



THE MESSAGE STICK IMPORTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL CATHOLIC LITURGY

16th May 2009
CUSTODIANS GATHERING
AVILA COLLEGE MT WAVERLY

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For all Custodians, I believe the information in this presentation is critical to your understanding of the custodianship of the Message Stick; and the responsibility, for its caretaking and usage in Liturgy, before those to which you present it; i.e. to your parishioners.

In Aboriginal culture bullroarers, fire, and message sticks were used as a means of communication between distances and between Aboriginal communities.

Message sticks were made of solid round wood and came in various sizes, averaging 30cms, with various ochre colours, and markings using lines and dots. Some were painted others burned with symbols that conveyed messages; that communicated many different things: a festival, a gathering, a sacred ceremony, someone passing through that required permission, or the protocol of respect in advising travelling through, or establishing information, and conveying some message or story, or a call to gather for corroboree. Usually they were wrapped in cloth and bound with string for protection when travelling.

No matter what they were used for then, they remain traditional Aboriginal cultural and intellectual property. Copyright if you like.

In contemporary times, Aboriginal people's use of the message stick is not different: they are still used for various forms of communication such as festivals, gatherings, sacred ceremony, and conveying a message. A yabber stick, letter stick, message stick, is like a telegram, letter or email.

One example is the message sticks used to bring different peoples together for ceremony; such as the Commissioning of the National Message Sticks celebrated by Cardinal George Pell and members of the Bishops Committee for Aboriginal and Islander People, NATSICC and Aboriginal community members, at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney on 1 May 2005; which went to and relayed each state/and territory with hundreds of events and services; and in Victoria the Message Stick travelled for about sixteen months.

One such event on the 5th June 2005 was at St Patrick's Cathedral with the Aboriginal community and the Melbourne Catholic Commission for Justice Development and Peace, and Bishop Hilton Deakin graciously received the Message Stick handed to him by Vicki Walker. The Message Stick was a call to attend Alice Springs in 2006 for the celebratory NATSICC Assembly 'Dreaming from the Heart' and commemorative anniversary Mass of the (late) Pope John Paul's visit to Alice Springs in 1986.

Another example is the use of the message stick launched in April 2006, by government services who used the message stick to boost relationships between Centrelink and Medicare; and focused on Aboriginal services.

During 2007 and 2008 the WYD message stick from the Sydney Gaddigal and Aora people - which went around Australia with the Cross and Icon to over 2300 events, and seen by hundreds of thousands of people, in different schools, parishes, deaneries and Diocese – offered a message of peace and unity in Jesus, and invited the youth to celebrate their strong Catholic faith on a world scale in Sydney in July 2008 with the Pope and the hundreds from around the world who packed out Randwick and Barangaroo.

NSW Aboriginal Elder Matilda House gave Prime Minister Kevin Rudd a message stick on the 12 February 2008, for the Opening of Parliament the day before The Apology. (to Stolen Generations.)

On 28th April 2008 at Penola Catholic College, Broadmeadows, a message stick was gifted by the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne, to Archbishop Denis Hart, Premier John Brumby, and Minister James Merlino as part of the journey of the World Youth Day Cross, Icon and Message Stick tour leading to WYD. Those message sticks were a sacred and powerful symbol of reconciliation, forgiveness, love, hope and peace, given in the context that they be embraced with the responsibility of their respect and care, and for them to be shared, and as a commitment and way forward.

Recently, Mark Heiss, a Wiradjeri man from NSW went to Rome - along with Cardinal George Pell - with a new message stick which was gifted to Pope Benedict XVI as a thank you memento. It was said the message stick had symbolically protected him during his stay in Sydney.ⁱ

Hop onto the internet and you will see various sites termed Message Stick. It is also the name of a Television Program.

The message stick will continue to be used by Aboriginal people wherever there is a need to do so.

For me, the defining element of your Message Stick from all other message sticks is the use of it for Catholic Church business by Catholics using Catholic Traditions, i.e., the Message Stick is blessed, and it is used in the Liturgy.

So, let's uncover the meaning of the Message Stick in contemporary Aboriginal liturgy and how this occurred.

The first Aboriginal liturgical Mass was inspired by Pope Paul VI in 1970 when he visited Sydney and he felt that Aboriginal culture needed preserving.ⁱⁱ He also told Aboriginal people at that time, "that they possessed a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask {us} to renounce."ⁱⁱⁱ

By 1972 Pope Paul VI approved the very first Aboriginal Eucharistic Liturgy which was held on 24 February 1973 at Sidney Myer Music Bowl. The liturgy was an expression of Aboriginal culture mainly in dance and song at the time; and the use of the Didgeridoo. The then Archbishop Knox, Father Deakin, now retired Bishop Hilton Deakin was involved and at that time, he was hopeful that further authentic and relevant expressions of the liturgy for Aboriginal people would develop.

13 years later, Pope John Paul II visited Blatherskite Park in Alice Springs in the NT, where he met Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from all over the country. In his Address, he 'challenged all Australians to ensure the preservation of Indigenous cultures' ... and suggested we 'seek ways between Indigenous traditions and those of Jesus and all his people', because he felt

that 'Aboriginal culture was a sign of lasting genius and dignity and that it must not be allowed to disappear'.^{iv}

20 years later, at the opening ceremony of the National Liturgical Music Convention the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Message Stick was first used at a Mass to commemorate and celebrate that 1973 mass; which was held on the banks of the Yarra River on 18th April 1993. The Message Stick was prepared with symbols representing Aboriginal Catholic Communities, and was carried by (the late) Agnes Palmer of the Arrente people from Santa Teresa in the NT. This Message Stick had been carried in liturgy throughout remote NT Aboriginal Communities. Bishop Ray Benjamin of Townsville, who was the Australian Catholic Bishops Committee Chairperson on Aboriginal issues, celebrated the Mass. The Archbishop, Father Deakin, had been very keen to explore ways in which Aboriginal people could make a contribution to the Catholic Church. And, at that mass, it occurred. The Message Stick was carried during the Gospel procession, along with the Book of the Gospels. It was a powerful symbolic gesture manifesting the willingness of both cultures to accept the Word.

There were other traditional Aboriginal symbols used during the Liturgy including a water bowl for the blessing; and this Medallion was a commemorative piece for the day. On one side it reads "Second National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Mass", and on the other, is a hand holding the Message Stick. This has always been the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne logo.

After the Mass, it was presented by the Elders to the Archdiocese of Melbourne. The ACMM remained custodians until it was 'joyfully received' some 5 years later; when it was blessed and installed into the south transept and mounted on the wall inside St Patrick's Cathedral by the then Most Reverend Archbishop of Melbourne, now Cardinal, George Pell on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday on 5th July 1998. On this day, Agnes Palmer returned to Melbourne and carried it along side Vicki Walker (now Vicki Clark) into the Cathedral.

This was a joyous occasion which strengthened the culture of both the giver and the receiver. It was a huge step in bridging the gap between what is largely a Western European culture of the Catholic Church and the traditional cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.^v

Three years after that, Pope John Paul II in 2001 wrote in his message to the Church in Oceania after the Synod in Rome that "it is the Church's task to help Indigenous cultures preserve their identity and maintain their traditions."

30 years later, in 2003 Aboriginal Liturgy and the Message Stick were captured in the Journal of the Melbourne Diocesan Historical Commission to convey to the Catholic Community the importance of Aboriginal signs and symbols in liturgy.

This Message Stick remains at St Patrick's, in a sacred place at the request of Aboriginal Elders; and at that time it was felt to be "a sign of hope and a continuing reminder of the spirit of Aboriginal Ancestors".^{vi} Archbishop Denis Hart's view is that "the Message Stick is at St Patrick's to acknowledge the wrongs of the past and to highlight the special place that Aboriginal people occupy in the Church".^{vii} And it was also felt that it was a powerful way for peoples of different cultures to come to worship the Creator. Elder, Betty Pike has referred to the Message Stick as telling "...the story of the Two Ways".^{viii} It was also felt that "... the Message Stick will continue to touch and heal the hearts of all who hear and believe the message of its story. It will become a legendary authentic Australian icon. The Church by accepting it is taking an important step forward with Aboriginal people on a journey of reconciliation."^{ix}

In 2006, the Message Stick was referred to in the Australian Catholic Bishops', Social Justice Sunday Statement, that the message stick carries "an invitation to all of us to celebrate the message

of hope and reconciliation in our local communities. They also carry with them the call to reflect on the message delivered by (the late) Pope John Paul II and to evaluate the extent to which we have responded to that message over the past 20 years".^x

So the varying views on the meaning of the message stick bring me to your Message Stick in your parish or school community. Just what does it mean? What have you said that it means? What do people think that it means? How has the meaning evolved? Hopefully today is the quintessential day to receive the same message at the same time to provide some exacting clarity.

Initially Aboriginal people feared they would have to denounce their Aboriginality to be Christian. Historically Aboriginal people were seen as heathen and in need of missionising and Christianising. Yet we have always been deeply religious. So Aboriginal Catholics hearing that we could be Catholic and be Aboriginal and practice both traditions was a whole new and joyous corroboree! And embrace the Catholic Church with all our signs and symbols to share in the liturgical celebration - we did.

So much so, that we have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday celebrated by every Parish around the country using Aboriginal signs and symbols, prayer and song, in the liturgy.

And, the message stick is in every state and territory. It is in over 300 parishes/schools in Victoria. It would be quite difficult to arrange for 1 message stick to be received by parish on demand; and it is best used as often as possible and when required. So that really means having one in your own parish or school. For me it is huge, that this Aboriginal tradition has been embraced so enthusiastically by many Australians, and advocated strongly by growing numbers. To experience and be part of this act of faith and reconciliation is simply amazing. Aboriginal people are proud. Non-Aboriginal people are honoured. There is dialogue between cultures, a sharing, an entwining of traditions that evoke the same message and spirit among church congregations.

Having said that, I'm sure you are conscious; that culture is not static it evolves just as the church has with Vatican II. And too, if you whisper a message in someone's ear by the time it gets to the last person in line, that message has changed. These things are often beyond our control, but it is something to be very aware of.

The Message Stick in contemporary Aboriginal Catholic Liturgy is our way of continuing all that is culturally precious to us, in order to take on the Gospel of Jesus. This was supported and advocated strongly by Pope John Paul II^{xi} and by Pope Paul VI.

The wood is cut and fashioned by Catholics, the artwork by Aboriginal Catholics, the symbols carefully selected from the message of the Gospel in Aboriginal interpretation, and with full Catholic meaning and intent. The Cross: is a symbol of God's love and promise to us, protection, strong faith, and devotion. The Gum Leaves: are used in traditional Aboriginal Ceremony, a vine bearing seeds of love, hope, justice and clinging to the word; we are equal to nature, we cling to the word; manna gum and food. The Coolamon: is used for Aboriginal food preparation and gathering, holding and cradling the baby, baptism and waiting for birth. Holy host: Eucharist, reconciliation and sharing. Bunjil: the eagle; creator, and good spirit of Victoria, love, strength and protection. The Holy Spirit: is guidance, gifts, fruits, unity, peace, fire (campfire) and presence in this land. The Southern Cross Stars: guidance, journeying, travel, paschal mystery, birth, death and resurrection. Each Message Stick is to be cared for, and placed in a sacred place when not in use; preferably wrapped in cloth. The Message Stick cannot be used for any other purpose. It is not an idol nor ornament to be admired or adored, but the Living Word to be upheld. The Message Stick is blessed before use and only for use in the Catholic Church for the liturgy; as an expression of the message of the Gospel of Jesus; and may be used ecumenically.

I hope this has provided some background, insight, memory and clarity for you; and hopefully prove useful in the workshops today. God Bless and have a fantastic day.

Research, References, Acronyms and Endnotes

Footprints; Journal of the Melbourne Diocesan Historical Commission, Volume 20, No 2, December 2003.

St Patrick's Cathedral and ACMM brochure; designed and produced by Catholic Communications Melbourne.

Betty Pike, 'Australian Story: A New Australian Dreaming in Kerker 'Time'', NATSIEC, 2007.

Social Justice Statement 2006; Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, NSW.

The Address given by His Holiness Pope John Paul II (the late); at the Meeting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at Blatherskite Park, Alice Springs, Northern Territory on 29 November 1986.

ACMM = Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne

VACC = Victorian Aboriginal Catholic Council

NATSICC = National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

NATSIEC = National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission

WYD = World Youth Day

ⁱ News Article by Vincent Morello, in ninemsn news, Monday April 8 2009.

ⁱⁱ Page 33, Footprints; Journal of the Melbourne Diocesan Historical Commission Volume 20, No 2, December 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Social Justice Statement 2006.

^{iv} ibid

^v ibid

^{vi} Footprints; Journal of the Melbourne Diocesan Historical Commission Volume 20, No 2, December 2003.

^{vii} St Patrick's Cathedral and ACMM Brochure, designed and produced by Catholic Communications Melbourne.

^{viii} Betty Pike, 'Australian Story: A New Australian Dreaming in Kerker 'Time'', NATSIEC, 2007.

^{ix} loc cit; vii

^x Social Justice Statement 2006.

^{xi} ibid

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This paper was prepared by Melissa Brickell for the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne and Catholics for Australian Reconciliation (CFAR); of which she is a member. As a representative Member for the ACMM, Melissa is a member on the Victorian Aboriginal Catholic Council, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission. Melissa is also representative on other community committees. Melissa is a Yorta Yorta Wiradjeri descendant.

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