

## ENCOUNTER – THE PAST AND FUTURE OF REMOTE KIMBERLEY

On 3 September 2008, Sister Brigida Nailon C.S.B., author and editor a range of works on the encounter between Catholicism and Aboriginal peoples, spoke to the Kimberley Society. She began by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the country and paying her respects to the Elders who hold the memories, traditions, culture and hopes of indigenous Australia. She then told how, after entering the Brigidine convent in Victoria in 1949, shortly after her 17th birthday, she trained as a teacher, taught in various places, and did field work in the Northern Territory as part of a Master of Education. She later met Hyllus Maris, a Yorta Yorta woman, and, through her, began to learn about Aboriginal people's lives in Victoria.

The catalyst for Brigida's long relationship with the Kimberley was her enrolment, on top of her teaching, in a Bachelor of Theology at Catholic College Clayton. She could not get to lectures so in 1980 she wrote a 10,000 word essay, 'The Pioneer priest of the Kimberley, Fr Duncan McNab'. While not quite following in Fr McNab's footsteps, Brigida sent her essay to Bishop Jobst in Broome and offered to serve in the Kimberley. He suggested that she teach Grade 6. In due course she arrived in Derby and found an Aboriginal world other than the one experienced through Hyllus Maris. The Leprosarium was operating outside the town, and a lot of Aborigines lived at Mowanjum Mission on Derby's outskirts.

At the end of 1981, Brigida was given a one way ticket to fly back to Victoria. Her luggage went to the wharf office to go by sea but it got no further because the boat was stuck in the mud for weeks. She went to Broome to say goodbye to the Bishop and, after he suggested she stay and write the story of the Church in the Kimberley, he flew her to Beagle Bay before he departed on a three month visit to Germany. In three months at Lombadina Mission, north of Beagle Bay, Inge Danaher (a Lay Missionary) helped to translate George Walter's book, *Australia Land People Mission*. While there, Brigida was privileged to be present with the women for dancing and ceremony in preparation for the boys' initiation. The boys wore pearl shells over the pubic area just like those shown in Fr Walter's book.

Back in Broome, the Bishop checked the translation, following it in the German while Brigida read the English version. He then took it to Germany and had 5000 copies printed. He brought back French documents from the Trappist Abbey of Sept Fons in France. After translating these, Brigida felt she had met the Trappists personally, especially Fr Alphonse Tachon who was buried in Israel. She visited the monastery there in 1997 but, being a woman, she was not allowed to visit his grave.

In Perth, at the Bishop's request, Brigida was given access to the Catholic Archdiocese archives that had been officially closed. Two Mercy Sisters, Margaret Mary and Raphael helped her. At that time, because of privacy laws, some government archives were not accessible but, when she returned to Broome Church archives, Brigida found that Bishop Otto Raible had used carbon paper to type his replies to official correspondence on the back of Departmental letters. These were invaluable for information about "native" administration after the 1930s.

While working on the history project in 1984, Brigida stayed with the Infant Jesus Sisters and then the Sisters of John of God at Beagle Bay Mission. The Bishop would fly up with files or she would work through his archives in Broome. She began to interview some of the people from Beagle Bay, Lombadina and the East Kimberley. She added their 14 stories to another 34 she had transcribed from tape recordings that Fr Francis had gathered from local people for Mary Durack's book *The Rock and the Sand* (1969). The stories, with permission from family members, went into print as *This is your Place: Beagle Bay Mission 1890 – 1990*, as part of the 1990 Beagle Bay centenary celebrations. The book was published by the Mission and Magabala Books (and republished by Spectrum Press with additional photos).

At the beginning of 1991, Brigida spent three months writing a Church history using her research. She travelled to Broome by bus and presented it to the Bishop but he was not interested. She left the manuscript with him and went to Bidadanga Aboriginal Community, south of Broome. Two Australian priests were there. Fr Kevin McKelson had been there for 30 years and spoke the languages. Fr Matthew Digges had just been ordained. Brigida became friends with Maria, the wife of Dodo, the Chairman of the Council. Maria worked in the school teaching language and culture to the children. There were two Sisters of St John of God. Veronica ran an Art and Crafts Group. Stella kept house. Brigida stayed with the priests, did some cooking, some research, and went fishing with Pauline Deegan, the local nurse. She left in October and later went to the Northern Territory, where she was employed at Nungalinga College Darwin to work on a Certificate in Theology and an Associate Diploma of Theology for TAFE Courses.

In 1993–1996, Bachelor College (NT) employed Brigida as a lecturer in teacher education in Maningrida Aboriginal Community in Arnhem Land. During that period, Bishop Jobst made her research available to Margaret Zucker who wrote his Church history, *From Patrons to Partners: A History of the Catholic Church in the Kimberley 1884-1984*. An opportunity to visit China in 1995 for the Women's Conference brought about a chance encounter with Sadie Carrington, an Aboriginal artist from the East Kimberley, at a Beijing restaurant. Brigida had been reading the oral

sources from *This is your Place*, thinking of the PhD on which she was working part time, and she showed Sadie a picture she had found in the Broome archives with the caption "Girls from Beagle Bay". In her mind she had placed it as about 1924. She asked Sadie if she knew the children, and Sadie said, "These are my relatives. Barney, Hector, Martin, Betty, Winnie and Julia."

Back at Maningrida, Brigida finished her thesis, 'Encounter between Catholicism and Aboriginal peoples in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia, With Special Emphasis On The Experiences Of Women On Both Sides Of The Encounter 1884 – 1990'. Then, having presented it for examination with Latrobe University, she left for Israel in 1997 to work at Kyriat Yearim as a volunteer for nine months. On the way back, after a month's holiday in England and Ireland, she spent three days in Rome to visit Propaganda Fide Archives, which had supplied letters for the McNab book.

In 1999, Bishop Jobst rang Brigida in Kyabram to ask if she would write Fr John Luemmen's memoirs. She went to Perth and together they wrote *Led by the Spirit: A Migrant Priest Tells His Story*. While she was working with Fr John, an invitation came from Frs Michael McMahon and Ray Hevern to write the Mission History of the Pallottines for their centenary in Australia. Together they produced *Nothing is wasted in the Kingdom of God*. When Brigida visited Broome to have another look at the archives there, Bishop Chris Saunders asked "Why don't you write about McNab and Emo?" So when she returned to Victoria she began work on those two projects. Out of that invitation came *The Writing on the Wall – Father Duncan McNab 1820–1896* (Brigidine Sisters, Echuca, 2004) and the two-volume set *Emo and San Salvador* (Brigidine Sisters, Echuca, 2005). In *Emo*, Book 1 covers Broome and Beagle Bay while Book 2 covers Cygnet Bay, Drysdale River and Lombadina.

After telling of her Kimberley research and writing, Brigida related numerous anecdotes about the people involved in the encounter between Catholicism and Aboriginal peoples there. Among those mentioned in the Beagle Bay stories were Bishop Matthew Gibney – known as the Father of Beagle Bay Mission – and an Aboriginal man named Felix. Fr Francis heard about him from Felix's nephew Remi. Fr Alphonse Tachon baptized Felix in 1897 but, before that, the missionary had written home to France:

Our hunter Felix, the master sorcerer of the country, at last goes to regulate his situation, he wishes absolutely to be a Christian but he has a broken heart, for he must send away one of his wives. For a long time, Felix struggled against grace because of this obstacle; it now appears that grace is going to triumph at last. Things are even a little more definitely arranged. Felix is going to give the youngest of his wives to his brother, one of our best sailors.

Felix had told the Djabber Djabber people "Come and see!" He taught Fr Alphonse the language and gave him symbols to translate Christian spiritual concepts into Nyul Nyul. Remi told Fr Francis:

We learn in French and we were glad to be in school and make friends. . . . After school was over I worked with the stock. One day my father came and I knew that he wanted me for Malulu. Everybody told me, "You follow our Law. Proper we finish you Malulu, you can go back to the Mission. You must be man like first man and you will follow our law." My father told Father Alphonse nothing. I came back by myself and when Father Alphonse asked me where I had been, I said, "I was Wanju." Father Alphonse preached in the Church "Stop that Malulu!" He talked outside to the men to stop. They said, "He can't do that because that is our Law, we old fellows we keep to our Law, we got to stick to that Law till we're dead, but all them boys can follow Christian."

It was before I was baptized. Fr Alphonse tell my Father, "Don't do that again! You're a head man on the Mission, you tell the others." My father said, "I can't." "That the last boy I've got."

More anecdotes followed, with mention of Elizabeth Fidelis Victor (Felix's niece) and Magdalen Williams (his granddaughter). Brigida then spoke of the first Pallottine Missionaries in Beagle Bay in 1901 – Frs White and Walter, Bros Kasperek and Sixt. Nine Sisters of St John of God arrived in 1907, with Bishop Gibney having appointed Mother Antonio O'Brien Superioress of the Branch House of the Order at the mission. Again, the stories from *This is your Place* provided glimpses of life at the mission in that era. Snippets gleaned from archival files added more. The audience heard of children being taken from their families, and of Fr Bischofs being interned in Armidale (NSW) for the duration of the First World War. Fr Bachmair replaced Fr Bischofs and organized mission workers to build Sacred Heart Church with mud bricks. There were also stories about employment, land, loss of language, the impacts of leprosy and being "half-caste", and about places that included Sunday Island, Lombadina mission, Derby and Balgo. It was clear that children from many parts of the Kimberley grew up at Beagle Bay, receiving education and training there.

Brigida told of the displacement of Aborigines creating the need for Aboriginal Missions. In 1908, for example, Abbot Torres and his Spanish Benedictines from New Norcia founded a mission at Drysdale River. But it was the Beagle Bay missionaries on whom her presentation focused. Rome sent Italian Salesians to replace Fr Creagh in the early 1920s. Bishop Coppo, who had worked in America, resigned in 1927 and the Salesians moved to Victoria. German missionaries were allowed back after 1925. Four priests and seven brothers were sent. Fr Droste, who organized the decorating of the church with pearl shells, went home for a holiday in Germany and died there.

In the 1930s, Fr Ernest Worms, a linguist and anthropologist, recorded songs chanted by the people in camp before they went fishing. Aboriginal appreciation of the uniqueness and diversity among animals and plants indicated their belief in the autonomy of species, that each has its own "Law". He wrote: 'It was not necessary for Aborigines to know brolga culture in detail; it was sufficient to know that brolgas had their own culture.' Lives of Aboriginal people were bound together, as were the soils, water systems and the lives of plants and animals.

Tardun Farm near Geraldton became an important resource for Beagle Bay and the Kimberley Church. Francis Byrne traced the history of hard work there in the book *A Hard Road: Brother Frank Nissl, 1888-1980*. Bro Henry Krallman, the other brothers and Aborigines from the North produced wheat for mission bread. Brother Joseph Schuengel, who had come to Australia in 1930, was asked to go back to Tardun in 1940, during World War II, he because he was naturalized. He told Brigida:

There were Aborigines from Beagle Bay, Jim Roe, Dick Smith, and Dora Smith. I worked on the farm. We had a tin shed. It was hot in summer and cold in winter. In Tardun ploughing, sowing and harvesting were the chief jobs. We had a team of horses and Bro F Nissl and I looked after the team. Only one of us went out into the paddock with the horses. It was Wartime. Dr Mannix was our greatest protector. There were only brothers helping there at that time. The next 5 years I worked in the kitchen. It was a nice house then. The parish priest and architect of the Church at Mullewa, Fr John Hawes, made the plan for the first Monastery at Tardun."

In the Kimberley, Bishop Raible looked for opportunities to expand the Pallottine missionary enterprise eastward where the government operated Moola Bulla as an Aboriginal cattle station and Violet Valley as a feeding depot. He purchased Rockhole Station near Halls Creek to found a mission and brought two doctors from Germany to staff a hospital there. But Mr Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, opposed the Bishop's moves. Mary Durack pointed out:

Mr Neville clearly regarded this encouragement of his least favoured missionary body into the heart of the Kimberley as a further shock to his plans for greater control of the situation. He was "a thorn in the side of all missionaries except a few of the more amenable." Mission plans for expansion of influence also represented what Neville saw as a threat to the proper working out of the assimilation policy that had been given formal sanction in 1936 when a Department of Native Affairs was established with more power for control.

Although missionaries generally kept their activities within the parameters set by the government, at Beagle Bay there was permanent settlement of married couples secure enough to have large families, which did not have to be assimilated into the wider community and which tried to have some measure of independence. The ideal

of the Pallottines was not assimilation but separate development and independence of the different stations which they endeavoured to make self supporting. But Rockhole was too near Moola Bulla for Neville. They had to move on.

Balgo Hills, 290 km south of Halls Creek, was the second place where Bishop Raible would establish a mission. The move occurred in September 1939, coinciding with England declaring war on Germany. Three Germans, Bro Stephen Contemprée, Bro Frank Nissl and Fr Alphonse Bleischwitz set off into the Australian desert to found the mission at Balgo Hills.

The war led to problems for other German men who remained in Broome. Four months after the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Beagle Bay Mission, 21 October 1940, Fr George Vill and Bro Joseph Schuengel were arrested and gaoled in Broome. The following day police arrested five priests and seven brothers at the mission. They were taken straight to the Broome gaol where they were locked in, three to a cell, with no furniture. Bishop Raible wrote to Military Headquarters in Perth, to the Kimberley politician Coverley and to Melbourne and Perth Archbishops. In Melbourne, Mannix brought the matter to the attention of the Prime Minister who negotiated parole for the missionaries. Frs Herold, Hornung and Vill and Bros Belderman and Mueller went to Melbourne. The others were paroled to Beagle Bay.

Fr Alphonse Bleischwitz worked at Balgo Hills for nineteen years. Aborigines also joined the missionary teams. Barbara Cox went as a Novice Native Sister about 1947. She had the supporting presence of her brother, Ambrose, her sister-in-law, Nancy, and their family. Born in Beagle Bay, Ambrose Cox was a son of David Cox from Noonkanbah Station and Lena Manado from Disaster Bay. He told his story:

One of my grandfathers was Willie Manado, a Filipino who died during the Second World War. The other was Billy Cox, a Scotchman who died in Louisa Downs and left the station to his Sister. I was 9 years on the Balgo Mission. I went with Bishop Raible to look over the place. I started my work in Rockhole with Fr John Herold. There was trouble with Welfare, too close to Moola Bulla. We shifted. I was on my own with Fr Alphonse. I came back and married Nancy O'Grady who was brought up in Lombadina Mission, and went back for a couple of years. I worked for myself in Broome, at the meatworks, at the powerhouse with Bernard Stracke, with the Shire.

Magdalen Williams worked with her husband at both Balgo and La Grange Missions:

My husband, Lawrence Williams and myself, Magdalen and my five children, Johanna, Albert, Cecilia, Philomena and David went to Balgo for six months with Fr Alphonse and two St John of God nuns, Sr Angela and Sr Winifride. We came back, then years later we went to La Grange.

La Grange, like Violet Valley, had long been a government feeding depot for the local Aboriginal people. Bishop Raible had been interested in it for some time and in 1953 he wrote to the Minister to reaffirm that interest. Around that time, the reserve of 450 acres on Thangoo cattle station had 85 Aborigines, 28 of whom were children. In 1955 the La Grange land was handed over to the missionaries.

One of Brigida's images showed Fr Francis with some of the workers at La Grange Mission in 1957. He had come from Cologne, Germany in the 1930s and retired to Rossmoyne in 1991. He baptised many of those whose names are in the Baptismal Registers of the Kimberley. Interestingly, the Baptismal Registry at Beagle Bay took on new significance in the 1980s when mission people needed to prove they were eligible for the old age pension or welfare benefits or get a passport to go overseas.

In 1959 the shortage of Pallottine Brothers to work at Beagle Bay and Balgo forced Bishop Raible to ask Fr George Vill, the Regional Superior, to try to find suitable lay missionaries who would come to the Kimberley missions for a year. A few Aboriginal volunteers like Elizabeth Dann were already working in the area. The first lay missionaries in 1959 were Joy Trantor, Kathy Curtain, and Carmel Hodgkinson.

The era discussed in Brigida's talk came to an end with Bishop Raible's resignation from the Episcopate being accepted by Rome in 1959. Bishop Jobst was then appointed. With Brigida having shown numerous images and told many anecdotes, the audience received great insight into the encounter between Aboriginal peoples and Catholicism in the Kimberley. They also learned quite a bit about the hard work and privation required of everyone who, for whatever reason, spent time living and working at Beagle Bay and the other missions. The usual round of questions and supper followed the talk, which was well received and well attended.

*Cathie Clement (drawing on Sister Brigida's notes)*