

ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS PEOPLE

Alice Springs, 29 November 1986

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is a great joy for me to be here today in Alice Springs and to meet so many of you, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia. I want to tell you right away how much the Church esteems and loves you, and how much she wishes to assist you in your spiritual and material needs.

1. At the beginning of time, as God's Spirit moved over the waters, he began to communicate something of his goodness and beauty to all creation. When God then created man and woman, he gave them the good things of the earth for their use and benefit; and he put into their hearts abilities and powers, which were his gifts. And to all human beings throughout the ages God has given a desire for himself, a desire which different cultures have tried to express in their own ways.

2. As the human family spread over the face of the earth, your people settled and lived in this big country that stood apart from all the others. Other people did not even know this land was here; they only knew that somewhere in the southern oceans of the world there was "The Great South Land of the Holy Spirit".

But for thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day. And during all this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Your "Dreaming", which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain for ever people of your culture, is your only way of touching the mystery of God's Spirit in you and in creation. You must keep your striving for God and hold on to it in your lives.

3. The rock paintings and the discovered evidence of your ancient tools and implements indicate the presence of your age-old culture and prove your ancient occupancy of this land.

Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear. Do not think that your gifts are worth so little that you should no longer bother to maintain them. Share them with each other and teach them to your children. Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages, must never be lost. Do you perhaps remember those words that Paul VI spoke to the aboriginal people during his visit to them in 1970? On that occasion he said: "We know that you have a life style proper to your own ethnic genius or culture – a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask you to renounce... Society itself is enriched by the presence of different cultural and ethnic elements. For us you and the values you represent are precious. We deeply respect your dignity and reiterate our deep affection for you".

4. For thousands of years this culture of yours was free to grow without interference by people from other places. You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land, with its animals, birds, fishes, waterholes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves.

You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it. and then walk away from it. You realized that your land was related to the source of life.

The silence of the Bush taught you a quietness of soul that put you in touch with another world, the world of God's Spirit. Your careful attention to the details of kinship spoke of your reverence for birth, life and human generation. You knew that children need to be loved, to be full of joy. They need a time to grow in laughter and to play, secure in the knowledge that they belong to their people.

You had a great respect for the need which people have for law, as a guide to living fairly with each other. So you created a legal system – very strict it is true – but closely adapted to the country in which you lived your lives. It made your society orderly. It was one of the reasons why you survived in this land.

You marked the growth of your young men and women with ceremonies of discipline that taught them responsibility as they came to maturity.

These achievements are indications of human strivings. And in these strivings you showed a dignity open to the message of God's revealed wisdom to all men and women, which is the great truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

5. Some of the stories from your Dreamtime legends speak powerfully of the great mysteries of human life, its frailty, its need for help, its closeness to spiritual powers and the value of the human person. They are not unlike some of the great inspired lessons from the people among whom Jesus himself was born. It is wonderful to see how people, as they accept the Gospel of Jesus, find points of agreement between their own traditions and those of Jesus and his people.

6. The culture which this long and careful growth produced was not prepared for the sudden meeting with another people, with different customs and traditions, who came to your country nearly 200 years ago. They were different from Aboriginal people. Their traditions, the organization of their lives, and their attitudes to the land were quite strange to you. Their law too was quite different. These people had knowledge, money and power; and they brought with them some patterns of behaviour from which the Aboriginal people were unable to protect themselves.

7. The effects of some of those forces are still active among you today. Many of you have been dispossessed of your traditional lands, and separated from your tribal ways, though some of you still have your traditional culture. Some of you are establishing Aboriginal communities in the towns and cities. For others there is still no real place for camp-fires and kinship observances except on the fringes of country towns. There, work is hard to find, and education in a different cultural background is difficult. The discrimination caused by racism is a daily experience.

You have learned how to survive, whether on your own lands, or scattered among the towns and cities. Though your difficulties are not yet over, you must learn to draw on the endurance which your ancient ceremonies have taught you. Endurance brings with it patience; patience helps you to find the way ahead, and gives you courage for your journey.

8. Take heart from the fact that many of your languages are still spoken and that you still possess your ancient culture. You have kept your sense of brotherhood. If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush-fire 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!

9. We know that during the last two hundred years certain people tried to understand you, to learn about you, to respect your ways and to honour you as persons. These men and women, as you soon realized, were different from others of their race. They loved and cared for the indigenous people. They began to share with you their stories of God, helped you cope with sickness, tried to protect you from ill-treatment. They were honest with you, and showed you by their lives how they tried to avoid the bad things in their own culture. These people were not always successful, and there were times when they did not fully understand you. But they showed you good will and friendship. They came from many different walks of life. Some were teachers and doctors and other professional people; some were simple folk. History will remember the good example of their charity and fraternal solidarity.

Among those who have loved and cared for the indigenous people, we especially recall with profound gratitude all the missionaries of the Christian faith. With immense generosity they gave their lives in service to you and to your forebears. They helped to educate the Aboriginal people and offered health and social services. Whatever their human frailty, and whatever mistakes they may have made, nothing can ever minimize the depth of their charity. Nothing can ever cancel out their greatest contribution, which was to proclaim to you Jesus Christ and to establish his Church in your midst.

10. From the earliest times men like Archbishop Polding of Sydney opposed the legal fiction adopted by European settlers that this land was terra nullius – nobody's country. He strongly pleaded for the rights of the Aboriginal inhabitants to keep the traditional lands on which their whole society depended. The Church still supports you today.

Let it not be said that the fair and equitable recognition of Aboriginal rights to land is discrimination. To call for the acknowledgment of the land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination. Certainly, what has been done cannot be undone. But what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow.

Christian people of good will are saddened to realize – many of them only recently – for how long a time Aboriginal people were transported from their homelands into small areas or reserves where families were broken up, tribes split apart, children orphaned and people forced to live like exiles in a foreign country.

The reserves still exist today, and require a just and proper settlement that still lies unachieved. The urban problems resulting from the transportation and separation of people still have to be addressed, so that these people may make a new start in life with each other once again.

11. The establishment of a new society for Aboriginal people cannot go forward without just and mutually recognized agreements with regard to these human problems, even though their causes lie in the past. The greatest value to be achieved by such agreements, which must be implemented without causing new injustices, is respect for the dignity and growth of the human person. And you, the Aboriginal people of this country and its cities, must show that you are actively working for your own dignity of life. On your part, you must show that you too can walk tall and command the respect which every human being expects to receive from the rest of the human family.

12. 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.

The old ways can draw new life and strength from the Gospel. The message of Jesus Christ can lift up your lives to new heights, reinforce all your positive values and add many others, which only the Gospel in its originality proposes. Take this Gospel into your own language and way of speaking; let its spirit penetrate your communities and determine your behaviour towards each other, let it bring new strength to your stories and your ceremonies. Let the Gospel come into your hearts and renew your personal lives. The Church invites you to express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to your Aboriginal minds and hearts. All over the world people worship God and read his word in their own language, and colour the great signs and symbols of religion with touches of their own traditions. Why should you be different from them in this regard, why should you not be allowed the happiness of being with God and each other in Aboriginal fashion?

13. As you listen to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, seek out the best things of your traditional ways. If you do, you will come to realize more and more your great human and Christian dignity. Let your minds and hearts be strengthened to begin a new life now. Past hurts cannot be healed by violence, nor are present injustices removed by resentment. Your Christian faith calls you to become the best kind of Aboriginal people you can be. This is possible only if reconciliation and forgiveness are part of your lives. Only then will you find happiness. Only then will you make your best contribution to all your brothers and sisters in this great nation. You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.

In the new world that is emerging for you, you are being called to live fully human and Christian lives, not to die of shame and sorrow. But you know that to fulfil your role you need a new heart. You will already feel courage rise up inside you when you listen to God speaking to you in these words of the Prophets:

"Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine. Do not be afraid, for I am with you".

And again: "I am going to... gather you together... and bring you home to your own land... I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you... You shall be my people and I will be your God".

14. With you I rejoice in the hope of God's gift of salvation, which has its beginnings here and now, and which also depends on how we behave towards each other, on what we put up with, on what we do, on how we honour God and love all people.

Dear Aboriginal people: the hour has come for you to take on new courage and new hope. You are called to remember the past, to be faithful to your worthy traditions, and to adapt your living culture whenever this is required by your own needs and those of your fellowman. Above all you are called to open your hearts ever more to the consoling, purifying and uplifting message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died so that we might all have life, and have it to the full.

Holy See: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia.html, accessed 4 July 2026.