

Homily

175th Anniversary of the Passionist Missionaries' Arrival on Stradbroke

Fr Kevin Dance CP

One hundred and seventy-five years ago a Swiss born Passionist Joseph Snell, along with Archbishop Polding, stepped ashore to begin the Catholic Church's first mission to Aboriginal people. Today we pause to remember. And to play around a little with words, can we think of *re-member as a way of putting* things together in a better harmony than they have known before.



Jesus came to show us that another world is possible and he invites us to share in that work of creating a new world. Snell, along with his brothers Luigi Pesciaroli, Raimundo Vaccari and Maurice Lenzioni, came from the other side of the world to bring Jesus' message to the people of this island. The message they brought was beautiful, their intentions were good, but their efforts were clumsy. They found another land, a different culture, other languages. There were no anthropology courses back then to help them understand how to do the mission of Jesus.

Six months after arriving, Raimundo Vaccari wrote to the Archbishop: *"The people show us great affection, this being quite the reverse of their treatment of other Europeans, for these, they say, do not act kindly towards them, but betray and deceive them, so they have lost all confidence in them. ..during the whole time we are here they have not shown by a single word or act they dislike us, but give us tokens of their delight when we tell them we will remain always with them...I am confident that all these people will be Christians,....but not till after 3 or 4 years"*. But they didn't remain with the people always and not everyone had embraced the Christian faith. Orders from Rome redirected them towards West Australia. The mission has been described as a failure. But we know that is not true. Generations of faith-filled leaders have been born from those first efforts. The presence of Auntie Rose Borey and Auntie Joan Hendricks are wonderful reminders of this. The

missionaries' dream stayed alive. The seed of Jesus' love was sown and, in God's good time, it has grown in the hearts and lives of the people of Stradbroke. Jesus came to show us a better way. Our shared story shouts out that justice is yet to be achieved. But our steps forward, though painful can bring new life.

Last year, wisdom distilled from 60,000 years on this continent spoke from Uluru. It was the fruit of deep listening. It called for a new relationship between indigenous peoples and their non-indigenous sisters and brothers. "Coming from all points of the Southern sky" this Message from the Heart called for a Makarrata Commission to guide a process of "agreement making and truth telling between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the government. Sadly, those in power again did not listen. But we cannot afford to lose heart!



May I offer a couple of signs of hope? I was privileged to be present at the first session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in May 2002 and to take part in 10 of the annual sessions of the Forum. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called it an '*historic moment*' and said "You have a home at the United Nations. It only took 57 years for indigenous peoples to be given a voice in the 'house of the people'.

My friend Peter Smith, Aboriginal elder from Mt. Isa with whom I shared 10 sessions of the Permanent Forum said: "*the manner in which the missionaries of the early days of colonization brought the message of Jesus to us left a lot to be desired, but the message itself, the gospel of Jesus was the most important thing that the colonizing power brought to us.*"



On 13 September 2007 I was in the UN General Assembly when *the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* came to a vote. It was overwhelmingly supported. Four countries voted against these rights – USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. By now they have each changed their position and support this important declaration. Change comes slowly, but it comes!



That wonderful Aboriginal woman Miriam Rose Ungenmerr reminds us of something truly important. She speaks of “a special quality of my people”- It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians. In our language this quality is called *dadirri*. It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. This is the gift Australia is thirsting for. It’s something like what you call contemplation.”

Pope John Paul said to you in Alice Springs:
"You're like a tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt; but inside the sap is still flowing. Under the ground the roots are still strong. You have endured the flames. You have the power to be re-born."



We Passionists are pleased to have shared, even if only for a short while, the journey of life with you. You brought us here and we were changed by the gift that you gave us. We rejoice in the good fruits that last till this day! But we don't just gather to be sentimental or to reminisce. We re-member in order to draw strength and direction for our shared future. Whatever injustices came with the first white men to this land, the truth now is we all share this land together. These are tough times, filled with fear and uncertainty...but they are also filled with hope. We cannot let the voices of division win! We must find a way to live together. If harm was done, we Passionists, through Father Tom, our Elder, ask forgiveness of you - children of the people of Stradbroke in 1843.

Now is God's time, a time for a new beginning; a time to re-member, a time of re-birth for all of us. Let us never forget Jesus says: "I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full."

Thank you for welcoming us here today and may the Lord of life bless us and help us to be a small sign of reconciliation and of hope. As you have been custodians of the past, may you also be our guides into a new future of hope.

In Christ Crucified
Tom cp
Provincial Superior