

A reflection for NAIDOC Week

7 – 14 July is NAIDOC Week

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Published in Catholic Outlook

9th July 2024

This year, all days and observances relating to Indigenous Australians are sacred to all Australians. Following the nastiness of much of the Referendum campaign and the distress its loss caused to so many Indigenous Australians,

non-Indigenous Australians owe it to their First Nations brothers and sisters to treasure and respect their festivals. For that reason, the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week is particularly timely. It commemorates an initiative taken in hard times, an act of defiance and an invitation to be heard. The week is a time to celebrate the fire that they lit and to work with them to keep it burning.

NAIDOC Week was built on pride: the pride that led Indigenous people, who recognised that they were neither respected nor heard, to work for change. They saw how inappropriate it was to celebrate Australia Day on the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet. This date marked the beginning of their dispossession. They began to organise in order to find recognition and acceptance by other Australians of their right to participate in society but faced opposition at every corner. They drew up a petition sent to King George V to ask for Aboriginal electorates, but the Government saw it as outside its constitutional powers to provide them. In 1938, the 150th anniversary of the landing, the day was made a national holiday. In the same year, a Congress of Indigenous people met in Sydney. Its members marched on Australia Day, which they called Mourning Day.

Australia Day is still celebrated on the anniversary of Indigenous expropriation, but NAIDOC Week was born and continues. The date was changed to expand the occasion beyond protest to a celebration of the Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander heritage. It provides an opportunity for all Australians to join in celebrating their culture, aspirations and hopes. And to listen to their voice.

The theme of NAIDOC Week, “Keep the Fire Burning: Blak, Loud and Proud”, is appropriate at many levels. It echoes the importance of lighting and controlling fire in Indigenous cultures before Settlement. Fire lay at the heart of the meals, the feasts, the care for the land and the community life of Indigenous Australians. To keep it burning was a communal task of mutual service. It was the difference between a thriving and energetic community and one that had lost hope and was dying out. This year, then, NAIDOC Week marks the determination to honour the fire in the heart that engendered the birth of the Week, and to ensure that it endures.

For non-Indigenous Australians, NAIDOC Week is a time to honour the culture of our First Peoples and the tenacity with which they have insisted on their culture and their rights. For all of us, it is what we want our shared Australia to be like. It is about forming the respectful and decent relationships that engender pride within communities. It is a time for engaging with one another, for recognising and celebrating the many ways in which pride is being built in Indigenous communities, and for pressing for respect in all our personal and institutional relationships.

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