

Today marks the last day of NAIDOC WEEK with its theme, "Always Was, Always Will be." Thus it seems appropriate to revisit Pope Saint John Paul 11's address of 29th November 1986 to a gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders which, like this year's NADOC theme, looked to the past and future of Australia's First Nations people.

After greeting the assembly at Blatherskite Park, Alice Springs, Pope Saint John Paul 11 continued, "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." The Holy Father linked the presence of the Holy Spirit to the land and, in particular, to the bush: "Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of the human being's relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves [and] the silence of the Bush taught you a quietness of soul that put you in touch with the world of God's Spirit."

The pontiff then noted culture's role in preparing the indigenous people for receiving the Gospel: "The achievements of your culture are indications of human strivings. And in these strivings you showed a dignity open to the great truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." He continued, "The Gospel esteems and embraces all cultures. It supports them in everything human and, when necessary, it purifies them. The Gospel uplifts and enriches cultures with the revealed message of a loving and merciful God."

John Paul 11 developed this point: "That Gospel now invites you to become, through and through, Aboriginal Christians." He reflected that, in this way, "the old ways can draw new life and strength from the Gospel" for "the message of Jesus Christ can reinforce all your positive values and add many others, which only the Gospel in its originality proposes."

The Holy Father concluded by calling on indigenous Australians to be creatively faithful to their traditions, while above all else, remaining ever more open "to the consoling, purifying and uplifting message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died so that we might all have life to the full."

Saint John Paul 11's Alice Springs address continues to remind us of our solidarity in Christ that motivates our commitment to work for reconciliation with, and justice for, the First Nations people of Australia.

Fr David Willis op