

Aboriginal Spirituality



Catholic
Schools
NSW

A support document for NSW Catholic Schools

Aboriginal Spirituality
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This Aboriginal Spirituality document has been made possible through the efforts and contributions of the Catholic Schools NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy Reference Group and many other Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal peoples.

Artist Statement

Title: "Colours of Country"



This series depicts a contemporary interpretation of land. It explores the movement, essence and the colours featured in Gamilaroi Country.

~ Lakkari Pitt



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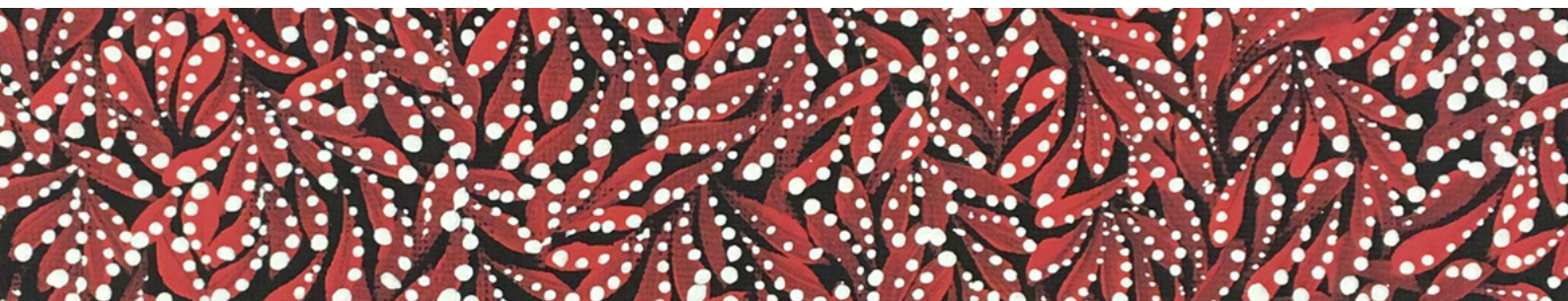
Purpose

Catholic Schools NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reference Group has produced this document as a resource to support current practice and guide strategic planning for the Faith formation of adults in NSW Catholic schools to give an Aboriginal world view.

The purpose of this document is to model Aboriginal Spirituality through a Catholic lens, primarily to leaders and staff, secondarily for parents and carers and finally for other members of school communities in Catholic schools across NSW. Subsequently, individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can find themselves in this document as it presents understandings that are fundamental to the formation of all individuals and communities.

The Catholic Church is committed to the development of Aboriginal expressions of theology and spirituality. The Catholic Church also aims to promote and support a greater understanding of Aboriginal peoples, cultures and social justice issues amongst the wider community.

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How to Use This Resource

The Aboriginal Spirituality document is an education resource designed to help school staff engage in meaningful ways with Aboriginal Spirituality to enrich the faith and cultural life of NSW Catholic schools. By drawing on the voices of our Aboriginal and non Aboriginal community who share their wisdom and insights into their own personal Spiritual journey, teachers can adapt the similarities of the stories contained in the Bible with traditional Aboriginal teaching and stories.

Catholic Schools NSW encourages discussion with Aboriginal members of the local community to further develop ways in which Traditional rituals and symbols can be used to enrich understanding and experience of spirituality and faith formation within the school context. When embedding Aboriginal Spirituality, it is important that you do not rely solely on texts. Localising Aboriginal Spirituality will have more meaning for students and at the same time demonstrate the diversity of experiences of Aboriginal people and communities throughout NSW.

There are Aboriginal Catholic Ministries in every State and Territory of Australia. These services and support resources, including Church documents, can assist in incorporating the gifts of Aboriginal culture, rituals and symbols and the liturgy and the life of the Church into physical school systems.

To make an enquiry or for more information about this resource, please contact Catholic Schools NSW (email: csnsw@csnsw.catholic.edu.au). School staff can also use the contact lists provided by each of the 11 Dioceses for additional information and support.

Teaching resources:

Creative Spirits: <https://www.creativespirits.info/>

NATSIICC Resource Hub: <http://www.natsicc.org.au/resource-hub.html>

[Aunty Ally Golding](#)



What is Aboriginal Spirituality?

All humans are spiritual beings with an innate desire to make meaning of the big questions of life. Our spirituality is about searching for meaning in life and reflecting on how we are in relationship with God, with other people, with the world around us, and with ourselves. Parker J. Palmer defines spirituality as "...the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos..." (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/evoking-the-spirit/>). In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been on this spiritual quest for over 65,000 years.

The word spirituality comes from the Latin word "spirare" which means to "breathe life into" and this meaning has particular resonance when exploring Aboriginal spirituality, which stems from a belief that the spirit of life is the result of a power greater than ourselves. When we speak about Aboriginal spirituality it is important to note that there is not one common expression of this lived experience that can be found across Australia. Prior to 1788 our great south land housed hundreds of language and cultural groups who each had their own creation stories and spirituality so there is incredible diversity in the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have and continue to express their spirituality.

However, within this diversity, there are some commonalities in Aboriginal spirituality that can be identified. Aboriginal spirituality...

- acknowledges a Creator Spirit that was at the beginning of the Dreaming and is at the heart of all life,
- recognises that Aboriginal people are spiritual people who are aware of the spiritual reality of the land and of their own lives and that land, language and identity are fundamental to knowing who you are, where you come from and what your place is;
- involves the land and connection to country which demands a responsibility to care for and live in harmony with the land;



- includes totemic relationships with birds, plants and animals that connect people to both the physical and the spiritual world, underpinning a reciprocal obligation to care for others and for the natural environment;
- celebrates the sharing of stories and the passing down of stories from generation to generation.

What is not Aboriginal spirituality?

Many texts and books use 'Aboriginal religion' when addressing Aboriginal spirituality. But these two terms should not be confused:

Spiritual "relates to people's deepest thoughts and beliefs, rather than to their bodies and physical surroundings".

Religious is "something that [...] is about or connected with religion", i.e. "the belief in a God or Gods and the activities that are connected with this belief, such as prayer or worship in a church or temple".

Hence spirituality is the foundation of religion, the deeper layer of any religious practice and expression.

Why should I embed Aboriginal Spirituality?

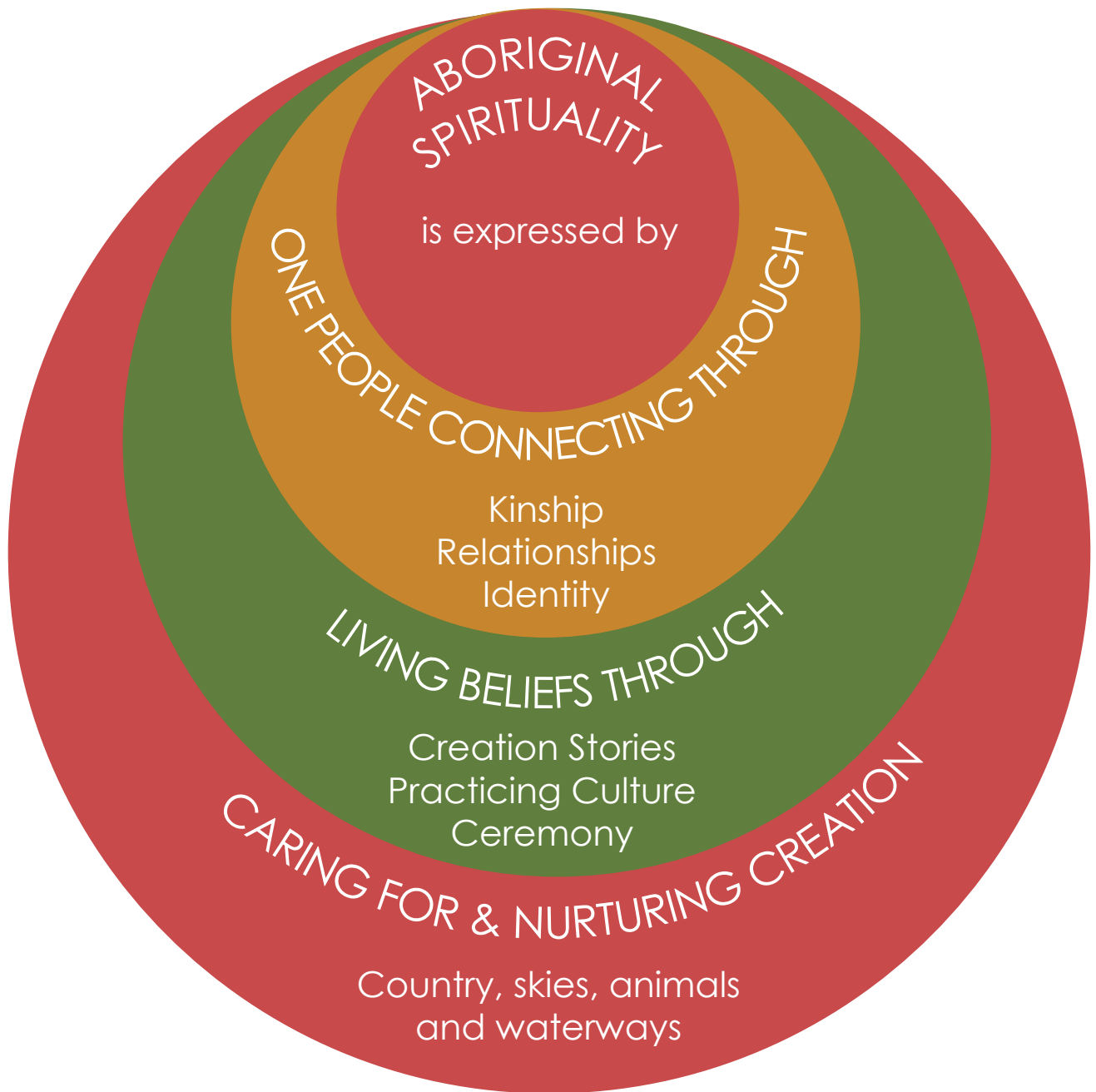
Spirituality is a broad concept with room for many perspectives. People experience and express their spirituality for different reasons and in different ways.

Catholicism does not strive to take the place of Traditional Culture, rather it harbours a deep desire to be enriched by the gifts that the first Australians can bring. As Catholic educators it is imperative for us to acknowledge Aboriginal Spirituality and recognise the rich cultural expertise and teachings of Aboriginal peoples in the teaching of our Catholic faith.

Stories throughout the Bible serve to teach about sharing and caring for each other and the land. It also serves to provide moral guidance. Similarly, traditional Aboriginal culture uses stories to serve the same purpose. Today, whilst there is still an acknowledgement of Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) spiritual beliefs, there is little understanding of these beliefs or how they impact on lifestyles and behaviours. We can commit to celebrating and promoting awareness of Aboriginal culture by placing God's teachings into Aboriginal cultural context. Once these connections are made, the Gospel is perfectly relevant and at the centre of the faith systems of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Catholics.



This diagram expresses a framework for Aboriginal Spirituality drawing from a holistic approach to develop formation or identity of self, family and community.



A Call to Act ...

Pope Saint John Paul II's teachings

Pope John Paul II's visit to Australia in 1986 and his address to Aboriginal people was pivotal in the journey of Aboriginal Catholics.

'Take heart from the fact that many of your languages are still spoken and that you still possess your ancient culture. You have kept your sense of brotherhood. If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush-fire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn. The time for this rebirth is now!'

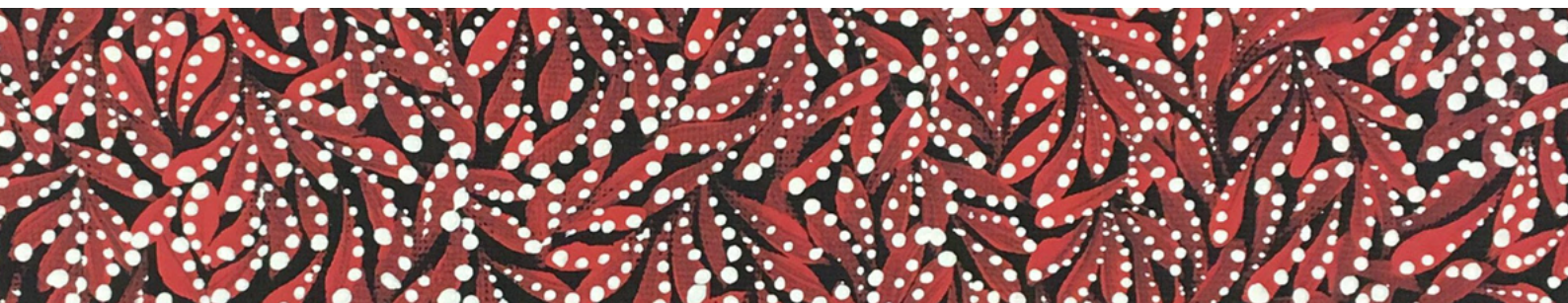
Pope John Paul II reminds us ...

"Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear. Do not think that your gifts are worth so little that you should no longer bother to maintain them. Share them with each other and teach them to your children. Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages, must never be lost."

Pope Francis in Laudato Si':

"It is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values".

Pope Francis, Laudato Si', 2015, 146.





Community Voices

The following pages include personal stories that engage with Aboriginal Spirituality which enables the reader to gain understanding through another lens. A powerful part of hearing these stories is making your own meaning as a part of your formation and understanding of Aboriginal Spirituality in action.



Aunty Elsie Heiss



Aunty Elsie Heiss is a strong Wiradjuri woman and a highly respected Aboriginal elder. Aunty Elsie is a founding member of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Sydney, and worked at The Reconciliation Church, La Perouse from 1998 until retiring in 2012, and is still assisting the ACM in many ways. Aunty Elsie was selected to go to Rome by Cardinal Clancy at 61 years of age. She was recognised for her contributions to the life of the Church and the community with Papal honours.

We Aboriginal people know the great spirit has always been with us.

In my early days growing up on Wiradjuri lands, my spiritual connection to mother earth was strong, and so was my involvement with my kinship and extended families. Spirituality is the basis of our connection to land, identity, culture and kinship. It is difficult to explain spirituality in just words as it comes from within us and is the very fibre that weaves our existence on this earth.

Embracing Catholicism and spirituality in my life has been easy for me. My father and mother were both Catholic and spiritual people.

The passing down of stories strengthens our heritage and history. We Aboriginal people take pride in holding on to our beliefs and stories. It connects us to mother earth and to each other.

**For the Son of Man came not to be
served but to serve, and to give his life
as a ransom for many**

(Mark 10:45 New Revised Standard Version)



The Sydney office of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry (ACM) began in Erskineville in early 1989 with Frank Fletcher MSC and Mum Shirl. The Aboriginal Catholics felt a strong need to start a ministry in the Sydney Archdiocese, to enable them to participate and contribute fully in the Catholic Church.

"We practised Culture fully. We set up the Aboriginal Culture in the church. People said to us we don't know what these whitefullas are doing. We sit, we stand, and we sit. We don't know what's happening. That's why we sit at the back of the church." I said "No we are going to sit you up the front of the church and we are going to make this the Aboriginal Church". We wanted things to be culturally appropriate, so people would come and feel comfortable. Well, Yes! they came in droves. They came in droves to the first Mass and they sang up a treat. They were comfortable. They didn't have to stand and sit.

"We need to value the sacraments. We couldn't change the rites of the church but we could add the Aboriginal Lamb of God, the Aboriginal Our Father and we did smoking ceremonies at Baptisms. It was wonderful. And it didn't matter if you weren't a Catholic. This is what is missing today, gradually over the years, this is what has been happening."

In 1999 the first mass was celebrated in the newly named Reconciliation Church and there were five Candidates prepared for their First Holy Communion. Over the years the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry and Reconciliation Church have welcomed many Aboriginal people into the church through Baptism and other sacraments, held functions for community groups and monthly masses. The Reconciliation Church welcomes Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal people and take great pride in building the unity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and working for a stronger reconciliation.

Question for Reflection

How do you see Reconciliation being achieved through embracing Catholicism and Aboriginal Spirituality?





Christ has no body on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through
which Christ's compassion
for the world is to look out;
yours are the feet with which
He is to go about doing good;
and yours are the hands
with which He is to bless us now.

St. Teresa of Avila

Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr



(Image courtesy of NT News)

Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (AO) is an Aboriginal elder from Nauiyu (Daly River). She graduated as the Northern Territory's first Aboriginal teacher in 1975. Originally teaching visual art, she went on to serve for many years as the principal of the local Catholic primary school. She is a renowned artist, activist, writer and public speaker and in 1998 received an Order of Australia for services to Aboriginal people.

Many Australians understand that Aboriginal people have a special respect for Nature. The identity we have with the land is sacred and unique. Many people are beginning to understand this more. Also, there are many Australians who appreciate that Aboriginal people have a very strong sense of community. All persons matter. All of us belong. And there are many more Australians now, who understand that we are a people who celebrate together.

What I want to talk about is another special quality of my people. I believe it is the most important. It is our most unique gift. It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians. In our language this quality is called Dadirri. It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.

Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call "contemplation".

“Be still and know that I am God”
Psalms 46:10



When I experience dadirri, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of dadirri is listening.

Through the years, we have listened to our stories. They are told and sung, over and over, as the seasons go by. Today we still gather around the campfires and together we hear the sacred stories.

As we grow older, we ourselves become the storytellers. We pass on to the young ones all they must know. The stories and songs sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside. In the ceremonies we celebrate the awareness of our lives as sacred.

The contemplative way of dadirri spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again...

In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn - not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years...

There is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware.

Question for Reflection

How could you practice Dadirri in:
your school;
your community;
your personal life?



Aunty Doreen Flanders



Doreen Flanders is a proud Aboriginal woman born and raised at Bowraville - part of the Gumbaynggirr Nation. Doreen's role involves addressing Indigenous education and issues affecting Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander students in mainstream classrooms. Doreen has vast experience in developing theology studies for students and incorporating spirituality into the classroom.

Our Aboriginal Dreaming stories and some of our history complement stories from the Bible. It is by knowing and understanding both which deepens our faith in God the Creator Spirit. Aboriginal Christians around the nation believe we are all God's chosen people and we can rediscover God through our Aboriginal Spirituality, through our stories and through our history. Our stories tell of our lore, culture, our survival and by telling these stories, sharing the knowledge, knowing special places, passing on ceremonies, these are our way of connecting with God in all that He has given, and most importantly with each other.

My belief is that we Aboriginal people are blessed with both Religions, Christianity and Aboriginal Spirituality.

Old Testament

Genesis 1
In the beginning God
created the heaven
and the earth.



Genesis 1:7-26
The Bible story of Adam and Eve in the
Garden of Eden, eating the forbidden fruit.



Genesis 1:26
"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our
image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over
the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over
the livestock and all the wild animals, and over
all the creatures that move along the ground.'"



Aboriginal Spirituality examples

We believe that our Creator Spirit, Yuludarra created everything. When He created the rivers along the eastern coastline of NSW from the Bundjalung to the Gumbaynggirr Country, He gave the tribes their language.

The Murrumbidgee Tree is a Dreaming story that teaches us about sharing and not being greedy, that there are some things we are forbidden to eat and we are required to be respectful of all things, human, animals, plants, everything in our natural environment.

We Aboriginal people were given the responsibility to look after and care for the land and creation – custodians, not owners.

Old Testament

Genesis 2:7
...then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.



Aboriginal Spirituality

Our belief is that we come from Mother Earth and will return to it when we die as features of the landscape, animals or plants.

Genesis 7:24

The Great Flood
The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days.



There are many Aboriginal Dreaming stories that talk about great floods. Floods or drowning that effect some of our lives today may include;

- Depression - Lack of culture and respect
- Alcohol and drug abuse - Mental Health
 - Jail - Lack of Spirituality
 - Unemployment - Grief
- Domestic violence – Dispossession

Genesis 11:1-9

the Tower of Babel, how the whole world had one language and a common speech.



Our story is about the different tribes who tried to catch and capture Yuludarra. Tribes were given different languages so they were unable to communicate.

Exodus 1

This Israelite story tells of an oppressed people who were taken from their land and lived in exile in Egypt. The first-born sons of the Israelites were killed to stop the growth of their people.



Our Aboriginal people were stolen to stop the growth of our people – The Stolen Generation.

Exodus 19

Talks about a sacred boundary around Mount Sinai where God met with Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments.



We too have boundaries to protect our sacred places and sites, and it is believed that we have to maintain and be respectful around these places. Entering places without permission could bring about sickness or death.

Genesis 11:1-9

God gave the Israelites the Law to live and abide by.



Our Aboriginal ancestors were given our Lore to live and abide by.

Ecclesiastes 3:1
Everything has its time.



We relate this with the seasons and being the right time to gather certain fruit, to hunt for particular food. When certain ceremony can be done.

John 14: 1-3

Jesus the Way to the Father
"There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so."



This reading is used quite a lot at funerals in our area because it fits with our culture. We always make room for one more, whether a meal or a place to rest.



Aunty Louise Campbell



Aunty Louise Campbell is a proud Gumbaynggirr country woman, mother, grandmother and educator. Having worked in Catholic education for 23 years, Aunty Louise holds a Diploma of Education, Bachelor of Education PDHPE, and a Masters of Theology. Aunty Louise is passionate about Spirituality and Aboriginal Catholicism in the Catholic Church of Australia.

To understand Aboriginal Spirituality, we need to know what the word spirituality means. Spirituality comes from the Latin word 'spirare' and this means 'to breathe life into'. Spirituality comes from our own belief that there is a power greater than ourselves, Biامي, and our faith in this is lived out through our culture, cultural expressions, our stories and our strong relationship to our land and the world of the Mystery. This sense of Mystery is passed on through the stories and passion of land which is said so eloquently by our many Elders, Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter.

We remember talking about connection to country and the sharing of stories is an important part of the passing down. Your story is not just your story but everyone's story. It belongs to your grandfathers, your grandmothers, your fathers and mothers. It is connected through the years and years and from the oldest to the youngest and from the seen and the unseen. It's important to know and keep that, because it then becomes not only your story but also the story of those generations to come. We want to feel not just loved by the country we hold dear but we want to endear all people to the land and how much we love the land and those spirits that live within.

Question for Reflection

How do you share your story?



Dave Ella



Dave Ella's present role is the Education Officer - Aboriginal Education for the Diocese of Broken Bay. His traditional roots lie with the Yuin people from the South Coast. Dave's family grew up in the Aboriginal community at La Perouse where his family instilled in him a strong sense of Aboriginal identity & culture.

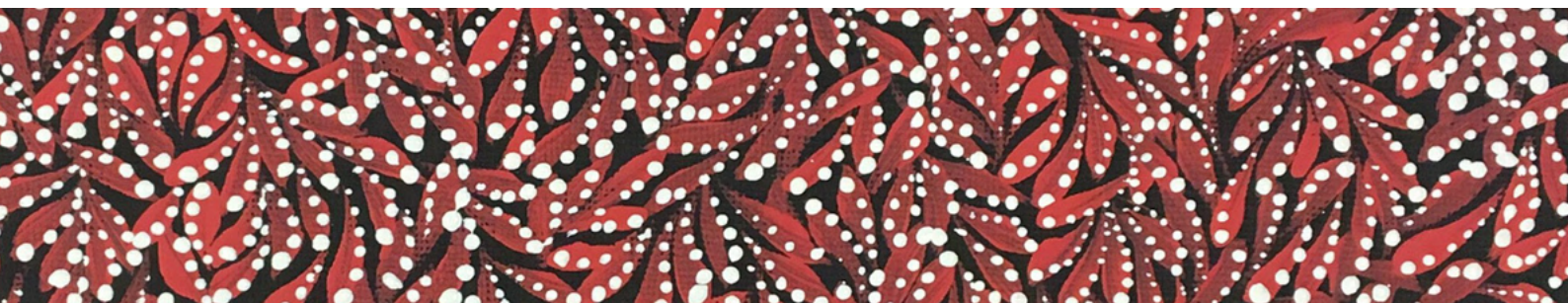
The sea is a big part of my existence; we are called salt water people. Everything in it, from the tiniest shellfish to the great whales that pass through here belongs to all of us, it's as important to us as land. This land is where Aboriginal people have taught and performed age-old ceremonies of storytelling, music, dance and celebration of our spiritual connection to the land and we carry this on today through our Catholic faith.

To me my Aboriginal spirituality is inextricably linked to salt water & the land.

"It's like splashing in the ocean or picking up a piece of dirt and saying this is where I started and this is where I'll go. The sea and land is our food, our culture, our spirit and identity" (Rob Waters).

Spirituality is expressed by ceremony, rituals or paintings. Aboriginal spirituality calls our people to experience wonder in their lives as they connect deeply with the sea & land and with each other. Wonder in life happens as people stop, listen and wait in a way that restores balance. Aboriginal spirituality does not involve prayer in a formal way as is known in the Christian tradition, but is about a spiritual way of living.

To me I believe that our Catholic spirituality also sees land and the sea as being sacred and as revelations of God in the world. There is therefore a beautiful connection between Aboriginal and Catholic spiritualities, which may only be made with the intention of offering respect to Aboriginal beliefs and cultures. However, there is a connection between Aboriginal and Christian spiritualities which marries the sea and land. Aboriginal Christians connect their Aboriginal spirituality with Christian beliefs.



The Aboriginal Our Father has been written to make the Lord's Prayer more accessible to an Aboriginal way of thinking, the Lord's Prayer is a way of showing unity amongst diverse Aboriginal countries. In an Aboriginal way of being, everything is connected to the sea and land. Aboriginal people 'learn to be' largely within their relationship with the land through which they express themselves physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually; that respects our Elders who hold the memories, traditions and culture history of this land.

St John tells us that "God is spirit" (John 4:24) and that spirit is active in us. It may be said that the Holy Spirit is the felt experience of God in our lives. When we see God active in the world through creation and through people, we say that the Holy Spirit is at work.

The Spirit of God was poured out through Jesus' life. The spirit of love worked through Jesus to heal wounds, free us to serve one another and choose a future, as seen in Luke 4:16-21, which is sometimes known as Jesus' Mission Statement:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

The Spirit of God poured out through Jesus' resurrection lures us together through interpersonal love into a future full of hope.

"To encounter the living Lord is to hear his call to follow him. Our spiritual journey of discipleship is guided by the Holy Spirit of Jesus working within us. Not our initiative, but God's is primary. We are followers of the way of Jesus...Our spiritual awakening is a sheer gift from God, and continues to be sustained by the sheer graciousness of God."

(Ranson, Fr D. Living in the Holy Spirit ,Elements of Catholic Spirituality 2008 Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference).

REF: DBB Land, People and Spirit A Sense of Belonging



Beth Riolo



Beth Riolo has worked in Catholic Education for over 30 years, first as a Primary teacher and then in the areas of RE curriculum, assessment and faith formation. Beth is currently involved in building staff capacity in environment, advocacy and outreach with particular emphasis on creating links with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and spirituality. As a non-Aboriginal woman, Beth is strongly committed to working alongside her Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers in contributing to a vision of a reconciled, just and equitable Australia for all.

Viewing Aboriginal Spirituality through a Catholic Lens

Catholicism does not strive to take the place of traditional Aboriginal spirituality and culture, rather it harbours a deep desire to be enriched by the gifts that Aboriginal peoples can bring, as articulated by Pope Saint John Paul in his famous Alice Springs Address in 1986:

"As you listen to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, seek out the best things of your traditional ways. If you do, you will come to realize more and more your great human and Christian dignity...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 joyfully received by others."

A Catholic understanding of the world is that the whole of creation is a spiritual as well as a physical reality with God at work in and through the whole dynamic process. This is a deeply incarnational understanding of creation that finds a home in how Aboriginal people understand their own lives. One of the rich spiritual treasures that Aboriginal spirituality, life and culture gives to the Catholic Church is the gift of knowing how to live in harmony with the land, to not be wasteful and to be good stewards. It is clear from Pope Francis' environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si'* that Aboriginal peoples have much to teach the wider Church.



"Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" (Laudato Si' 139).

"As part of the universe, called into being by the one God, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect." (Laudato Si' 89)

Pope Francis speaking of Indigenous peoples... *"Land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values." (Laudato Si' 146)*

There are aspects of the Christian ritual and the story of the life of Jesus that resonate very strongly with Aboriginal spiritual values. As Boniface Perdjer explains:

"When I read the gospels, I read them as an Aboriginal. There are many things in the gospel that make me happy to be an Aboriginal because I think we have a good start. So many of the things that Christ said and did, and the way he lived, make me think of the good things in our way of life... We find it easy to see in Christ the great dreamtime figure, who, more than all the others gave us law and ceremony and life centres, and marked out the way we must follow to reach our true country... So it is not difficult to realize that Christ is with us always...the same yesterday, today and forever."

Gospel values such as sharing, fairness, justice and equality, the Catholic Social Teaching of the "common good" are all an integral part of Aboriginal life and culture. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann speaks for many Aboriginal people who call themselves Catholic when she says:

"Jesus shared our whole human experience from birth to death and he in turn shared gifts and blessings, ultimately himself, with us, even down through the ages in the Eucharist. Jesus lived and taught a life of sharing because he loved all without exception. Such love is the measure of true sharing... the sharing of Jesus strikes a resonance in my Aboriginal self and is a cause for rejoicing and celebration... As an Aboriginal I have life shared with my clan group. We received this life from our original Great Ancestor. It is the basis of our clan system. Even our animal totems in some way share this life, so that we call them 'brother' and 'sister'... Jesus shared his life with us. We share his life with one another—all of us brothers and sisters of Jesus and of one another."



In the Catholic faith tradition, we have St Francis Assisi's beautiful Cantic of Creation where all praise is given to God for "Sister Moon" and "Brother Sun", "Sister Water" and "Brother Wind, Air and Fire". We also have the beautiful Benedictine invitation "to listen with the ear of the heart" which finds a resonance with the Aboriginal understanding of Dadirri, the inner deep listening and quiet still awareness so beautifully unpacked for the Church by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann.

Celebrating Aboriginal Spirituality within the Catholic Faith Tradition

Throughout every State and Territory of Australia there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic ministries and in each of these ministries the traditional owners strive to incorporate the gifts of their culture, rituals and symbols into the physical church, the liturgy and the life of the Church. Catholic School communities throughout Australia need to walk alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a spirit of reconciliation that looks for opportunities to assist inculturation in the liturgical life of the Church.

In Catholic schools one of the ways that they engage with their spirituality is through prayer and ritual and so it is important school communities consider how to incorporate and celebrate Aboriginal spirituality through their liturgical celebrations. There are connections that can be made with Aboriginal spirituality, celebration and ritual with many symbols associated with Aboriginal ceremonies being similar to those used in the sacramental life and religious rituals of the Catholic Church. There is a community nature inherent in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church that can also be seen in Aboriginal symbols, rites of passage, celebration, and ceremony.

Question for Reflection

How will you celebrate Aboriginal Spirituality within your school community?





Symbols, Rites and Celebrations

Many symbols associated with Aboriginal ceremonies are similar to those used in the religious rituals of the Catholic Church.

(Adapted from Catholic Education Office WA)

SYMBOL of SMOKING in an ABORIGINAL context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A smoking ceremony cleanses and heals the body and spirit. A smoking ceremony is used in the practice of warding off unwanted spirits, eg cleansing a person, home or area. 	SYMBOL of SMOKING in a CATHOLIC context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Benediction, the priest burns incense to make smoke to purify and sanctify the church before the exposition of the blessed sacrament. Incense smoke is used in the sanctification of the body during a Requiem Mass.
SYMBOL of WATER in an ABORIGINAL context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water is important to Aboriginal people. In the driest parts of the country, water is life-giving, refreshing, cooling and cleansing to country and to the people. 	SYMBOL of WATER in a CATHOLIC context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water is the symbol of Baptism, which gives new life and hope and makes people one with Jesus and with each other. Water is used in blessings and sprinkling rites.
SYMBOL of OILS in an ABORIGINAL context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animal oils are used for healing purposes. Application of certain oils can assist in helping one connect with his/her spiritual side. 	SYMBOL of OILS in a CATHOLIC context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Special oils are used in anointing and for healing purposes, in the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Healing of the Sick & Holy Orders. Anointing of the body prior to death prepares for meeting with God.
DECORATION in an ABORIGINAL context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decorations are used to convey the things that are important to the living and spiritual world of Aboriginal people Natural body paint and other materials are used for decoration. People can be immediately recognised by the decorations used. 	DECORATION in a CATHOLIC context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The priest's vestments immediately identify him as the leader of the faith community. White Alb - Baptism, Stole - sign of office, Chasuble - historical link to Jewish high priest, Colours reflect the liturgical season. Water is used in blessings and sprinkling rites.
CELEBRATION in an ABORIGINAL context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ceremonies are performed to reinforce the connection between the living world of the Aboriginal people and the spirit world. 	CELEBRATION in a CATHOLIC context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Church celebrations follow the liturgical seasons and help create a deeper relationship between people and God.

<p>SYMBOL of FIRE in an ABORIGINAL context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campfires are important hubs of the community where people gather, and food and information is shared. • Fire is used for creating a sense of togetherness, a sense of belonging, strengthening identity. • Cultural knowledge is often maintained when people gather around campfires (e.g. stories, ceremonies). • Fire is used for cleansing and purification. 	<p>SYMBOL of FIRE in a CATHOLIC context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On Pentecost Sunday, the Apostles gathered as a community of people, were filled with knowledge by the Holy Spirit who appeared through the symbol of fire. • At the Easter Vigil, the people gather around the Easter fire, where the Paschal candle is lit. This candle is then used throughout the Easter season, at Baptisms and Funerals.
<p>MATURITY RITES in an ABORIGINAL context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal youth are introduced to the sacred meaning of life through certain ceremonies. • They acquire knowledge of ceremonies and rituals which is an inherent part of reaching adulthood. • As they receive more knowledge, their participation in ceremony increases. 	<p>MATURITY RITES in a CATHOLIC context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth are fully initiated into the Catholic faith through the sacraments. • The youth upon receiving the gifts of each sacrament, participate more fully in the life of the Church. • Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation are the three sacraments of initiation.
<p>ART in an ABORIGINAL context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paintings or engravings on the walls of caves or in other sacred places, depict the spirituality of Aboriginal life. • Spirit ancestors feature in ancient rock art. • Reminders of connection to the land and spirituality abound in nature all around. 	<p>ART in a CATHOLIC context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Churches use a crucifix and Stations of the Cross which depict important events in the life of Jesus. • Churches usually have pictures and statues of saints. • Other art works may decorate a church and are symbolic of God in nature and all around, eg banners, floral arrangements, focus area. • These forms of art are a reminder of beliefs and encourage participation in prayer.
<p>SYMBOL of BREAD in an ABORIGINAL context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Damper is the result of a collective of activities. Aboriginal women: collect seed, crush into flour, make dough, cook dough • When the dough is cooked in the ground it is known as damper. This is then shared by community members. • Anything that is cooked in the ground has a spiritual influence. 	<p>SYMBOL of BREAD in a CATHOLIC context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unleavened bread is the result of a communal effort: farmers harvest the crop, the grain is crushed to make flour, bakers make the dough, the dough is cooked. When the dough is cooked it is known as unleavened bread. • In the Mass we bring ourselves and our lives to the community in the Offertory. • The priest blesses, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, changes the bread & wine into the body & blood of Christ and it is shared amongst the congregation.



Glossary

Aunty

Aboriginal people may refer to a female as Aunty as a sign of respect.

Biarni

Creator Spirit for many first nations people across Australia.

Bundjalung/Gumbaynggir

First nation North Coast New South Wales region.

Ceremony

Can also be known as corroborees being dramatic representations, in mime and song, of the histories and spiritual beliefs and survival skills.

Country

In Aboriginal English, a person's land, sea, sky, rivers, sites, seasons, plants and animals, place of heritage, belonging and spirituality: is called 'Country'.

Culture

Shared stories, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours or practices that give a group or individual a sense of who they are and help them make sense of the world in which they live. Culture is a shared system but inherently diverse - it is a lens through which we see the world (NSW PDHPE Syllabus pg: 80)

Dadirri

It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.

Dreaming

A western term used to describe the Aboriginal Spirituality system. The dreaming encompasses all the cultural values, laws and knowledge which is passed down through song, dance painting and storytelling to each generation. Each language group has their own term to describe their belief system.

Elders

Highly respected Aboriginal people held in esteem by their communities for their wisdom, cultural knowledge and community service. They are responsible for making decisions within the community.

Glossary

Great Ancestor

A term used to define a higher creator spirit.

Kinship

Traditional kinship relations continue to play a role in contemporary Aboriginal communities. While Australian family life often centres on the nuclear family made up of parents and children, Aboriginal family life includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins and the mob.

Law

Also known as Lore. Handed down by the Creation Ancestors and upheld by Aboriginal communities for thousands of generations, Law includes the accepted and traditionally patterned ways of behaving and shared understandings relating to land, language, ways of living, kinship, relationships and identity.

Lore

Refers to the customs and stories the Aboriginal peoples learned from the Dreamtime. Aboriginal lore was passed on through the generations through songs, stories and dance and it governed all aspects of traditional life. It is common to see the terms 'law' and 'lore' being used interchangeably.

Mob

A way to refer to a group of Aboriginal people who have a connection to one another. For example, 'my mob comes from Walgett' or 'that mob travelled along way.'

Mother Earth

Land is mother, the giver of life who provides us with everything we need.

Naiyu

First nation area Daly River Northern Territory region.

Sacred Places and Sites

These are significant areas which include, but are not limited to natural landmarks and waterways that hold meaningful stories of creation and continued knowledge for ceremonial practices.

Glossary

Songlines/Storylines

A songline is a track across the land, sky or sea following a journey of a Creation Ancestor. Songlines are recorded in Creation stories, songs, paintings and dance. A knowledgeable person is able to navigate across the land by repeating the words of the songs describing the location of landmarks, waterholes and other natural phenomena. By singing the songs in the appropriate sequence, Indigenous people could navigate vast distances. Australia contains an extensive system of songlines, many that pass through multiple Aboriginal countries.

Stolen Generations

Between 1910-1970, many Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families as a result of various government policies. The generations of children removed under these policies became known as the Stolen Generations. The policies of child removal left a legacy of trauma and loss that continues to affect Indigenous communities, families and individuals.

Totemic/Totems

A natural object or animal that is believed by a particular Aboriginal first nations group to have spiritual significance.

Traditional Owners/Custodians

Senior people in the community, who are responsible for their traditional land and waters, are referred to as 'Traditional Owners'.

Uncle

Aboriginal people may refer to a male Elder as Uncle as a sign of respect.

Wiradjuri

First nation area of Central New South Wales region.

Yuin

First nation of South Coast New South Wales region.

Yuludarra

Creator Spirit from Gumbaynggirr first nations.



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Further details on state and territory
information can be obtained through the
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