

Archbishop Carroll
Opening of Academic House
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One of the advantages of a retired life is the opportunity to take time out for remembering and reflecting. I have found myself doing just that especially in anticipation of these few special days in the developing life of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. In particular I found myself recalling a memorable event that was not strictly an initiative of the Centre but which, I believe was perfectly in accord with its vision and aspirations. I refer to the Pilgrimage to the Heart that was the main ecumenical activity of the National Council of Churches for the Jubilee Year of 2000 and which set out from here on the journey to Uluru.

May I share a little of my reflection for I think it may serve as a reminder of the inspiring vision of the Centre and allow a review of how it is measuring up to its founding hopes and stated purposes.

The Pilgrimage was to mark the 2000th.year of the birth of Christ and the beginning of the Christian pilgrimage through time that will continue until Christ comes again and all things are restored in him. As Christ was the central focus of the pilgrimage so he is the very heart of this Centre. “For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ”. Many of you will remember the soul-searching discussions whether the Centre should be unashamedly Christian or perhaps some kind of interfaith or broadly-based spiritual centre. The conviction and decision were unequivocal that this was to be a Christian centre that would, however, be inclusive in its spirit of hospitality, open in its arms of welcome and genuine in its commitment to dialogue.

I believe that that decision has already been vindicated even in the short history of the Centre. I also believe that the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ needs to be constantly and strongly re-affirmed as new challenges arise in relationships with the plurality of faiths and diversity of cultures that are the hallmark of the Australian society which the Centre is committed to listen to with humility, critique with respect, dialogue with integrity and serve with love. In our Gospel reading Jesus tells us that the wise man will build his house on rock . He is that Rock; he is the Rock on which this Centre is built and we must at all times

listen to his words and act on them – Jesus makes it very clear that lip service is not enough but only those who do the will of his Father will be part of the reign of God. The splendid cross that stands on the centre of this site witnesses to this conviction of faith.

The Pilgrimage to the Heart was undertaken as an initiative of the National Council of Churches of Australia. Heads of Churches were invited to travel together by bus from Canberra to Uluru, the geographical and symbolic centre or heart of Australia. It is good that this Centre has a certain independence and free-standing status in respect of the Churches both individually and collectively. None the less its links with the Churches need to be strong and their goodwill, cooperation and support are essential for its credibility and effectiveness. The envisaged development of the ecumenical building and closer contact with the National Council and other churches at the national level should strengthen and enrich these relationships

The Pilgrimage to the Heart was a pilgrimage of reconciliation with a threefold focus –between the Christian churches, the many cultures of Australia and perhaps principally between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The latter theme was dramatically emphasized at the sending-off ceremony. We gathered around the open-air fireplace that is not only symbolic of the Tent of Meeting but that resonates powerfully with indigenous culture. Local Indigenous Elders then purified us for our journey with the traditional smoking ceremony. Several of the pilgrims were themselves aborigines and their presence and active participation not only enriched the experience but added considerably to its credibility.

On the way we met and celebrated with the local communities in Narrandera, Wilcannia, Cobar, Broken Hill, Peterborough, Port Augusta, Coober Pedy and finally Uluru. On each occasion the local Aborigine community was strongly represented and, at least in some cases, this was a novelty, albeit a very welcome one. At Uluru itself we celebrated Pentecost Sunday with the Mutijulu people - a wonderful symbol of unity on the feast of the universal unity that can only be brought about by the Spirit of God. Of course not all was perfect and there were lessons to be learnt, for example, the small degree of participation accorded to the Mutijulu people in the preparation and conduct of the prayer service.

From its very envisioning and inception this Centre has sought to do justice to the spiritual aspirations of Australia's indigenous peoples and to be a

place of reconciliation. The mural wall with its aboriginal artistic representation of the Holy Spirit of reconciliation and communion must continue to challenge and empower the Centre to be true to its foundational commitment to the original inhabitants and owners of the land

The Pilgrimage to the Heart aimed to strengthen the ties between the many cultural groups that make up Australia. This still remains a challenge for our country and this Centre, especially in light of heightened ethnic and religious tensions and the emergence of an aggressive rather than an inclusive nationalism. The pilgrimage did not give explicit attention to what is now an even more obvious priority for the country, the Church and the Centre – inter-faith relationships and dialogue. This area raises many fundamental questions for Christians and poses a massive challenge for this Centre in particular. It is no arena for the faint-hearted but the Centre is ideally placed to take up the challenge. Its efforts so far in this regard give us confidence that it will be a significant player in this area, an area in which Australia is well placed to make a worthwhile contribution even at the international level.

I have already spoken something of the third focus of the Pilgrimage to the Heart, that of Christian unity. Clearly that is and must remain central to the life and work of this Centre.

Heads of Churches found the opportunity to pray together and prayer must always be at the heart of all forms of ecumenism and all the activities of this Centre. We had plenty of time on the bus for informal dialogue but more importantly to build relationships that could grow into personal friendships. Its prime location and the provision of buildings and facilities such as we dedicate today, will allow the Centre to develop both formal and informal dialogue and help build the mutual trust that allows all to speak the truth in love. But the Heads of the Churches were not the only pilgrims – each Church was also represented by a young person. This injection of youth brought a whole new dimension. Ecumenism is not only about reconciling past conflicts and divisions but a growing into a new and dynamic unity that realizes the prayer of Jesus that all should be one. For this the Church needs the energy and enthusiasm of young disciples and it has been good to see the increasing efforts being made by the Centre to involve the younger generation. This must continue to be a vital dimension to the Centre's thinking and activities.

One of the pleasing aspects of the bus pilgrimage was the enthusiasm with which the local communities prepared for our visit and celebrated our coming. We sensed that in a number of places the Churches had found a greater and sometimes needed motivation to come together. As I mentioned before, in some towns bridges were built between the Aborigines and the wider community. Civic leaders also came to welcome us and perhaps were reminded of the power of the Christian Gospel to reconcile and unite and of the contribution the Churches make to the local community. We heard pupils of State and Catholic schools singing together for the first time; in Cobar a disabled child in a wheel-chair was at the centre of a school's song and dance act. Many in the local communities commented on the good effects of the visit that encouraged them to come together and experience reconciliation and community spirit. I remember saying that we should have continued the pilgrimage for the rest of the Jubilee year so as to share that vision and unity throughout the length and breadth of Australia. As all involved with the Centre know it is no easy task to raise awareness of its existence and potential power for good throughout the nation. "It's just another Canberra thing", is a very usual reaction even by those who should know better. This highlights the need for more imaginative efforts to spread the good news of the Centre so that gradually it will be able to fulfill its vision of providing a place for the spirit at the heart of the nation. Perhaps we can continue to dream, pray and work for the day when this Centre will be recognized as a sacred place at the heart of the nation where the spiritual journey of Australia and Australians will be honoured, enriched and celebrated. As Solomon humbly rejoiced to see the dedication of his temple to God, we look forward to the day when there will be a Great Space to celebrate national events both tragic and joyful.

The journey to Uluru was a journey in the spirit of a sacred pilgrimage through the awe-inspiringly beautiful but fragile landscape of outback Australia. The pilgrim way is a defining physical feature of this Centre but it also speaks volumes of its identity and self-understanding. The way, gradually being embellished by shelters and evocative features, speaks of prayer and reflection, of connections with history and sacred traditions and of contemporary engagement with significant elements in the Australian way of life. The way encloses the land dedicated to native grasses, symbolic of a responsible stewardship of God's creation that has now, in the light of today's understanding of environmental factors and climate change, taken on the urgency of concern for the very future of our planet and all its inhabitants.

Today marks a significant step forward in the Centre's own pilgrim journey. We pray for God's blessing on this building and the future of the Centre "that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house". May the presence of the living Christ be palpably felt in this holy place, engendering a dynamic, living faith that cherishes its heritage but constantly renews its interaction with Australian society and the wider world. May the Holy Spirit guide each step along the way with prophetic wisdom, hope-inspired courage and all embracing love.

+ Francis P. Carroll
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