how many lives it has touched and how many more lives yet to come. Waving to the JCI and seeing off was a very sad moment but as I remembered impact it had on the people, it brought a smile to my face.

As I watch the JCI being packed away, I realised then that I just didn't see them as symbolic wood but as people. I saw Jesus and Mary in the communities, I saw them among the people, and I saw them in each and every one of my people. Remembering the experiences we shared in the Territory and by the little cross hanging around our necks, the JCI will be with us for all eternity.

I ask God to bless those who come to touch, kiss and see the Cross and Icon and may it open their own hearts and minds to the beauty of God's great ever lasting love for us.

Adriana Armstrong's reflection and the accompanying photos from the Diocese of Darwin are used with permission.



REFLECTION

"The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks all languages. It esteems and embraces all cultures. It supports them in everything human and, when necessary, it purifies them. Always and everywhere the Gospel uplifts and enriches cultures with the revealed message of a loving and merciful God.

"That Gospel now invites you to become, through and through, Aboriginal Christians. It meets your deepest desires. 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 else who owns them. Jesus calls you to accept his words and his values into your own culture. To develop in this way will make you more than ever truly Aboriginal."

From the Address of John Paul II to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Blatherskite Park,
Alice Springs, November 29, 1986
Source: www.vatican.va

REFLECTION

"Friends,... what about today? What are you seeking? What is God whispering to you? The hope that never disappoints is Jesus Christ. ...You are Christ's disciples today. Shine his light upon this great city (New York) and beyond. Show the world the reason for the hope that resonates within you. Tell others about the truth that sets you free. With these sentiments of great hope in you I bid you farewell, until we meet again in Sydney in July for World Youth Day! "

From an Address of Pope Benedict XVI at Saint Joseph Seminary, Yonkers New York, April 19, 2008
Source: www.vatican.va

SOME FACTS ABOUT BEING AN INDIGENOUS YOUNG PERSON IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

AT A GLANCE

Full text see: "Closing the Gap of Indigenous Disadvantage, Generational Plan of Action, Northern Territory Government"
www.action.nt.gov.au

Education: The gap

On average, Indigenous students achieve lower literacy and numeracy levels than other students. In the Northern Territory in 2006, under 40% of Indigenous students achieved the Year 3 reading benchmark, compared with 87% of non-Indigenous students. In 2006, only 13.5% of Northern Territory Certificate of Education recipients were Indigenous.

Health: The gap

Indigenous children in the Northern Territory are more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to die before the age of one. Life expectancy at birth is 16 to 20 years lower for Indigenous Territorians than non-Indigenous Territorians. Non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer account for almost 80% of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy, with poor access to primary health care services also responsible for disparity.

Safety – Alcohol and Drugs: The gap

In 2004, more than 17% of Territorians were engaging in drinking behaviour that carries a high risk of long term harm. This compares to less than 10% of the population nationally. In 2005-2006, more than 70% of Northern Territory prison receptions were alcohol related, rising from 63% in 2000-2001.

Housing: The gap

Nearly a quarter of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over in Australia are living in overcrowded housing. This situation is most pronounced in the Northern Territory, with more than 60% of Indigenous Territorians living in overcrowded conditions. Overcrowded houses are more difficult to maintain and keep clean, and lead to increased likelihood of spread of infection and infectious diseases.

Jobs: The gap

In the Northern Territory in 2001, Indigenous labour force participation rates were lower than 40%, while unemployment was 13.6%. Based on 2001 data, it is estimated that 2000 additional jobs would need to be created per annum for 10 years to lift the Indigenous employment level in the Northern Territory to non-Indigenous levels.

Safety – Child Protection: The gap

In 2005-2006, Indigenous children nationally were four times as likely as non-Indigenous children to be the subject of abuse or neglect. On 8 August 2006, the *Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse* (the Inquiry) was established to find better ways to protect Aboriginal children in the Territory from sexual abuse. The Inquiry provided 97 recommendations detailing the actions required to combat child sexual abuse.

FOR ACTION

- What do we do to encourage youth to embrace all cultures?
- What have I (my community, my parish) done to help Indigenous youth get to Sydney for World Youth Day? Some parishes and dioceses have helped with finance for Indigenous young people to be at WYD Sydney.
- Have you ever thought of assisting young Indigenous people with education? Contact your local school, TAFE college, university, boarding houses etc to find someone who needs help.
- Did you know that each campus of Australian Catholic University has an Aboriginal Support Unit, contactable through the ACU website www.acu.edu.au
- Read some Indigenous news:
 - The Koori Mail* www.koorimail.com
 - National Indigenous Times* www.nit.com.au
 - Living Black* <http://news.sbs.com.au/livingblack>
- Read about the National Indigenous Youth Movement of Australia www.niyma.org
- Pray some Indigenous prayers.

TANIA MAJOR SPEAKS (Young Australian of the Year, 2007)

Tania Major, "Here I am" 2003

An excerpt from her speech delivered to John Howard and Cape York leaders in 2003

For full text see Hansard
www.aph.gov.au/hansard/reps/dailys/dr031103.pdf

"When I was growing up in Kowanyama there were 15 people in my class. Today I am the only one that has gone to University, let alone finished secondary education. I'm also the only girl in my class who did not have a child at 15. Of the boys in my class seven have been incarcerated, two for murder, rape and assault. Of the 15 there are only three of us who are not alcoholics. And, Prime Minister, one of the saddest things I must report to you is that four of my class mates have already committed suicide."

"The relationship between poor education and poor health is clear. People whose self-esteem and pride have been decimated by a sub-standard education system and a social system that creates an addiction to passive welfare have little reason to live healthy lives."

"Reconciliation is about each culture learning from and adjusting to the other. It should enrich the lives of all Australians. I don't fear what will happen if progressives publicly debate the future of Aboriginal welfare. I do fear what will happen if they don't."

INVITATION TO PRAY

A Dreaming Prayer

Creator Spirit,
you created all things, seen and unseen,
listen to our silent prayer as we stand here before you.
Our weary eyes look back over distant horizons, back to
those days where our people walked.
The footprints of our ancestors are imprinted on the
earth, and their images are real to us.
We see our grandfathers, standing tall and strong, warriors
of long ago.
We see our grandmothers, strong and hard working
women.
We hear them singing, we see them dancing, and our
spirits move within us.
They told of emus fighting, and the kangaroos picking up
the scent of our hunters

The images fade away as we feel the hurt of our people.
We can hear the cries of our grandmothers as they cry
for their children.
Loving Creator, you can see us as we stand here and
feel this hurt.
Let us walk with you, loving Creator, towards the dawning
of a proud and new nation.
We thank you for our sacred being.

The Words of Deacon Boniface Perdjert of Port Keats

God did not begin to take an interest in people
with the incarnation of his Son,
nor with Abraham.
My people existed here in Australia thousands of years
before Abraham.
In all that time God was with my people.
He worked through their culture.
He was saving us despite human weakness.
He was preparing us for the day
when he would see the features of Aboriginals
in the image of his Son.
So I must recognise,
I must use the things of God that are in my culture.
I must use them in his service.

If I do not do this,
my faith and my service are shallow.
They are a pretending.
They belong to some one else, not to me.
God has asked us to love him with whole mind, heart and
soul.
So I must give myself to God as an Aboriginal.
This is what God wants or he would not have made me
what I am.

These words were written in the late 1970s

Source: Aboriginal Catholic Ministry www.aboriginalcm.cathcomm.org/aboriginalCM

From: Specific Issues Committee, Indigenous Concerns (Anne McGuire, Sisters Rose Glennen, Mary Quinn and Moira Truelson). The Committee warmly invites your response to the article or the issue.

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