

Portsmouth Down Under

Tuesday 8th July

An early start to the day as the Portsmouth pilgrims travelled to Heathrow to begin their pilgrimage to Australia. Check in was relatively stress free and before we knew it we were off on the new A380 to Singapore.

Wednesday 9th July

After a 12 hour flight we arrived safely in wet and humid Singapore. After a brief stopover we joined our flight to Melbourne. It may be due to the time difference but the second leg was definitely quieter than the first! We were joined on the flight by a group of pilgrims from Lancaster, travelling with their Bishop, Pat O'Donoghue.

Arriving in Melbourne, we were met by a group from our host parish, St Simon the Apostle, Rowville. A good night's sleep (in a bed) was definitely what was needed.

Thursday 10th July

Today we met up with the Jersey group who arrived on Tuesday! The theme for today is looking at our cultural identity. After celebrating Mass, we looked at where we have come from and what factors have brought us to where we are. We were led by Jacqui and Sally Anne. After a lunch of baked potatoes, we travelled into Melbourne to visit "Bunjilaka" the indigenous section of the Melbourne Museum. Here we were told about how the aboriginal people are one of the oldest civilisations in the world and their connectedness to the land. A display of dancing followed and some brave pilgrims joined in.

After grabbing a bite to eat in Melbourne, everyone headed for Federation Square for the Music Festival before heading back out of the city to Rowville.

Friday 11th July

Today started with a breakfast provided by the School Parents association and then we looked at our faith and the important people for us in our faith lives. We also looked at what it means to be a young Catholic today.

In the afternoon we travelled to Melbourne and visited a heritage centre based on the life of Blessed Mary McKillop and the work of the Josephite Sisters.

The highlight of the day was the commissioning mass held at the Telstra Dome. This 50,000 seater stadium is more used to Aussie Rules, rugby and soccer, but tonight pilgrims from all over the world gathered to be sent forth by Archbishop Denis Hart to Sydney. It was a good opportunity to catch up with other pilgrims from England, who were also staying in Melbourne. These included people from Nottingham, Hallam, Leeds and Birmingham.

A noisy atmosphere beforehand, with flag waving, chants and Mexican waves, all subsided as Mass was about to begin and a wonderful and reverential calm fell across the whole stadium. There were many priests, bishops, archbishops and Cardinals who concelebrated the Mass, including some Eastern Rite bishops in their golden robes.

At the end of the Mass the party atmosphere began again amongst the congregation of 40,000 and we were engulfed by a giant Lithuanian banner. There was much singing and chanting as we made our way out into Southern Cross station for the journey home.

Saturday 12th July

This morning we spent some time sight seeing. We had a journey on "Puffing Billy" a Victorian steam train and then had a chance to see some kangaroos in the wild. We also saw the effect the climate has been having on Australia with a visit to a reservoir which is less than 30% full. After a very cold picnic lunch we headed back to St Simon's to hear how a panel of parishioners put their faith into action. Activities include SVP (or the Vinnies!) working for reconciliation with native people, parish visiting, visiting the sick and working in schools. After this the pilgrims took part in a series of service projects including gardening, litter picking, window cleaning, visiting senior citizens and designing posters to highlight human rights.

In the evening there was a chance to let our hair down with a meal, provided by the parish and a disco.

Sunday 13th July

Pilgrims attended Mass with their families and were sent off by Fr Martin Dixon, the parish priest. We were all given a blue ribbon with the message,

"Go make a difference in the world". The afternoons were spent with families in a range of activities such as the visiting the zoo, going to the sea and even trying t understand the rules at a footy match. (Hawthorn Hawks beat the Sydney Swans at the MCG!)

Monday 14th July

Another early start as we said "Goodbye" to our host families and started the 8500km trek to Sydney. Despite over 700 coaches making the trip we made good time and took 12 hours. We stopped off at Gouldburn in NSW which has a giant model (30meters!) of a Merino sheep. Gouldburn was also famous for running out of water last year! We arrived at our apartments and made ourselves comfortable.

Tuesday 15th July

After some confusion with registration and packs we set off for Barangaroo for the opening Mass with Cardinal George Pell, the Archbishop of Sydney. Over 150,000 people were present and we were welcomed by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. In the build up to the Mass, pilgrims mixed and swapped badges. We met pilgrims from Alaska, Taiwan, Italy, France and Korea.

We saw Bishop Crispian as he processed in and waved at him – I hope he recognised us!

The Mass was a wonderful taste of what will happen at the final Mass and a good rehearsal for coping with cold Sydney nights!

Afterwards we all returned home exhausted.

Wednesday 13th July

We had our first catechesis session at St Martha's Strathfield. We were with a group of deaf pilgrims and it was interesting to see the deaf signers and the responses made in sign language. The catechesis was lead by the Bishop of Grand Island Nebraska. He shared his faith story with us and encouraged us all to be witnesses of the Holy Spirit. After a period of time in Eucharistic adoration, there were questions to the Bishop and we closed with a Mass. We were then treated to an "Aussie Barbie" – unfortunately there were no prawns!