

The Sydney Morning Herald

From Rome to Redfern, letter sends a message of hope

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Led by a determined priest, Redfern's campaign for its medical service has been boosted by an encouraging letter from the Pope.

Father Ted Kennedy was pleased yesterday. He had heard from the Pope. Kennedy read the letter out to the congregation at St Vincent's, Redfern, and said: "I am very pleased." The congregation at morning Mass clapped.

The applause came because the people at Redfern were pleased with the sentiments emerging from the Vatican but also, one felt, because they were happy to see the modest pleasure on their battling priest's face.

He is frail now, 71 later this month and suffering the effects of two strokes. He sat yesterday while delivering his homily on the Christ child it was the Day of the Epiphany and reading the letter from the Vatican. At the back of the church, an Aboriginal father bottle-fed his baby, the child clad only in a nappy.

The priest, sitting in front of the sculptor Tom Bass's altar in the middle of the church, wore shorts, a sports shirt and slip-on footwear. He wore an ecclesiastical stole around his shoulders.

The letter from the Vatican was addressed to Dr Naomi Mayers, chief executive officer of the Aboriginal Medical Service. Kennedy and Mayers have been working together in Redfern since 1971. She was just as pleased as her colleague about Pope John Paul II's response.

She had written to him asking that security of tenure be given to the medical service over a parcel of land behind St Vincent's on which the medical clinic is located. She pointed out that Aboriginal people owned the land until white settlement.

"We understand that you must deal with matters of great international import and that, usually, a local matter of such specificity would only become of concern if significant matters of principle were at stake," Mayers wrote. "We believe our case is symbolic of deep and significant issues, issues which touch on morality and the church's attempts to promote Christian healing throughout the world."

The letter was signed on November 23. On November 22, the Pope issued in Rome his *Ecclesia in Oceania* to Australia's Catholic leaders and laity, referring to "the shameful injustices done to indigenous peoples in Oceania" and to the "special case" of the "Australian Aborigines, whose culture struggles to survive".

The archdiocesan secretary, Brian Lucas, has said the centre occupies the premises rent free and that "there are limits to the extent to which church patrimony can be alienated". Archbishop George Pell confirmed in November that the land would neither be handed back to its original owners, nor would the lease be guaranteed past 2008.

After a call by the Australian Catholic Bishops' social justice committee to restore stolen land, the Sisters of Mercy handed their property to the Redfern Aboriginal community in 1978. The medical service, which provides medical, dental, aged care, drug and alcohol services to about 55,000 patients a year, has occupied the premises since. But the archdiocese has held on to the other half of the land.

The Vatican reply to Mayers was signed by Monsignor Pedro Lopez Quintana, assessor in the Vatican's Secretariat of State. He wrote: "His Holiness Pope John Paul II has received your letter and he has asked me to reply in his name." Lopez Quintana pointed to the Ecclesia in Oceania, saying: "The Holy Father shares with the Bishops of Australia a concern for the welfare of the Aboriginal people and a sensitivity to the need to do whatever is possible to right the wrongs of the past. But a decision in the matter of your concern rests with the Archdiocese of Sydney rather than with the Holy See. I would suggest, therefore, that you pursue dialogue with the authorities in Sydney. In the meantime, His Holiness will remember you and the work of the Aboriginal Medical Service in his prayers."

Kennedy thought there were two reasons to be very pleased with the letter, even if the decision rested with the archdiocese. First, it wasn't good enough to do one's best to meet today's problems. The wrongs of the past should be corrected.

Second, the Pope was urging that dialogue with Sydney church leaders be pursued. Kennedy said Archbishop Pell suggested discussion of the matter was over.

Kennedy is a saint to some, a turbulent priest to others. After his first stroke some years ago, he decided "to live the rest of my life as if I were already dead. I am more inclined to state things as they are, or as I see them, without fear or compromise."

He says his contract with the the Aboriginal people is for life. As he stood to leave church yesterday, the Aboriginal baby in the nappy gurgled happily.