



# Let the Many Coastlands Be Glad!

A Pastoral Letter on the Great Barrier Reef

– By the Catholic Bishops of Queensland –

A Pastoral Letter on the Great Barrier Reef  
Signed by THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF QUEENSLAND on  
*World Oceans Day, 8 June 2004*

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Let the earth  
rejoice; let  
the many  
coastlands  
be glad! . . .  
before the  
Lord of all  
the earth.

Psalm 97:1-6

## ***A GIFT OF RARE BEAUTY***

As the Catholic Bishops of Queensland, we have written this Letter to emphasise our shared ecological responsibility for one of our greatest natural treasures, the Great Barrier Reef. Care for the environment and a keener ecological awareness have become key moral issues for the Christian conscience.

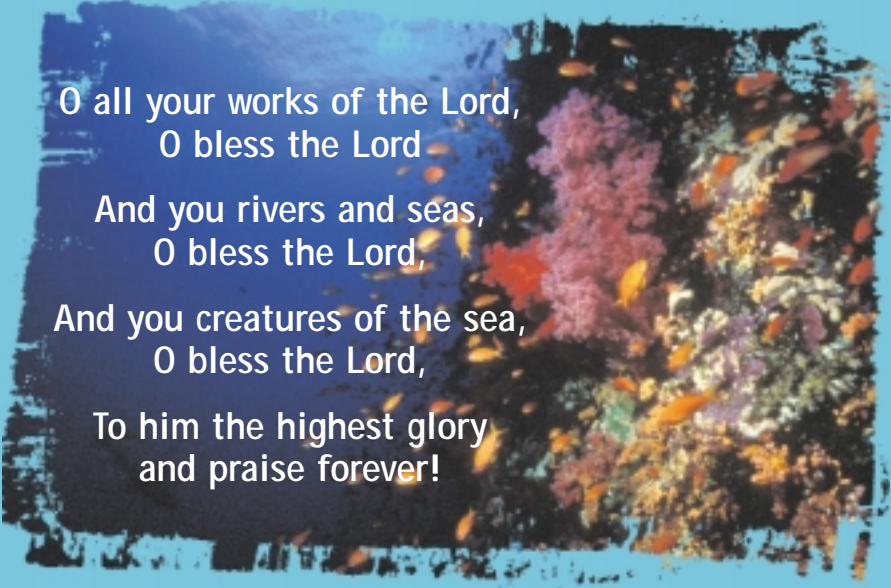
The Holy Spirit is clearly guiding us into a deeper sense of companionship and care in regard to all the varied forms of life on planet Earth. Not only is the Reef a precious ecosystem in itself, but also an integral part of the one web of planetary life that connects us all – the human species and all species of the land and sea, rainforest and reef, mountains, plains and inland desert.

In our minds and hearts, a greater awareness of the wonder of life has awoken. This awareness compels us not to be passive spectators or exploiters of what has been, for millions of years, in the making. It redefines us as carers, stewards, artists and celebrants of the living world. It colours and inspires our imaginations; it nourishes our being and turns our thinking into the deepest kind of gratitude for what has been so unstintingly given.

We cannot realistically love our neighbours and leave out the neighbourhood in which they live. Nor can we pretend to respect that neighbourhood without understanding it as a life-sustaining environment. But that, in turn, means looking to its long-term well-being. Indeed, to adore the Creator of the universe with praise and thanksgiving, to realise that all things have been made in Christ and find their connectedness in him (Col 1:15-18), is to become more sensitive to the wonder of creation. It is, after all, a beautiful, tender display of God's glory and revelation. All this is true to a remarkable extent in what we have come to call the Great Barrier Reef.



The Reef brings many who experience it to the point of prayer. They feel united with countless generations who have contemplated the wonders of nature, and found themselves impelled to praise God, as in the words of the Cantic of Daniel:



O all your works of the Lord,  
O bless the Lord  
And you rivers and seas,  
O bless the Lord,  
And you creatures of the sea,  
O bless the Lord,  
To him the highest glory  
and praise forever!

The composer of this ancient prayer did not know the beauty of our Reef. We can add, therefore, our own verses in celebration of its multi-coloured fish, the coral trout, the huge groupers,



dugongs, sea snakes, large green turtles and the humpback whale. We can praise God for the glowing hues of the coral gardens and the mats of sea grasses swaying in rhythm with sea fern, sponges and anemones.

There is a special glory in this Reef. Wonder, gratitude and praise of God lead easily to a deeper sense of responsibility for what God has made. Our Reef is



home to thousands of creatures, “many of which appear to be dressed for an underwater mardi-gras so absurd and brilliant are their colours and patterns. People who spend even a few hours exploring this world become reef conservationists for life.”<sup>1</sup>

The imagination of Jesus himself was alive to the wonder of nature. He admired the freedom of the birds and the beauty of the lilies of the field (Lk 12:24-28). He spoke of the deep meaning of life in realistic terms dealing with flocks and vines, grains and crops and fruit trees, wind and rain, fish, snakes, scorpions, hills, mountains, desert and sea. He lived in the world of nature, and often used

the language of the natural world to speak of our relationships to himself, to God, and to one another. We could well wonder how he would have enjoyed the beauty of the Reef as so many of us have come to know it. One thing is clear: he would have seen it as a splendid manifestation of his Father's love, and as invitation to live beyond the greed and violence in our lives, and to move into another space. The wondrous beauty of this place, our Reef, demands that we see things 'otherwise', that we occupy our land and its beauties as a blessing to be shared, not as a resource to be mindlessly plundered.

We are indebted to our Indigenous sisters and brothers for the lessons they have taught us in seeing things 'otherwise', in caring for the land and sea of this ancient continent. We acknowledge that Indigenous Australians, stretching over millennia, have an enduring and extraordinary affinity with the world of nature and spirit, explained in the words of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr: <sup>2</sup>



“Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait.  
We do not try to hurry things up.  
We let them follow their natural courses – like the seasons.  
We watch the moon in each of its phases.

We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth.  
When twilight comes, we prepare for night.  
At dawn we rise with the sun...

There are deep springs within each one of us. Within this deep spring,  
Which is the very Spirit of God, is a sound.  
The sound of Deep calling Deep.  
The sound is the Word of God – Jesus.”





# THE GREAT WATER GARDENS

Any call to sustainable stewardship must be based on accurate information, and, as far as possible, on scientifically established fact. We thank the various teams of marine scientists who have built up our knowledge of the Great Barrier Reef over the years. Extensive research conducted locally by the Australian Institute of Marine Science, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and James Cook University has helped us base our concerns on fact.

Through their research, and the research of other scientists at other universities, the CSIRO and museums across Australia we know, for instance, the surprising size of the Reef with its 2900 individual reefs covers an area greater than the United Kingdom. It is nearly the size of Italy. Astronauts tell us that from

space the reef is clearly visible in all its fragility and splendor. Enlivening the surface of the planet, it is a field of vibrant interaction linking sea creatures, including corals, with sea-grass beds, beaches, mangroves, estuaries and the hinterland. At least 1500 species of fish inhabit the waters, with 400 types of hard coral and 5000 varieties of mollusc. In the skies above the Reef soar herons, osprey, shearwaters, pelicans and sea eagles. It is one of the most complex natural systems in the world.



That the reef is a unique natural wonder has been recognised in Queensland, throughout Australia and across the world. U.N.E.S.C.O has listed it a World Heritage Area, thus declaring it one of the remaining Great Natural Wonders of the World. So significant is the Reef that its area constitutes over 30 per cent of the total area in the world protected by world heritage listing. Regrettably, to date, only 1 per cent of the world's reef systems are heritage protected.

We applaud this sense of growing responsibility for the Reef, firmly based in deep moral values and on scientific evidence. We recognise especially that the indigenous peoples of Queensland have long practised good management and protection of their sea country. Throughout this World Heritage area are many middens and archeological sites of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. Rich examples are found on Lizard and Hinchinbrook Islands, and on Stanley, Cliff and Clack Islands where there are spectacular rock paintings of great age and significance. In recent times, many indigenous communities have documented their goals and strategies with the Environmental Protection Agency of Queensland.<sup>3</sup> Such records will improve communication between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in what is a major concern to both: namely a shared custodianship and protection of the Reef.

*“It is the task of the State to provide for the defence and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces.”* Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus



# SIGNS OF HOPE

## SIGNS OF THE SPIRIT

Pope John Paul II has for many years been drawing attention to the environmental crises facing humanity. In his 1990 New Year Message, he stated, “Christians in particular, realise that responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith”.

In his 1999 New Year Message, the Pope warned that “the danger of serious damage to land and sea, and to the climate, flora and fauna, calls for a profound change in modern society’s typical consumer life-style, particularly in the richer countries.”

Again, on 17 January 2001, (General Audience, Vatican) he drew attention to the continuing environmental deterioration of the planet, describing humanity’s disregard for the integrity of creation as “humiliating...the earth, that flower-bed that is our home”. Prophetically, in this address, the Pope called the world’s Catholics to an “ecological conversion” to avoid planetary “catastrophe”.

The following year, in response to this call, the Australian Catholic Bishops established a new national agency, Catholic Earthcare Australia - mandated to “safeguard creation”, promote the importance of living more sustainably, and provide a voice for the victims of environmental degradation. Catholic Earthcare reports a wide-ranging appreciation and support of its ecological mission by Christians of all faith traditions and communities. In addition, schools, youth workers and University researchers have named a concern for world

Those who go down to the sea  
tell part of its story, and when  
we hear them we are  
thunderstruck; in it are his  
creatures, stupendous amazing,  
all kinds of life, and the  
monsters of the deep. For him  
each messenger succeeds, and  
at his bidding accomplishes  
his will. More than this we  
need not add; let the last word  
be, he is all in all!

Sirach 43:25-28

and local environment issues as one of the “touchstones for this generation of young Australians”.<sup>4</sup>

Pope John Paul II sees this growing concern for the health of the environment as one of the “signs of hope” that the Holy Spirit provides for our times. At the dawn of the new millennium, the Bishops of the Church of Oceania met in Synod in Rome. Following the conclusion of the Synod the Pope issued a document called *Ecclesia in Oceania* (The Church in Oceania). In this document he illustrated the theological foundation for respect for the environment and declared, “It is the task of human beings to care for, preserve and cultivate the treasures of creation” (No. 31). He also stressed the fact that “the natural beauty of Oceania has not escaped the ravages of human exploitation” (No. 31). The Churches of Oceania are rightly called upon to care for the natural treasures of the region – Queensland’s Great Barrier Reef, the Rowley Shoals, Ningaloo and Abrolhos reef systems along the coast of Western Australia, the kelp forests of Tasmania and reefs in countries such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Cook Islands and Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

For some time now, many people have been working towards the preservation of our Great Barrier Reef. They include farmers, pastoralists, fishermen, scientists, environmental activists and ordinary citizens, even young children.



The sea and dry land belong to God, who m

They are to be congratulated for their perseverance, dedication and practical concern. In a poll taken in 2003, some 94 per cent of Australians declared that they wanted greater protection for the Reef, and 90 per cent of coastal Queenslanders indicated the same concern.<sup>5</sup>

The forty-five thousand supporters of the 2001-3 campaign to protect the Reef can be well pleased with their involvement. As a result the Australian Government has agreed to increase the protection of the Great Barrier Reef from 4.6 to 33 per cent, thus creating the world's largest network of marine sanctuaries. The new Green Zones will help protect more than 11 million hectares of reef from human exploitation. We commend the Australian Government for responding to the will of the people and hold hope that the Government will see fit to continue to financially support reef research work, and where necessary, consider increasing the area of reef protection.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has led the way with its public education programmes. Its sound research and policy developments envisage a situation in which the Reef can be both a water wonderland to be enjoyed and at the same time be protected for the generations to follow.



ade them, formed them by hand. Psalm 95:4-5

"...changes in farming practices..."



"...limit soil erosion..."

## ***SACRIFICES ALREADY MADE***

We must not forget those who are contributing to the Reef project in ways that are often very costly to themselves. Many cane farmers, pastoralists and agriculturalists have contributed significantly to changes in farming practices that limit soil erosion and run-off. The majority of recreational and professional fishermen have collaborated closely with Government agencies in developing new compliance regulations. We recognise that some people in the fishing industry have lost their traditional source of income because of the new conservation zones, and that all Australians and their national and state governments need to generously respond to the sacrifices that have been made.

The implementation of new responsibilities is inevitably painful, and some bear a disproportionate burden. As pastors we are deeply concerned for the well being of these people and wish to support them and their families in every

*As the rising sun  
is clear to all,  
so the glory of  
the Lord fills  
all his works.*

*Sirach 42:16*

way possible. Continuing consultation with industry groups, the renewable energy sector, conservation groups, government agencies and the communities most affected is imperative if genuine progress in the Reef preservation project is to be maintained.

In particular, both the fishing and tourist industries have made significant changes in this regard. Most tourist operators take great care in sharing their conservation ethic with the travelling public and lead by example, all in an effort to leave the lightest possible footprint on that part of the Reef they visit. The tourist and recreation sectors are encouraged to embrace fully the principles of eco tourism. The tourist industry would be well aware of a recent University study advising that the Great Barrier is the most economically valuable reef in the world - with an estimated worth of some \$457 billion to the international economy and up to \$3 billion in recreational tourism.<sup>6</sup>

Just as the rainforests can yield new drugs our oceans may be an equally important source for the discovery of new medicines. Already scientists have developed a sunscreen from substances that corals use as a protection against sunlight. A poison released from sea snails has served as an effective pain killer for humans, and chemicals from sea sponges have been used as effective cancer cell destroyers. Scientists are optimistic that the waters of the Reef will reveal many new natural products for their therapeutical properties in the future.



*“Coral reefs are the global canaries, as they are already showing rapid responses to climate change at the global scale.”*

The Townsville Statement.

In this context, it is important for those with deeper concerns about the environment to recognise that farmers, graziers, landowners and the tourism and fishing industries share many common concerns and aspirations, even if such groups may be called to embrace the environmental challenge more deeply. We are all in the process of learning how to better safeguard creation, respect the rhythms of nature and live more sustainably. In the interests of planetary health we are all called to participate in respectful dialogue, to leave a lighter ecological footprint and firmer spiritual one, so that generations yet unborn will inherit a world, in the words of the Pope, “closer to the design of the Creator”.<sup>7</sup>



It is particularly heartening to draw attention to the burgeoning number of schools whose students have become involved in the Great Barrier Reef “Reef Guardianship” project, the Green & Healthy Schools Programme and State and Local Government water and land care initiatives. By no means the least of the groups who have played a part are families. To be aware of the number

of families who involve themselves in campaigns like Clean Up Australia, or in organisations like Coastcare, Landcare, Riverwatch, Saltwatch, Beachwatch and Wetlands Action Groups is to understand what an influence they play in protecting our land and waterscapes. They are proof of the value of individuals and families who act locally and think globally, in a way that the present situation demands. These generous people provide a human face and spirit to what the Pope calls our “ecological vocation”.<sup>8</sup>





# *A COMMON CAUSE FOR THE COMMON GOOD*

Protection of the Reef is a common cause for the common good. It is promoted most effectively through active co-operation, up to date information, and healthy debate on unresolved issues. The Church desires to contribute to the public dialogue by explaining how its ecological and social justice teachings serve to safeguard the integrity of creation, promote the common good and protect the health and well being of both human and non human communities. In recent times, Pope John Paul II has explained one aspect of the Church's mission as, "protecting the radical good of life in all its manifestations".<sup>9</sup>

Despite recent successes, some raise major concerns about the extent of sanctuary that has been declared, as well as about several significant issues which we must address, if we are to ensure the survival, the diversity, the beauty and the integrity of the Reef. Some threats remain.

The immediate threats are those of sediment run-off from the land, sewage outflow, deteriorating water quality and over-fishing. Next, are the problems connected with climate change, particularly coral bleaching and rising sea levels. Moreover, the interaction of coral bleaching and varying water quality are likely to strain the resilience of the Reef even further.



## *Land Management*

The immediate threat to water quality on the Great Barrier Reef stems from soil erosion resulting in nutrients and toxic chemicals (pesticides, herbicides and heavy metals) flowing onto the Reef through the many Queensland river systems. These rivers now carry ten times more silt than they did 100 years ago. Silt smothers corals and prevents young corals from settling and recolonising the vacant reef space, killing or weakening the coral so that it becomes susceptible to disease. Without coral life, the finely balanced reef ecosystem collapses. Regrettably, there are a number of examples around the world where this has already happened.

To combat soil erosion, some agriculturalists and pastoralists have prudently planted riparian zones on their properties, to trap soil and reduce erosion. Repairing and protecting wetlands is also important, for they are “the kidneys of our water ways”. They are a natural effluent treatment system that cleans the water before it reaches the sea.

We congratulate the Queensland Government on the recent decision to radically reduce land clearing activities in the State. Our environment will benefit significantly from this welcomed initiative.



## Domestic and Workplace Habits

In our habitual practices, we all need to recognise that whatever flows down our drains flows into our rivers; and ultimately out onto the Reef. Clearly, we all share a responsibility to use water wisely and dispose of waste, chemicals and packaging in a responsible manner.



## Over Fishing

Marine scientists warn us that over-fishing remains a threat to all world reefs. On the Great Barrier Reef too, many species are regarded as “fully exploited”.<sup>10</sup> Experience demonstrates that a decline in the viability of one fishery is inevitably followed by switching to a new fishery in an attempt to recover investment, which in turn jeopardises the ecological sustainability of the new fishery. We commend the new Reef protection plan which now excludes fishing from 33 per cent of the Great Barrier Reef to provide sanctuary areas for replenishment of stock in fished out waters.

## Tourism

Not only are there concerns about sustainable fishing and its future on the Great Barrier Reef, there are also other industries like tourism that need to ensure that they continue to minimise their “footprint” on the Reef. We acknowledge the great strides made by many operators and businesses towards eco tourism activities that impact less on the environment. Good community education and advertising slogans - such as “Whatever rubbish you carry out in your boat, make sure you bring back!” - designed to inform yacht and pleasure craft operators are to be encouraged.

*“The ability of reefs to recover from cyclones or bleaching – the reef’s resilience – is compromised by overfishing and pollution.”*

The Townsville Statement.



## Development

Coastal developments that argue for the removal of vegetation, disturbance of turtle and bird nesting sites, dredging of lagoons, filling in of mangroves, eradication of fish breeding habitats and the destruction of fringing reefs by trampling and effluent pollution, require a vigorous and continuing monitoring. In this context we are reminded of the warning from Pope John Paul II, when he said, “I speak... in a spirit of concern for the preservation of the goodness and beauty bestowed by the Creator. For there is a danger that everything that brings such joy to the eye and such exultation to the spirit can be destroyed. We need to realize that there can be a grave sin against the natural environment, one which weighs on our conscience, and one which calls for grave responsibility towards God the Creator.”<sup>11</sup>



## Global Warming

Then, there is the very serious problem of climate change. Scientists advise that the waters of the Reef are now warmer than 100 years ago. Great Barrier Reef waters have risen 0.6 degrees centigrade in the past 100 years and are projected to increase by between 2 and 6 degrees over the next century.<sup>12</sup> Corals live in a very narrow “envelope”

of thermal tolerance where temperatures only 1 degree centigrade above normal summer conditions cause them to stress (bleach). When exposed to these conditions over prolonged periods, corals die.

In 1998, and again in 2002, coral bleaching demonstrably occurred across most of the Great Barrier Reef, killing, on some reefs, up to 90 per cent of the coral. Climate change scientists report that these events are a wake-up call as climate change is likely to make such happenings more frequent and more severe.

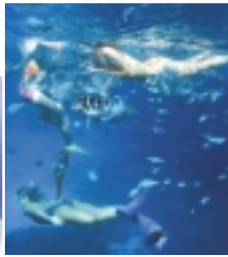
In September 2002, out of a concern for protecting the land, oceans and atmosphere of the Pacific region, the Australian Catholic Bishops together with the other 14 member Churches of the National Council of Churches, issued a statement urging the Federal Government to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. We again call on the Federal Government as a matter of urgency to join in solidarity with the other 122 nations of the international community that have ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

# TAKING RESPONSIBILITY: OUR ECOLOGICAL VOCATION

Global warming is the responsibility of individuals as much as governments and industry. As the world's highest emitters of greenhouse gases per person, Australians have a particular responsibility to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change can be controlled by diminishing greenhouse gas emissions. Because the consumer ideology encourages us to purchase more and more appliances, which in turn need more and more electricity, it is important that each of us make the effort to do three things:

Firstly, we need to convert to renewable sources of energy as most of our energy is being created from non-renewable fossil fuels. Fossil fuel emissions are the greatest contributors to human induced climate change, especially to global warming. And every effort should be made to design and construct houses and buildings that are more energy efficient.

Secondly, we must change our consumption habits and seriously examine what we buy and why. Many people are beginning to realize that the Earth's resources are finite and cannot be stretched to go around at the same level of





Western consumption for everyone, no matter what technological breakthroughs or redistributions occur. We are living beyond our environmental capacity and we have to face the hard issues of radically changing our habits, reducing our consumption of everything that is not renewable, and reusing and recycling what we have. We are, in conscience, required to ask where our consumer goods have come from, where our food is grown or where its water is taken from or goes to, or indeed how much is used. Our investments should support enterprises that make ecologically sound decisions and not those whose activities damage our ecosystems.

Thirdly we need to believe that our individual actions, small though they be, will make a difference. For example, the recycling of just one aluminium can will save enough electricity to run one television set for 3 hours. We invite you to visit the websites of Catholic Earthcare Australia and the Catholic Justice & Peace Commission of Brisbane for advice on recycling, waste management and prudent energy and water use. We encourage the carrying out of an environmental audit of your home, work or organisation's operations in the hope that it will lead to more ethical, sustainable and economical practices. Contact Catholic Earthcare Australia for assistance with an audit.

# CHRIST IS ALL CHRIST IS IN ALL (Col. 3.11)

While we have made some progress, there is much still to be done. At the launch of Catholic Earthcare Australia, Archbishop of Brisbane John Bathersby, spoke of the way forward for the Church in Australia in tackling the environmental crises:

“The entire life of Christians is an exploration into Christ. Each generation pushes back ever so slightly the envelope of his mystery...One of the most significant developments in Catholic understanding of the Christian mission in

more recent times is its embrace of creation in all its vitality and beauty...to enlist Catholics in this further aspect of evangelisation, and to educate people about the depth of vision demanded of those who would follow in Christ’s footsteps.”<sup>13</sup>

One way, Pope John Paul II has urged this generation of Australians to follow in Christ’s footsteps, is by living out our “ecological vocations”.<sup>14</sup> What does this mean? The Pope’s message was emphatic. We have, he said, the “special responsibility to assume, on behalf of all



humanity, stewardship of the Pacific Ocean, containing over half of the Earth's total supply of water. The continued health of this and other oceans is crucial for the welfare of peoples, not only in Oceania but in every part of the world".<sup>15</sup>

Although these past ten years have had their successes, we Queenslanders cannot afford to be complacent. We must safeguard the Great Barrier Reef not only for ourselves but also for the generations to follow. In another sense, the Reef belongs to the world and the world relies on us to exercise prudent and prophetic stewardship in ensuring its vitality, fecundity, beauty and biodiversity.

In so safeguarding the integrity of the waters of the Pacific and the Great Barrier Reef, we are in a profound sense, honouring and sharing in the life of the risen Christ. As St Paul taught us, "So he who came down is the same one who went up, above and beyond the heavens, to fill the whole universe with his presence" [Ephesians 4.10]. This is the very same "presence" that today fills the universe and lovingly graces, impregnates, stimulates and sustains the sparkling blue-green waters and gloriously coloured coral necklace of Queensland's eastern coastline we call, "the Reef". It should be understood, that to do wilful harm to the integrity of the Great Barrier Reef is to diminish the image of Christ which is radiated to us through our world.

Responding to this sacred task with a sense of humility requires for many of us a candid examination of lifestyle choices, a realisation that creation is sacred and endangered and a radical change of heart – an "ecological conversion". It is vital to grow more aware of the importance of safeguarding the health of our local, life sustaining coastal catchments and ecosystems that support our communities and nourish the spirit.

And in preparing for the ecological and spiritual challenges ahead, as Queenslanders we can do no better than to heed the words of the Holy Father, spoken when he last stood on Australian soil:<sup>16</sup>





Look, dear people of Australia,  
And behold this vast continent of yours!

It is your home!

The place of your joys and pains,  
your endeavours and your hopes!

And for all of you Australians,  
the Way to the Father's house

Passes through this land

Jesus Christ is this Way.

Pope John Paul II



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