



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Coming Home

In the new morning light the group of Aborigines was sitting still and silent, like meditators, in a circle on the dry river bed. Mick, the parish priest who was showing me the town slowed down and greeted them. His words and kind smile traveled slowly across the dust towards them; their response came back even more slowly through their alcoholic haze.

Mount Isa is a remote mining town in Northern Queensland, in the diocese of Townsville which is about the size of Britain. The outback stretches endlessly in every direction. I had heard of it years ago because, coincidentally, our last UK coordinator was born there. The night before I had spoken in Fr Mick Lowcock's parish and met the Aboriginal Australian who had represented his people in the UN conference on Indigenous Peoples, an articulate and urbane man as well as Amos, a friendly but rougher diamond. Today I was to speak to a hundred Catholic teachers in this part of the diocese which has been participating for two years in the "Coming Home" program of the Catholic Education Office, introducing meditation to children in all grades. The seminar was being held in the Irish Club, something between a leisure centre, pub and casino. I entered with Bishop Michael Putney, who is also co-chair of the Catholic–Methodist dialogue for the Holy See. As we walked past lines of "pokie" machines, one-armed bandits, into the meeting room I remarked with pride that this was real Catholicism: speaking on contemplation in an Irish casino deep in the Australian bush.

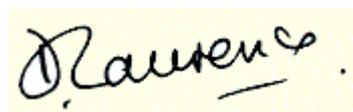
The connection is with the land. At every talk we were welcomed to the land we were on by a representative of its Traditional Owners and it was always more than a politically correct gesture. Many Australians have now awakened to themselves as newcomers to the continent and they grieve at the irreparable damage done to the original peoples over the past two centuries. In earlier times white people could get a police permit to shoot Aborigines and not much would happen if they neglected to get it. There are still good leaders among them, supported by people like Fr Mick and Bishop Putney, but there are others who are almost a lost human tribe struggling to transmit their ancient wisdom. The Church has been part of this awakening to historical responsibility and it has been blessed by the broken people it is now caring for. From them Christians are learning of *dadirri*, the contemplative spirituality of a people with an ancestral memory of 40,000 years. The alcoholics on the river bed might not

be benefiting from it but it is being transmitted by some of their elders to whites whom they recognise as capable of listening to and understanding the stories that contain their wisdom. Dadirri is a deep silent, non-questioning listening to the land and its inhabitants. It takes time and attention. One Catholic meditating teacher had been invited to undergo initiation into the tribe because after observing him a long time they saw in him both the ability to understand their knowledge and the discretion to protect their secrets.

As they see the constant wounding of their 'guardians' the Aborigines understand what is happening. Like most of us they feel helpless as the madness continues, the rains fail, the ice caps melt and the deforested lands flood. But they sit with astonishing lack of bitterness and share their redemptive wisdom with those who take care to listen. One Christian Aborigine told me after a talk on meditation that her faith had taught her that what her people had been listening to these many millennia was the Word of God sounding at the heart of creation.

Two days later, beaming and mitred, Bishop Putney and the Archbishop of Brisbane, the Apostolic Nuncio to Australia and a long line of priests waited patiently outside before entering the beautiful newly refurbished cathedral of Townsville. The Indigenous people in traditional undress were 'smoking' the building readying it for re-consecration. It was a moving moment as the Traditional Owners welcomed the newcomers who, for all their past sins, had shared the faith of Christ with them. In Sydney people might think they are closer to the centre of power and fashion than Townsville. But that evening through the beautiful cathedral liturgy I thought the centre of the world is where you can be in dadirri enough to know that the centre is where God is.

I remembered a young meditator who had recently told me that at the top of the list of thirty things he wanted to do before he died was: 'to be a local'. It seemed a sadly poignant ambition and yet a profound intuition. If enough felt it it might connect the local alcoholics on the dry river bed to the deracinated city dwellers around the world. Perhaps in remote parish churches and renewed cathedrals we can learn how to be locals on this earth and to be local wherever we go, before we even forget what 'being a local' means.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Laurence Freeman, OSB

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