

# GULPA-NGAWAL LOTJPA

*Deep Listening Speak – Yorta Yorta language*

*Aboriginal Spirituality celebrated through Catholic Faith Tradition*



Catholic  
Education  
Sandhurst Ltd





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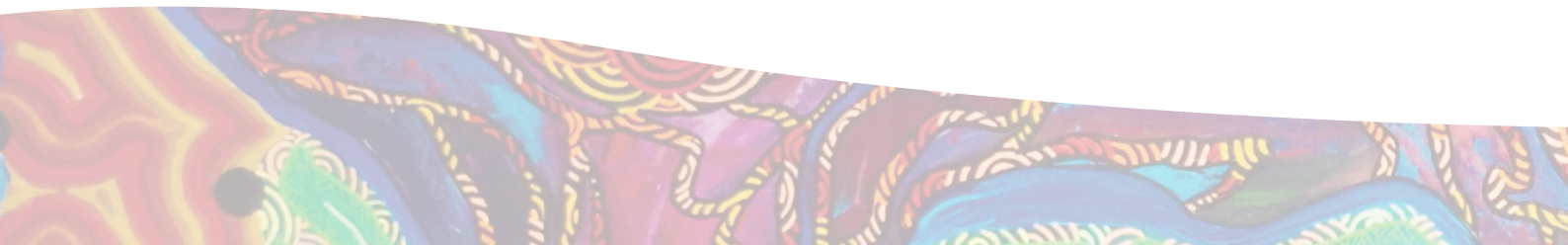
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Artwork: Troy Firebrace

Photos: Louise Levy

This artwork represents the Sandhurst Diocese 'In Country'. The Sandhurst Diocese is situated in a landscape that is rich in ancient and contemporary stories, histories and sacred sites where local Aboriginal peoples are generously willing to share culture history:

Artist Troy Firebrace: Education Officer for Catholic Education Sandhurst Limited (CES Ltd)



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# Preface



The great gift Aboriginal Australians can give to all is the gift of spirituality, understood in terms of kinship with the land which is both home and mother, providing identity. In western terms this is the Dreaming, the sense of the sacredness of origins, of kinship with the earth and all living creatures. Australians tend to think of land in terms of commodity or resource, of value and asset. For Aboriginal Australians the land owns them. There is, of course, a ready resonance between the creation stories in the Book of Genesis in the Bible and the stories of creation in the Aboriginal Dreaming. Kinship with the earth and all living creatures, and responsibility for the earth are common themes.

To the best of my knowledge, the first recorded contact between Europeans and the Australian continent was that of the Dutch explorer/trader Dirk Hartog who landed on the West Australian coast in 1602 at a place now known as Cape Inscription near Carnarvon. Hartog took a ship's pewter plate, hammered it flat, inscribed his own name, the name of the ship, and the date, and fixed the plate to a wooden stake on the shore, and then, taking careful measurements of the location (latitude and longitude), sailed away. The plate remained untouched and unseen for some 70 years until another Dutch trader, following Hartog's measurements, found the location. Similarly, he fixed a pewter plate to the same pole and took Hartog's original plate with him, and sailed away. The Hartog plate is now in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam; the second plate is now in the Maritime Museum in Fremantle, WA. I have seen both plates.

Europeans began drawing maps of a southern continent in the early sixteenth century. They worked on the principle that if there was a great land mass in the northern hemisphere, there must equally be a great land mass in the southern hemisphere, to balance the globe. These early maps of the Australian continent are sketchy, with significant gaps. Much of what they drew was surmise. The Portuguese named this great southern land mass (still unknown and uncharted) "Terra Australis del Espiritu Santo", the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me those Portuguese cartographers in far-off Lisbon intuited something central about the Australian continent that its Aboriginal inhabitants had known for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans – that this was a sacred land, a land of deep spirituality, and indeed the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of Aboriginal Australians is that of deep listening, of contemplation, of stillness, gifts very much needed in the seething uproar of modern life. This deep listening is expressed in the word *Dadirri*. The title of this present resource *Gulpa-Ngawal* captures the essence of *Dadirri* in the Yorta Yorta language. Contemplative listening is the habit of a lifetime, indeed of generations. This resource seeks to establish a dialogue between Aboriginal spirituality and the Catholic faith tradition. The recognition on this great gift of contemplative stillness in Aboriginal spirituality enriches the Catholic tradition. Again, the use of the word *Lotjpa*, which translates from the Yorta Yorta language as "speak", highlights this dialogue. I am very pleased to commend this resource to Sandhurst Catholic schools. All Australians walk together on the path of reconciliation and mutual respect. We can all learn to better appreciate the Divine Presence in our lives, in our histories, in our land through contemplative listening and reverential silence.

**Rev Dr Brian Boyle EV**  
*Episcopal Vicar for Education*

# Dedication



In a spirit of acknowledgement and respect to Elders, past, present and emerging I am pleased to introduce this publication on Aboriginal spirituality and its dialogue with the Catholic tradition. This publication is written by the Aboriginal Education Team of Sandhurst specifically for the staff and students within Sandhurst Catholic schools. The resource is well researched and is a collaboration of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors. Our focus is an awakening to Finding God in all things.

As Pope John Paul II said in Alice Springs (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. Let your minds and hearts be strengthened to begin a new life now. Past hurts cannot be healed by violence, nor are present injustices removed by resentment. Your Christian faith calls you to become the best kind of Aboriginal people you can be. This is possible only if reconciliation and forgiveness are part of your lives. Only then will you find happiness. Only then will you make your best contribution to all your brothers and sisters in this great nation. 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 (n.13).*

Recontextualization emphasises the Catholic faith in a contemporary context. This is viewed through a lens of engaging with Aboriginal culture by joining our shared beliefs to transform one another, giving a valued new meaning to Catholic and Aboriginal spiritual belief.

Our insistence that each human being is an image of God as told in the first creation story in the book of Genesis, emanates goodness and blessing, as does the belief of Aboriginal creation stories illustrated through their 'Dreaming'.

The contents of this resource invites us and challenges us to an awareness of our own spirituality and meaning systems. It calls us to an authentic expression of our own spirituality realising that Aboriginal spirituality and Australian country form the context for Australian Catholic faith. This resource also invites us to move toward braver and more impactful actions toward reconciliation, justice and healing. I commend this resource to you all and know that if it is taken to heart, it will enrich all our lives and contribute to the healing of our nation and the fullness of life in the Catholic church and the whole community in Australia.

**Dr Chris Hayes**

*Chief Catholic Mission, Learning and Teaching Officer  
Catholic Education Sandhurst Ltd*

# Aboriginal Spirituality

Aunty Delsie Lillyst

We remember the Indigenous way of being where all is connected – land, spirit, people.

We become disconnected from our Spirit if we lose the experience of our Creator God's forest, the butterflies, the song of the birds and if we can't see the awe and wonder of the night sky.

To understand this we must understand the Indigenous peoples' relationship with the Creator Spirit, with the land and indeed with all of creation.

We must now understand that our own well-being can be achieved only through the well-being of the entire natural world around us.

Everything is sacred – the animals, plants, hills, mountains, trees, leaves, rocks, stones, river, lakes, oceans, everything.

Everything has its own voice as it originates from God's loving generosity. Just ask the animals, and they will teach you. Ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you (Job 12:7) Thunder and lightning, stars and planets, animals, trees, they all have voices as they emanate the Spirit of interconnection and dependence.

All of creation has as much right to exist as humans do. If we dishonour creations right, we dishonour our own right to exist.

The universe is composed of subjects that live in sacred communion. They are not objects to be exploited and downtrodden.

Spirituality of blessing is where all of creation makes its tracks in the land. It is the place where the great story is told.

The LORD your God will bless you in the land given to you. We are grateful for all her gifts that nourish and sustain us as one.

It is a place that speaks to you, a place where you are the centre of the universe where you can go deep into sacred wells of knowledge that is deep within us, and come up with new vision.

Our future reality depends on what we do now in this present moment.

It is a place that tells you 'you are mine and I am yours.'

Our spirit will rest in God's embrace, as Christ lives in us and we live in Christ.

A place we feel ourselves called by the land to enter the land, where there is a spiritual wilderness that awaits our tentative steps to go further into the mystery of God.

Together as one we are called to proclaim God's greatness in all of creation. For this we are forever grateful.

The land is a place where the Creator Spirit tenderly stirs our inner Spirit, deepening our connection to all things.

As proclaimed by Christ, our covenant of peace cannot be shaken.



# Introduction



# Purpose

The purpose of this framework is to celebrate Aboriginal spirituality through the Catholic faith Tradition for all members of our early childhood and school communities in the Sandhurst Diocese.

Spirituality is paramount to Indigenous Australians' knowledge systems and life experience. Aboriginal spirituality informs all ways of being including identity, belonging and journey. The Catholic church recognises the immense importance of the Aboriginal voice regarding Spirituality.

'Catholicism in Australia has a multicultural diversity, reflecting various expressions of spirituality and religious practice, in large part due to migration. The tradition of the spirituality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as deeply connected to the land with a profound sense of the sacred, has existed for thousands of years prior to the arrival of Europeans. This spirituality is a key societal context for Catholic faith. This faith then must respect, engage with, and learn from this sacred story.'

*Diocese of Sandhurst RE Policy*

## Aboriginal Spirituality in dialogue with the Catholic Tradition

The Catholic church recognizes that Aboriginal spirituality has been a part of the Australian landscape for over 65,000 years. Today as we are invited to become a people of reconciliation, we are called to seek, know and love the wisdom that arises from Aboriginal spirituality.

The Australian Catholic Bishops' social justice statement '*Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*', (2022) draws our attention to the significant place that Aboriginal culture and spirituality plays within the Australian context today. This document celebrates the First Nations people and the contribution they can make to the future of our global dreaming. 'The connection to Country and all of God's creation, reveals our spirituality as people and our ancestors, a home we have looked after with special regard for millennia" (p.13).

At the heart of the 2023 Social Justice Statement, *Social Justice Statement: Listen, Learn, Love: A New Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, is a call for all the people of God to embrace a new engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, an engagement which involves a commitment to listen to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers and to learn from them. This listening and learning and the actions which flow from them must be grounded in a spirit of love if there is to be a change for the better.

# What is Aboriginal Spirituality?

**Aboriginal Spirituality** is a source of lore and a way that Aboriginal people communicate their world views. It reflects the ideology that our ancestors emerged out of the earth and created and transformed the landscape. Our ancestors returned to the earth which created our sacred and spiritual beliefs and as Aboriginal people we are custodians of that lore. Aboriginal spirituality is described as the Dreaming. This is not time specific, but a reflection of past, present and future.

**Aboriginal Spirituality** is experienced in certain ways. It relates to those who are initiated and those who hold deep truths and lore. It relates to family, clan and extended family. It is responsible for keeping specific places, uphold relationships and to pass on knowledge and wisdom relating to place. It is custodianship based on a totemic relationship. Aboriginal spirituality is dynamic and conveys knowledge through song, dance, painting and stories.

# What is not Aboriginal Spirituality?



**Aboriginal Spirituality** is not something that you can move in and out of, it is not a religion.



**Aboriginality Spirituality** is not something we do, it's who we are.



**Aboriginality Spirituality** is not just a form of celebration or performance.



**Aboriginal Spirituality** is not a science nor can it be easily defined.



**Aboriginal Spirituality** is not one story, it is as diverse as the many clans across Australia.



# Aboriginal Spirituality celebrated through Catholic Education

In 1986 Pope John Paul II stated, *'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.'*

Spirituality grounds you in who you are and enables you to be guided down a path that respects your true self. As Catholic educators the identity and success of Catholic education is linked inseparably to the witness of faith given by the community who truly live their faith. Recontextualization allows Catholic schools to face the challenge of re-interpreting the Catholic faith while allowing schools to better understand how their Catholic Identity is expressed. Recognising and acknowledging the rich cultural expertise of Aboriginal spirituality will enrich our experience of the Catholic faith by

- providing a balance of different cultural perspectives
- showing the intersecting lines of Aboriginal spirituality and the Catholic Tradition
- providing a framework of Aboriginal spirituality in the context of the Catholic faith embedded into learning and teaching
- ensuring that Aboriginal spirituality is utilised in an active way across all sectors of school life
- including Aboriginal spirituality into the prayer and liturgical life of our schools
- demonstrating that when we experience the Gospel texts, we do so from our personal perspectives.

Furthermore, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) states that, *'People come to full humanity only through culture ... but culture comes to its full value only through being restored and perfected in Christ'* (Mundine & Mundine 2014).

*Nothing about us without us!*

pg. 11 "Listen, Learn, Love:  
A New Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples



# Moving towards Reconciliation



# Connecting with Scripture

## Genesis 1:26

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness".

## Matthew 5:22–24

'So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

## 2 Corinthians 5:18–20

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,[d] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

## Colossians 3: 12–15

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord[f] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

## Ephesians 2:13–23

'So Jesus came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.'

*"To listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their cultures and history and to learn from them can help us see our national story differently."*

pg. 6 "Listen, Learn, Love:  
A New Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

# Hope, Dreaming, Respect, Reconciliation

## Source of Life document

'The Tradition of the Catholic Church is a dynamic reality shaped by every generation'. The second Vatican council reminds us that the Holy Spirit speaks to us in a variety of ways but especially through sacred scripture through the Tradition of the Church and through 'signs of the times'. Responding to this by paying particular attention to the 'First Nations people of Australia, reconciliation is a vital process towards a deep understanding and a sharing of a sense of interconnectedness with all of creation. True reconciliation requires three things: recognition of different stories, an appreciation of different legacies and an invitation to action'. (SoL. p. 12)

## Pope John Paul II address Alice Springs 1986 to the Aboriginal people of Australia

*'Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God, for the land was proof of a power in life greater than yourselves.*

*You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it, and then walk away from it. You realised your land was related to your source of life.'* (Pope John Paul II 1986)

## 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.

## Kalik Baring Kayap Baringi

*Kalik Baring Kayap Baringi* (Many Paths one Destination) is Sandhursts' Indigenous Education Plan, which has at its heart 6 foundation stones. There are two foundation stones that connect to this document:

### Catholic Identity

This foundation stone refers to all people in the Church and of the Church. Aboriginal Australians invite us to acknowledge, honour and celebrate a spirituality and a way of being which embraces symbols, rituals, customs and their journey. In living the Gospel values we are called to be people of reconciliation and inclusion because of our shared history and our shared humanity.



### Cultural Competency

This foundation stone requires the ability of the school community to 'see' issues and experiences from another person's perspective, adhering to appropriate protocols with respect and consistency.



Cultural competence is underpinned by right relationships and it evolves over time. There is a distinct but cumulative relationship between cultural awareness (knowing), cultural sensitivity (appreciating), cultural competence (practising and demonstrating), cultural proficiency (embedding as practice) and cultural safety (environment).’ (Kalik Baring Kayap Baringi, 2018)

*“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”*

*Lilla Watson  
Gangulu Country*



**Why do you think it is important to share story?**

**What impact does the story have on those who listen?**



# Prayers



# Covenant Prayer with the Land

By Aunty Betty Pike

Today, we make a covenant with this land.

As a branch is grafted onto mature stock,

So we want to be grafted onto the ancient heritage of this land,

So that it's life may flow through us.

We commit ourselves to the land we live in and to all who belong to it,

Most particularly our Indigenous people

And also the newcomers to this country,

Who have bound themselves to this land.

We will care for it with gentleness, patience, simplicity and compassion,

Rather than merely something to be bought and sold.

We will see the land as a gift for which we are truly thankful,

And undertake the privileged duty of respecting and looking after it.

We thank God, the Great Creator Spirit, for all the earth provides:

Water, food, and all the riches above and below the ground.

We undertake to use them sparingly and thoughtfully.

As we enter more deeply into the Spirit of the land,

We see the land as a Sacrament and Icon of our mothering Creator Spirit.

Be still.

Listen to the breath of the Spirit which has blown through it for ages past,

Today, and always;

For this is: The Spirit of the Dreaming.

# Journey to the Centre

Be still, wait, and do not rush things. Let life happen by itself.  
Trust in the spirituality and wisdom that is around you.  
With certainty, we wait for the coming together of two stories.  
Sometimes waiting can be unbearable;  
Be patient, listen for the whisper that will herald the arrival of eternity.  
The people of the land honour the Creator by honouring creation.  
There is a sacredness about all living things.  
All have the right to be here and breathe.  
Make the relationship between one place and another,  
then with each other.  
Leave a part of yourself in the land for another to find.  
Look back in sorrow and remember what was,  
Then travel on, to what will be.

Spirituality is where you make your tracks in the land,  
It is the place where your story is told.  
Go deep into sacred wells of knowledge  
and experience the kind of truth  
that has the power to hurt and heal at the same time.  
Seek the new vision that is hidden there,  
Silently awaiting the anticipated visit of the hesitant explorer.  
It is a place that speaks softly to you.  
It is a place that whispers, 'You are mine and I am yours.'  
Honour the memory of the people of this land from long ago.  
Enter into the land with the courage needed  
to deal with the true realities that await us there.  
Re-inhabit a moment in time where the silent and deep suffering of the people from the past can  
still be heard in the present.

Go further into the immensity of God and listen to creation breathe.  
Find an unfamiliar path, make a new commitment, change ideas and,  
every now and then, change direction.  
In this place, the Creator Spirit tenderly stirs our inner peace  
to the friendship about to be born.  
Time enough to heal. Land enough to share.  
Befriend the past, acknowledge it, and then release it.  
Be free to act upon creating a future that unites the two stories into one.  
Let us honor the breath of the Spirit which has blown through creation for ages past,  
today, and always.  
For this is The Spirit of the Dreaming.



# Connecting with Creation



Many cultures and religions throughout history have developed, shared and written down creation stories. These stories formed a critical element of peoples' lived experience and were often expressed through art, music and dance. Essential to these stories was a reverence for creation and its Creator alongside an invitation to care for this gift that was given freely out of loving generosity. Today, we are privileged to add our knowledge around evolution to this reality. This creation story that is 14.6 billion years old is the greatest story of creation available to humankind today. Let us embrace it as a moment of Divine embrace.

## Creation Stories in the Catholic Context

In the Catholic faith there are two creation stories that are essential to our belief system. Both of these are found in The Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. The Seven Day creation text (Gen 1:1-2:4) speaks of an orderly event where creation came to be over the course of time. It was written in the Priestly era during the Babylonian Exile when the Israelites were trying to make sense of their difficult experience. The Second Account of Creation (Gen 2: 5- 2:25) also grapples with human existence in relationship to creation. It focuses on the creation of man from the earth's dust and woman from Adam's rib. This older text was written in the Yahwist era in which God was specifically referred to as Yahweh.

Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament there are many other references to creation that reflect a reverence and respectful interrelationship founded on God's love. This is most noted in the Psalms.

Amongst other significant documents, *Laudato Si* (2015) stands out as our most contemporary text written by Pope Francis that celebrates creation's biodiversity and its wonder and beauty. Importantly, it also explores the fragile state that creation is currently in. Pope Francis also discusses the impact of human abuse on creation and the earth's cry for a change of heart and behaviour so that peace and life may thrive amongst all aspects of creation. Pope Francis' rhetoric is founded upon a biblical vision for hope and love.

## Aboriginal Creation Stories

Many Aboriginal Nations share a belief of the Creator Spirit. For example eastern Australian Aboriginal people believe their Creator Spirit to be Bunjil & Biami. Creator Spirits like Bunjil and Biami, created the earth, the trees, the animals and the people. They laid down the lore and put the words in our mouths so that we can teach and pass on knowledge to the next generation. Bunjil and Biami still to this day look over us within the stars, within the water, within the Earth, ensuring that our lore is upheld by the families, governed by the Elders, and all people of the land to continue the story of Country.

The Long Neck Turtle, the Yorta Yorta Nation's totem says, 'We Will Survive' symbolizes my Totem, the long neck turtle. The turtle totem wisdom teaches us about walking our path in peace and sticking to it with determination and serenity. Slow moving on earth, yet also incredibly fast and agile in water, those who have the turtle as totem may be encouraged to take a break in their busy lives and look around or within themselves for more grounded, long-lasting solutions. Traditionally, the turtle is symbolic of the way of peace, whether it's inviting us to cultivate peace of mind or a peaceful relationship with our environment, which is surrounded by the sun, the light and all its beautiful power'. (Wominjeka – A New Beginning, 2015)

Aboriginal people do not own the land, the land owns us. We are one with the land and are affected by what happens to the land. Living on Country means living with Country, thus the responsibility of custodianship is bound to us by the lore of our ancestors, Country and the Dreaming.



# Deep Listening



The concept of **Deep Listening** appears in many Indigenous languages in Australia. In the Ngangikurungkurr language of the Daly River in the Northern Territory, the word for Deep Listening is 'Dadirri'. In the Gunaikurnai region of Gippsland, it is 'Molla Wariga'. In the Yorta Yorta language of the Murray River in Victoria, it is 'Gulpa Ngawal'.

**Deep Listening** is an Aboriginal way of listening and learning.

It is used to guide in hearing the voices of ancestors, listening to the land, the sea and the stars and hearing the stories that want to be told.

***For Indigenous people Deep Listening comes naturally It's about walking on the land softly quietly and listening to the stories around the campfire. We've got to listen to the wind in the trees, listen to the birds. It's the feeling of a gift, a gift always comes back.***

(Ron Murray Wamba Wamba)

'Let the wise also listen and gain in learning.' Proverbs 1:5

'Joseph said, Listen to this dream that I dreamed. Genesis 37:5

'The Lord listened to the voice of Israel.' Numbers 21:3

'... and he said, Anyone with ears to hear, listen.' Mark 4:9

'Listen, you are to conceive and bear a son, you must name him Jesus.' Luke 1:31

'Listen, imagine a sower went out to sow seeds ... Mark 4:3

***In our Aboriginal way, we learn to listen from our earliest days.***

***We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened.***

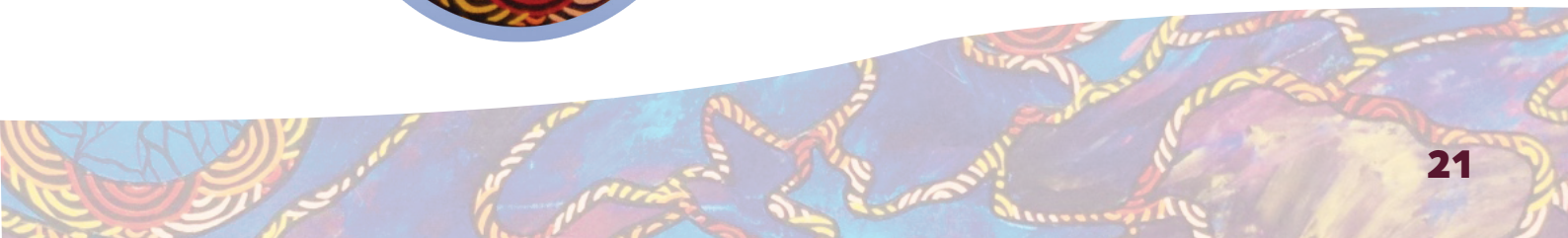
***This was the normal way for us to learn ... Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years ...***

(Aunty Miriam Rose Ungunmerr)



# Celebrating Spirituality through Dialogue

Celebrating Aboriginal Spirituality within the Catholic Faith Tradition



The Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne offers historical and present story of struggle and survival of a small group of Aboriginal Catholics. Responding to the Holy Father's challenge in 1986: *'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'*. There are Aboriginal liturgies that are available to use that will give a context and meaning to Catholic prayer. Connections can be made with Aboriginal Spirituality through ceremonies, rituals and liturgical celebrations and thus assisting with inculturation in the church's liturgical life. By inculturation, the church makes the Gospels incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community.

*Sherry Balcome*

Aboriginal spirituality and the Catholic church share in common the importance of the community and of rituals to form and connect these communities. Catholic schools express and grow their spirituality through prayer and ritual which seems a natural way to make connections with Aboriginal spirituality. Many symbols are common to both Aboriginal spirituality and Catholic sacramental life such as body movement, water, smoke, story, fire and art.

We are invited to honour the particularity of Aboriginal spirituality and the Catholic faith but find a space for dialogue between these two beliefs systems. All Australians have much to learn from the cultures, spirituality and knowledge of country of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality contains symbols and rituals that, when used appropriately in Catholic liturgical contexts, enrich our celebrations and facilitate a welcoming environment for Indigenous peoples. The advisory councils of the Bishops' Commission for Liturgy, in partnership with NATSICC, will develop options for the liturgically and culturally appropriate use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander symbols and rituals in Catholic liturgical contexts, with respect for the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

*Fifth Plenary Council of Australia – Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts Decree.*

*“In the current moment, this is an invaluable example that the Church can offer to all Australians as the way to reconciliation and peace in our land.”*

*pg. 17 "Listen, Learn, Love:  
A New Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*



***How can we celebrate Aboriginal spirituality within your school community?***



# Symbols and Rites



Spiritualities and religious traditions provide communities with shared ways of engaging with their respective environments, not primarily through logic or the theoretical but with symbols, rituals and celebrations. As they seek to engage with what is essentially mysterious and beyond full human comprehension, significance is found in places, whether they be temples, shrines, churches, totems, statues, caves, mountains, rivers or shrines. Actions and celebrations, whether it be through song, feasting, texts, prayer, dance, clothing, ritual, or gesture, also convey meaning and they all come to be understood as sacred or intensely meaningful.

Few symbols, rituals or celebrations are privileged in their own right. Rather they lead to expanding horizons, open up possibilities and point beyond themselves to other realities. Their layers of meaning are difficult to exhaust.

Catholic tradition and Aboriginal spirituality both contain symbols, rituals and celebrations including story, art, sound, movement, water, and light. Many of these are shared, but do not necessarily point to the same meaning. Sometimes the meaning may be similar and other times different. However ongoing, open and respectful dialogue between what is Catholic and Aboriginal should engage and strengthen both. Bringing them together indiscriminately may not be just for either source. However, as the recent Australian Plenary Council affirmed, appropriate use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander symbols, rituals and celebrations within Catholic contexts will enrich these celebrations, strengthen Catholic communities, and facilitate more welcoming environments for indigenous peoples. Bringing what is Catholic and what is Aboriginal together in ongoing, open and respectful dialogue should engage and strengthen both realities.



## FIRE

### the ABORIGINAL context

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.

### the CATHOLIC context

Fire plays a significant part in Catholic liturgy.

At the Easter Vigil, the people gather around the Easter fire outside the church, where the new Paschal candle is first lit. This candle is then used throughout the Easter season, at Baptisms and Funerals.

On Pentecost Sunday, the Apostles gathered as a community of people, and were filled with knowledge by the Holy Spirit who appeared through the symbol of fire.



# SMOKING

## the ABORIGINAL context

A smoking ceremony cleanses and heals the body and spirit.

A smoking ceremony is used in the practice of warding off unwanted spirits, e.g. cleansing a person, home or area.

## the CATHOLIC context

Incense is used during some festivities and solemn Catholic rituals including the Mass, Benediction and funerals to symbolise reverence, cleansing and purification.

It also links to the gifts brought by the Magi in Matthew's Gospel and those taken by the women to the tomb after Jesus' Crucifixion.



# WATER

## the ABORIGINAL context

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.

## the CATHOLIC context

Water is recognised as vital to life and is used extensively in Catholic rituals, primarily as the prime symbol of Baptism, as it provides new life and hope, and bring people into unity with Jesus and with each other.

Water is also used in a range of blessing rites.

# OILS

## the ABORIGINAL context

Animal oils are used for healing purposes.

Application of certain oils can assist in helping one connect with his/her spiritual side.

## the CATHOLIC context

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 one to meet God.

# BREAD

## the ABORIGINAL context

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.

## the CATHOLIC context

Bread is very important in Catholic tradition. It was an important gift from God in the form of manna that kept the Israelites alive during their Exodus.

Jesus described himself as the Bread of Life and it was a key focus in his Last Supper, used to symbolise his sacrifice on Calvary.

We believe that, during a Eucharistic celebration, the priest reenacts that Last Supper as he blesses and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, changes the bread & wine into the body & blood of Christ to be shared amongst the congregation.

It is brought to the altar during The Offertory as an offering to God that symbolizes ourselves and the produce of our work.

Bread, together with wine, is the result of communal effort: drawing from the natural world and creation; with farmers harvesting, millers crushing the grain to make flour, and bakers forming and cooking the loaves.

# STORY

## the ABORIGINAL context

The land holds stories and there are many Aboriginal Dreamtime Stories. Dreaming stories tell of the distant past, but they are also a lived daily reality for many Aboriginal people. They link the past, present and future.

Some examples:

- The Rainbow Serpent (Arnhem Land)
- Tiddalick the Frog (Gunnai/Kurnai)
- Bunjil and Waa (Kulin Nations)
- Emu and the Jabiru Story (Yolgnu)

## the CATHOLIC context

Story is very important within the Catholic tradition as it is the primary means to convey the tradition from one generation to another.

The most significant stories are those collected and preserved by the early Church within Holy Scripture, witnessing to the ongoing experience of God, firstly for Hebrews and then Christians.

Catholics also preserve and hand on significant stories of their lived experience.

# ART

## the ABORIGINAL context

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.

## the CATHOLIC context

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, e.g., banners, floral arrangements, focus area.

These forms of art are a reminder of beliefs and encourage participation in prayer.



# COLOUR

## in an ABORIGINAL context

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.

## in a CATHOLIC context

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.

# RITEs

## in an ABORIGINAL context

Ceremonies are performed to reinforce the connection between the living world of the Aboriginal people and the spirit world.

## in a CATHOLIC context

Church celebrations follow the liturgical seasons and help create a deeper relationship between people and God.

Catholics also enact rites of passage surrounding key times within each life, including birth, baptism, initiation, marriage, and holy orders.

# The Seven Sacraments

## Catholic Education Sandhurst



This artwork represents the sacramental journey through the lens of an Aboriginal artist, progressing from birth and baptism through to adolescence, adulthood, initiation and marriage to the final stages of life. The story brings together the Aboriginal story with the Sacraments of the Catholic faith. The rituals of the seven Sacraments of the Church are directly linked with Christ and his life, ministry, death and resurrection. They are profoundly human and in touch with human experience. Rituals enable us to enact bodily, the belief that God touches our lives in special ways. They enable us to enact the faith that is within.

*Artist: Troy Firebrace*

Our hope is that Aboriginal Spirituality through the Catholic faith Tradition will enrich our students' understanding and love of Aboriginal culture and people. It is hoped that this framework will encourage future direction and action towards inculturation, reconciliation, inclusion and healing in Australian society.

***“In this regard, we believe that Aboriginal Australians are inheritors of a spiritual tradition – a way of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ in the world through embodied participation in space – that connects humans to the cosmic rhythms (rhythmic events) and the divine mystery (abiding events)”***

The Natural Mysticism of Indigenous Australian Traditions Joan Hendriks & Gerard Hall SM



# Glossary



**Biarni, Bunjil**

Creator Spirit for many first nations people across Australia.

**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.

**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.

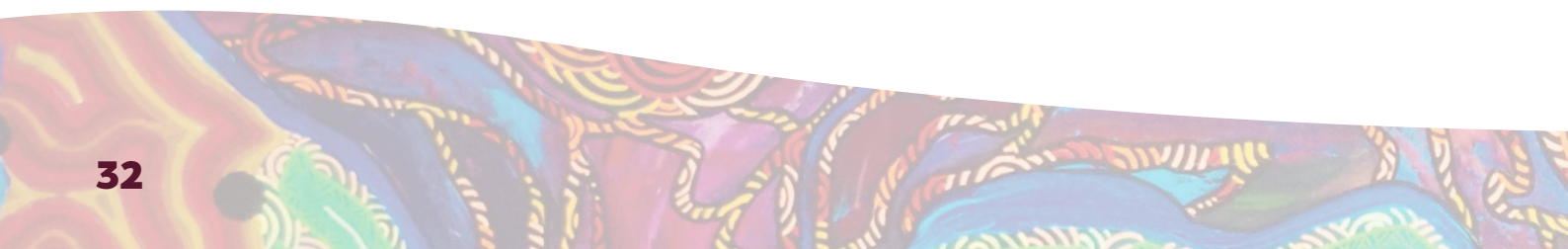
**Elders**

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.

**Lore**

Refers to the customs and stories the Aboriginal peoples learned from the Dreamings.

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.



## Mother Earth

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

## 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.

## 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.

## 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'.

# Aboriginal ways of knowing

*“In this regard, we believe that Aboriginal Australians are inheritors of a spiritual tradition - a way of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ in the world through embodied participation in space - that connects humans to the cosmic rhythms (rhythmic events) and the divine mystery (abiding events).”*

*The Natural Mysticism of Indigenous Australian Traditions Joan Hendricks & Gerard Hall sm (2008)*

*When I walk in my Country, I walk in the footprints of my ancestors. The land is my Spirit ... my Country is my prayer.*

*Vicki Walker, Knowing Home DVD Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Victoria*

*It is important we hold the light of our Creator and Spiritual Ancestors within us - which contains knowledge, compassion and love to humanity and our earth. As First Nation people we are the sum of our experiences which connect through many thousands of generations in many realms. Teaching and connecting within Catholic Education perpetuates our identity, family and traditions which is not only important to continue our stories through Elders but to be teachers which take care not only our First Nations students but all students as a whole caring collective.*

*Dr Treahna Hamm - Yorta Yorta Artist*

We are called, through our work, to look at the importance of honouring God's covenant with our Aboriginal education mission that has an emphasis on reconciliation.

It is important to promote the unity of people and bear witness to God. Reconciliation is a fundamental part of unity for Australia as a nation and it requires faith and hope that Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians become loving and valuing each other. Aboriginal Spirituality is not so much about Spirituality it is more about our Aboriginality.

Michael Chisholm (Aboriginal Education officer Sandhurst)

Aboriginal Spirituality is a living element that defines our journey and our steps moving forward in life. It demands respect for all living things, for all manner of nature's laws.

Aboriginal Spirituality calls us to be who we are, to trust in our identity and to fulfil that role.

Troy Firebrace - Aboriginal Education Officer (CES Ltd)



# Educational Resources



Aboriginal Catholic Ministry & NATSICC

Source of Life

Bishops' Conference

Kinship with the Earth

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Education Sandhurst Website: [www.ceosand.catholic.edu.au](http://www.ceosand.catholic.edu.au)

Diocese of Sandhurst Creation Statement

Catholic Identity Website: [www.ceosand.catholic.edu.au/catholicidentity](http://www.ceosand.catholic.edu.au/catholicidentity)



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