

Deacons can promote justice

Deacon Nick Kerr speaks to Vicki Clark

DEACONS can do a lot to promote justice for Aboriginal people, according to Vicki Clark. Vicki has just stepped down after 25 years as coordinator, Aboriginal Catholic Ministry (ACM) Victoria. I spoke to her on her last day at the ACM centre at Thornbury, Victoria.

Vicki will be one of the speakers at the NAD conference in Melbourne.

We may not realise it, but our churches show a good deal about our attitudes towards justice for Indigenous people. Vicki threw out some challenges to me.

“Does your Cathedral fly the Aboriginal flag?” she asked.

(It was a particularly pertinent question. Harold Thomas designed the Aboriginal flag on a table in the rectory at St John’s Anglican Church, Halifax Street, Adelaide, one of our sister churches. Harold and I, as very young men, campaigned together during the 1967 Aboriginal Rights Referendum. The Aboriginal flag was first flown in Victoria Square, on National Aborigines’ Day, 12 July 1971. Victoria Square is also known as Tarndanyangga. It was, and still is, an important meeting place for Indigenous people. Our cathedral is on a corner opening onto Victoria Square and Wakefield Street. The Aboriginal flag now flies permanently in the square beside the Australian flag, just west of the cathedral.)

“Does the priest or commentator acknowledge country at Mass – not just on special occasions but at every Mass?” Vicki asked. “Why not at every Mass? Do you acknowledge country in your newsletter, on your website?”

“Why can’t the churches do that? Why? That’s a role the deacons can play. They can push for that.”

I said that should be a fairly simple task.

“It’s not simple,” Vicki said. “It’s an uphill battle. Richard Franklin, the famous Aboriginal playwright and musician, always says that, when he sees an Aboriginal flag flying anywhere, he knows there’s been a battle there and the war’s been won by us mob. There’s been discussion, there’s been talk, there’s been a decision made and action taken. Flags don’t just go up because someone thinks it’s a good idea.

“If their churches haven’t got a flag, outside or inside the church, the deacons need to have a fight and get one up. These are simple, symbolic things.”

Vicki said she had seen incredible changes in her time at the ACM. “One of the great things I’ve seen in our parishes in particular is the use of Aboriginal artefacts as symbols in the church. I’ve seen those symbols come alive. Parishes and parishioners have become custodians of artefacts our people have been carrying for thousands of years.

“The artefacts are message sticks. We have close to 400 of them around Australia. Some are overseas as well. The message stick is actually used during the Gospel. Traditionally the message stick was a message – an invitation, a celebration, law business and so on. The Gospel is the message from the Word, so the message stick is held up during the reading of the Gospel. It’s carried in procession with the Gospel book as well. “

“Every cathedral in Victoria has a message stick. They were made here in Victoria by an Aboriginal artist and many schools and churches have them. They carry a message of reconciliation, forgiveness, love, hope. What you read in the Gospel is the journey of Jesus and the message of Jesus. Our message stick carries the same message.

“Every state and territory was given a message stick for the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II’s visit.”



Sherry Balcombe, left, with NAD conference speaker, Vicki Clark. Sherry is new coordinator, Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Victoria.

Pope St John Paul II had told Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders: "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 gladly received by others"(Alice Springs, 29 November 1986).

Vicki said that a part of accepting that contribution is using the approved Aboriginal liturgy far more widely than it is.

"The church has to address the whole question of inculturation," she said. "It has to be addressed, especially by priests, deacons and religious and, of course, bishops as well. Inculturation has to come from us. It can't be forced onto people. You fellas can't say, 'We want to do it blackfella way today.' We have to say, 'We want to do it our way.' That's inculturation. That's where it starts. We've been asking for that since Pope John Paul's visit in 1986 – the right to express ourselves as Aboriginal people in the Catholic Church and for you fellas to joyfully receive our contribution.

"Joyfully receiving that contribution isn't happening very easily. It isn't happening at all. That's the challenge. We're working to reclaim and restore what our ancestors had in the way of ceremony and ritual. The assimilation that took place meant the loss of many ceremonies and rituals.

"This would involve special celebrations in the liturgical calendar, whether it's Advent, Pentecost, Good Friday and the Stations of the Cross. We have the Aboriginal Our Father, the Aboriginal Eucharistic Prayer, the Aboriginal Lamb of God, the Aboriginal blessing. They've been developed right across Aboriginal Australia.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday is on the list of Sundays to be observed nationally. The liturgy is prepared by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council office.

"I'd love to know how many parishes use that liturgy on that day.

"The saddest thing for me, the biggest disappointment, is that we can't get the priest or the commentator in all our churches to acknowledge country.

"When we're talking about the symbols like acknowledging country and flying the Aboriginal flag we're really talking about racism. Most people think we don't have a rightful place in the Church. We should be just like every white person in the Church. We have Aboriginal Catholic ministries in every state. There are Aboriginal Catholics who are passionate about this in every state. They want to contribute their way of being Catholic to the Church, with their Aboriginal symbols and prayers.

"It's disheartening to an Aboriginal person to come up against this. I'd love to see the bishops push for an Aboriginal Sunday so that every church has an Aboriginal Mass, and include the Aboriginal prayers. They're all ready. They're all approved. It's only once a year."

There are real questions of justice, too.

"If we want to talk about justice, I want to know about the land that's been gifted – gifted – to the Church for the benefit of Aboriginal people. How much benefit Aboriginal people are getting from that land today? The Church should be leading that conversation.

"How many Aboriginal people are employed by the Catholic Church in Australia? I know of only two in Victoria. The Catholic Church is one of the biggest employers in Australia.

"This is a justice issue. This is real stuff. This is what liberates Aboriginal people.

"The Church has to be careful it doesn't speak with tokenism or hypocrisy. The Church is good at talk but it has to be careful about its relationship with Aboriginal people. The Church can't speak for us if it hasn't got a good relationship with us. There's been a lot of talk, a lot of publications. But why am I still saying the same things that I could have been saying 25 years ago?"

The thing that makes Vicki saddest of all happens at Mass.

"When it comes to the Sign of Peace, people refuse to shake the hands of Aboriginal people. These are good Catholics, sitting in those pews. I've had it happen to me, where I've been ignored. Why don't they want to shake the hands of a blackfella? What's going on?"