Living in harmony at

SHARED TABLE
OF HUMANITY

Involved with ACU National for more than 10 years, Aunty Joan also lectures on Indigenous issues and cross-cultural studies to education students from all backgrounds.

“There is a spirituality that is alive at ACU National because of the nature of a Catholic university,” Aunty Joan said, adding that being called “Aunty” gave her a sense of being loved and of belonging.

“There is a spirituality of education, and a spiritual relationship between the staff and students from the top of the ladder down. One only has to walk around an ACU National campus to sense that spirit. They cater for everybody. There’s a real acceptance of cultural differences.”

ACU National Indigenous Research Scholarship recipient Aunty Joan Hendriks of the Ngugi people is researching the possibilities of dialogue on creation spiritualities in the Indigenous and Christian traditions.
During opening orientation each year, the University acknowledges the original custodians of the land on which its campuses are situated, and celebrates reconciliation during NAIDOC Week and Education Week.

“It’s wonderful to see the three flags flying – the Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. Every effort is being made to put forward practical and symbolic reconciliation here.”

Aunty Joan works closely with the University’s three Indigenous units, Weemala in Brisbane, Yalbalina in Sydney and Jim-Baa-Yer in Melbourne.

“Many Australians are beginning to realise that Indigenous spiritualities contain a great gift for all people in reconnecting humanity to the sacred source within all creation.”

At a recent conference on interfaith dialogue in Venice, Aunty Joan and School of Theology (National) assistant head of school Reverend Associate Professor Gerard Hall SM presented a paper on The Natural Mysticism of Indigenous Australian Traditions.

They noted the danger of “intellectual colonisation” in which we too readily apply foreign pre-conceptions onto the “other”, whether in a romantic or derogatory way, thereby making the other an intellectual extension of ourselves. “This may placate our fears, but does little to enhance authentic understanding.”

They made it clear that they cannot speak for all or most Indigenous Australians, and that when they use Indigenous terms such as Alcheringa or Dadirri, these are always terms derived from a particular people, tribe and place. “It is this particularity of land, people and place that circumscribes the distinctive spiritualities of each Indigenous clan,” their joint paper noted.

“Indigenous Australians are ready to enter into dialogue with peoples from other traditions who make a place at the common table of our shared humanity.

“As with the scriptural texts of other traditions, it is the land itself which gives life, forges identity, reveals the Sacred. In this sense, Indigenous Australians embody and express in an original and striking way … a kind of nature mysticism.”

They explained that, for Indigenous Australians, the Sacred is not a separate reality experienced outside time. It is by “living in harmony with all things the Sacred is manifest”.

“Personal identity, human community and cosmic harmony are one-and-the-same. This is the experiential understanding, or abiding myth, awakened in Indigenous people from birth. If we can speak of ecstatic moments of unity with the created universe, ancestors, greater and lesser spirits, these are the rites of passage and associated rituals that affirm one’s mystical relationship with the earth, the tribe and the cosmos.

“Through this natural experience, Indigenous Australians form an intimate relationship with the earth which they cannot ‘own’ but learn to ‘live’ with in harmony, to ‘dwell’ on or ‘inhabit’ as an integral part of themselves. This explains the difficulty Indigenous people have in relating to ‘private’ property and ‘individual’ ownership which mark European cultures.

“While many of these experiences are ‘broken’ as a result of European colonisation, one cannot wipe out 40,000 years of cultural life and memory in the short space of 200 years.”

The work of Indigenous artist Richard Campbell, of the Gumbaingirr/Dunghutti people of coastal NSW, is rich with the symbols and stories of his family and heritage.

A member of the Stolen Generations, Richard was able to reunite with some members of his family and channel his experiences into his artworks. Richard was selected as an Indigenous artist for World Youth Day 2008.

“Through my painting, I forgive,” Richard said. “I tell my stories ... It’s how I heal. Christ himself was persecuted throughout his life.”

ACU National acquired a copy of his Stations of the Cross in 2006. The symbols reveal good and evil in the rainbow serpent, the joy of life, the wisdom of past elders, a non-judgemental God, the importance of gathering together and nurturing and caring for each other, and much more.

Notes by Sister Patricia Adams RSM which accompany the artwork describe the stations as a “journey of God’s love for all”, a “journey of dedication to wisdom and the oneness of God and us”. “As we journey together the Spirit of this ancient land reveals to us the wholeness and inclusiveness of all creation,” she said.