

14th Sunday Naidoc / Forgiveness

The Lord appointed seventy-two others. These 72 were his disciples or followers, of which he chose 1/6th of them and they were known as apostles – meaning to be sent. We who are baptized are also sent. In fact, at the end of every Mass in the world, we are all sent: Go forth the Mass is ended. The very name Mass or *missa* (missile) means sent. So we are sent out to evangelize others. How do we do that? Jesus said be like lambs: that is, docile and friendly. Then, assure them of my peace: Let your first words be: “Peace to this house!” If they bear Christ’s peace then the kingdom of God is very near to you. The mission back then and still today is much the same. In this Jubilee Year how do we bear the peace of Christ to others? In this week, the media focuses on Naidoc matters. So one may ask how have we evangelised the first people of this country? One person who died in 1960, played a fascinating role in bringing peace to our aborigines was Bishop Francis, the bishop of 150 wives, a book entitled about his missionary work. His name was Frances Xavier Gsell and was born in Alsace, Germany in 1872. He joined the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and spent a few years in Papua before being appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Northern Territory. In 1911 he established a mission at Bathurst Island. In contrast to failures of recent times in those regions, he ran a peaceful settlement with children attending school and with real economic activity, including a market garden and a saw-milling business. But actual missionary success was slow, for there was not a single adult convert in thirty years. It all changed in 1921, when Martina converted. She was a young girl at the mission who was betrothed to a “anonymous man” who had come to collect her. Bishop Frances noted that in tribal law, woman were objects of pleasure and they were betrothed as infants to elders’ harems at young ages. Martina refused to go, but the bishop was obliged to follow tribal law. He wrote that he tried to stifle her tears though insisted that tribal law is final. Five days later, however, she returns with a speared leg and determined to stay at the mission. In the evening an angry mob of tribesmen arrive and demand her back. Not forgetting to call on God’s help, the bishop welcomes them with flour and tobacco and suggests a good sleep before talking in the morning. Overnight he lays out a variety of goods: calico, tobacco, a mirror, pots of meat and tins of treacle. When the tribesmen woke up they noted the produce and he names the price: Martina’s freedom. She is brought up by the nuns and is allowed to marry a native on the mission. Over the years, Bishop Francis ‘bought’ a hundred and fifty girls, all considered under tribal law as his wives. Being wary of assimilation, in the sense of integration into white society, for the whites could also exploit, he ensured that the girls married well and peace prevailed. As Bishop of Darwin in the 1940s, he was present during the policy of child removal of infants of mixed blood, now called the Stolen Generation. Unlike many commentaries today, he claimed that because many of these children were unwanted in the tribes, their lives were filled with neglect and suffering, so their departure, for some, was a blessing. To accommodate the “half-caste” children, a settlement was made at Garden Point, Tiwi Islands. It like Beagle Bay mission, north of Broome, founded by the Trappist order in the 1890s on similar principles, also provided for the unwanted for at the mission they had enormous gardens full of vegetables and melons; the men had their jobs to do, each going to their own workplace, whether it was the bakery, gardens or checking the windmills; the women looked after the babies and little ones, or worked elsewhere. Today, its church’s altar, elaborately decorated with pearl shell, is now a tourist attraction, for the mission, as such, is gone. For those who feel that they cannot forgive, we Christians are reminded by the Lord, that we must let go and let God’s grace heal us - move on. One prime example of forgiveness and healing is well portrayed in the life of St Maria Goretti (1890-1902), whose feast is today. She was the third of seven children of a poor family in Italy who shared a house with another family who had two sons, one was Alessandro. Maria’s father died when she was ten. Alessandro was besotted with Maria’s beauty and sought to seduce her. When she refused, in blind rage, he stabbed her. Before her death a day later, she forgave him. He was sentenced to thirty years in jail, and for the first seven was unrepentant and bitter. After Maria appeared to him in a dream, he changed and was a model prisoner for twenty years. Once released, he sought out the Goretti family and asked to be forgiven by Maria’s mother. At Midnight Mass together they knelt together at the altar rails – murderer and mother. Maria was canonized in 1950. Alessandro died in 1970 after entering a monastery.