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From left: Bishop Michael Morrissey, apostolic administrator of the Broome Diocese; Aboriginal elder Madeleine Jadai; Perth Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, president of the Australia Catholic Bishops Conference; and Aboriginal elder Maureen Yanawana, in Sydney for the presentation of the Mass of the Land of the Holy Spirit on May 7 (Courtesy of Australian Catholic Bishops Conference/Paul Osborne)



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Rome — May 23, 2024

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Australia's Catholic bishops have approved a liturgy incorporating elements of Aboriginal language and culture, marking what some liturgists are hailing as a lived expression of the Second Vatican Council that has been long delayed.

On May 7, the Mass of the Land of the Holy Spirit ("*Missa Terra Spiritus Sancti*") was approved during a plenary meeting of the Australian bishops for use in the Broome Diocese in Western Australia. The Mass will now be submitted to the Vatican's Dicastery for Divine Worship for official recognition.

"The way I see it, it's part of this process envisioned by the Second Vatican Council and the Constitution on the Sacred liturgy," Jason McFarland, the executive secretary for liturgy for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, told the National Catholic Reporter. "It represents an inculturated form of the Latin rite."

Among the major reforms of the landmark 1962-65 Vatican II council was the approval for Mass in the vernacular, and in particular, the encouragement of liturgical inculturation.

Around that same time, in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, Pallotine Fr. Kevin McKelson was beginning his work with Aboriginal communities, including learning five Indigenous languages that he used to help formulate a liturgy that would become known locally as the "*Missa Kimberley*."

For five decades, that Mass has been used throughout the region, but in various forms and without official recognition. When St. Joseph Sr. Carmel Pilcher visited the Kimberley region in 2012, she was "extremely impressed" by what she witnessed.

"This Mass has been in use since the council, but when I was visiting it was on scrappy pieces of paper and there were various versions being used," she recalled to NCR.

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Over the years, McKelson, a linguist, worked with the Aboriginal communities to study their expressions and language to begin to formulate the Mass.

"While the structure is the same as the Roman rite, the texts have been written in such a way that they have come from the first languages of the Aboriginal people back into English," said Pilcher, who described the Mass as using simple English and being entirely sung, with frequent repetition.

"This is the Aboriginal way," she said. "For some people, it may seem extremely simplistic, but it's how they speak, it's their vocabulary."

McKelson had died in 2011 and Pilcher, a liturgical scholar, carried on his work by setting up a committee that included both liturgists and Aboriginal representatives to begin studying the Mass theologically, liturgically and canonically, and to make some small changes.

While McKelson had made various efforts to gain official recognition from Rome, he was never successful in his attempts. Throughout the last decade, Pilcher and her committee worked to prepare materials for the Australian bishops, and the recent approval by the bishops' conference was initiated at the request of Bishop Michael Morrissey, the apostolic administrator of the Broome Diocese.

According to McFarland, the bishops' conference is now preparing the materials that will go to the Vatican, including an interlinear text to help Roman officials navigate the complicated linguistic background.

"Normally, it takes a good amount of time because it's an important matter that requires their ample attention," he said of the timeline for the Vatican review.

Broadly speaking, however, liturgist Rita Ferrone told NCR that she believes that this is a ripe moment for such a move.

"It seems to me that people are feeling that the time is right to put this on the table and see if they can gain some official recognition of the work they've already been doing," said Ferrone.



The Aboriginal Cross stands in front of the lectern for the Book of the Gospels during the opening Mass of the First Assembly of the Plenary Council at St. Mary's Cathedral in Perth, Australia, Oct. 3, 2021. (CNS/Courtesy of Perth Archdiocese/Ron Tan)

"I truly believe Pope Francis is in favor of inculturation and that extends to liturgical inculturation," she said. She cited the pope's own encouragement of the proposal for an Amazonian rite that emerged out of the 2019 synod for the Amazon, and his support and celebration of the Zairean rite in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

According to Ferrone, who is the author of several books about the liturgy, including *Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium*, inculturation efforts have had their ups and downs following Vatican II.

While she said that Pope Paul VI encouraged liturgical inculturation, "a kind of chill fell over the project under the reigns of Popes John Paul [II] and Benedict [XVI]."

During that time, efforts were made by Native Americans, Indians and other communities that have distinctive cultural characteristics, but, according to Ferrone,

"they weren't getting anywhere in Rome." The only group to gain approval was for the Zairean rite in 1988.

Ferrone believes that the combination of the Amazon synod and the ongoing synod on synodality has caused "antennas to go up and people are starting to say 'maybe we can do this officially, too.' "

"One of the signature reforms of the council was the approval of this very idea [of liturgical inculturation], and we've had a backlash against that," she observed. The approval of the new Aboriginal liturgy, she added, is "an encouraging sign that the movement is alive and it's part of the greater church. It's not something that's in contrast to the larger community."

Pilcher concurred, saying that in Australia, the Aboriginal peoples have a "deep faith" and "to get this kind of recognition from the leaders of the church, we probably can't put words around it."

"It's just really hitting them now that the church has said yes to what they have been celebrating for 50 years," said Pilcher. "Now they know it's theirs and that the church has said yes to it."