St Leo’s Outback Pilgrimage 2011

By Nathan Elliott, Year 10

Last June, after a prayer led by Father Paul Finucane, our Pilgrimage Chaplain, we set our compass on Cobar.

Next morning Fr Paul celebrated Mass at St Laurence O’Toole Church, after which we walked to the Heritage Museum where we were fascinated with information and visual representations of Cobar, a famous mining town. Next we were welcomed into the local Catholic primary school, St John’s. The teachers and children showed us you don’t have to live in a city area to get a good education. Afterwards, we headed off to the Open Cut and Peak Hill mines. That evening, around a camp-fire, our Aboriginal guide, David Ellis, led a ‘yarn circle’ and we shared experiences and listened to Dream-time stories.

We departed for Wilcannia at 4.30am the following day. After seeing the sunrise we stopped at Mt Granfell, an Aboriginal sacred site and were amazed at the artwork thousands of years old painted on the underside of rock overhangs. Upon arrival at Wilcannia, we delivered gifts to St Theresa’s Primary School. We then took a look around the town with metal fences and stores with bars on every window. We visited the Central High School and were given an informative talk by a young Aboriginal elder who explained life in Wilcannia, particularly for young people. We also chatted to a young Aboriginal man who is training to be a teacher. Later we drove to White Cliffs where our accommodation was in the Underground Motel. We met a local man named Jock who described life in White Cliffs in its glory days and took us to his underground house.

In the evening we experienced another camp-fire and yarn circle, this time incorporating Eucharist. Again, our guide fascinated us with further Aboriginal Dreamtime stories. We gained a sense of connection between Aboriginal spirituality and Catholic beliefs.

Next morning we set off on the long trip to Parkes. When we eventually arrived, we were greeted by the Parish Priest, Father John Keeble. After sleeping on the floor of the Sports Hall, it was back on to the bus for another long journey. Songs were sung to unwind everybody and we all cheered as we reached St Leo’s College as we were tired and needed sleep.

I think I can speak for all the pilgrims in that the people we met and the places and communities we visited changed our views on life and communities in the outback. Most importantly, both students’ and teachers’ perspectives on Aboriginal culture and present living conditions were enlightened and I hope in the future we can do more activities like this and that the friendships we made and the experiences we had will be long remembered.