

Our indigenous Peoples

Dan Harding



Fr Harding tells us about the characteristics of the indigenous people in Australia and Chile.

The Mapuches are the aboriginal people of Chile.

BEFORE becoming a Columban priest, I was a primary school teacher and spent several years teaching in an Aboriginal school on remote Cape York in far north Queensland.

During my 13 years as a Columban missionary in Chile, the similarities between the indigenous peoples of Australia and Chile has always interested me.

The Mapuches (people of the land) are the principal indigenous group in Chile. They make up about eight percent of Chile's population. Their traditional homeland is 700-1000kms south of Santiago. However, up to one half of them now live in Santiago.

They were never conquered by the Spanish colonisers but by the Chilean State in the 19th century after Chile became independent from Spain. As a result the Mapuches are some of the poorest people in Chile, with the lowest income and educational levels, the highest unemployment and imprisonment rates as well as the worst health record.

Attempts are being made by the Chilean government to improve their situation. Bi-lingual education programmes, special university and other scholarships are available to Mapuche students. There are also projects to improve their economic situation.

As Columbans we have the pastoral responsibility for an area called Huapi Island, 850kms south of Santiago. The vicinity is 100% Mapuche and is the poorest municipal district in Chile. A visitor to this area passes by rich fertile plains along a river. This land with well-organised farms belongs to Chileans while the infertile, surrounding hill country belongs to the Mapuches. Until the late 19th century all this land belonged to the Mapuches.

Today, Australia and Chile are characterised by dominant Western settler cultures and minority indigenous cultures struggling for justice and social, cultural and economic survival.

The indigenous peoples have a great attachment to the land. In Australia, we are aware of the importance of the land to the Aborigines, of the Mabo decision and the recognition that they were in possession of the land before European settlement.

We know that Aborigines have had many past and at present conflicts with industries from the mining and pastoral sectors but together and in dialogue they need to come to some form of mutual agreement for the use of the land.

In Chile, there are difficult and often violent relations between the Mapuches and the different industries operating in their

heartland. The modern Mapuche political movements are intent on recovering and preserving their land. During the last decade there has been a violent uprising that continues today. People have been killed, forestry company offices and machinery have been destroyed. Many militant Mapuche leaders are imprisoned.

The most militant of these groups don't recognise the Chilean State. They have their own flag and want to create their own state. Their theme is, "Mapuche Yes, Chilean Never."

What is behind this Mapuche "uprising"? The Chilean economy has had more than 20 years of relatively high economic growth. Much of this has come from Chile's insertion into the globalised world markets, free trade agreements and the subsequent reliance on the capital of transnational companies to invest in Chile.

For the modern export-oriented agricultural and forestry industries, which are maximising profits and productivity, the small-scale traditional farming of the Mapuches seems primitive and economically unviable. Large transnational corporations have invested heavily in industries like forestry and salmon farming on what was originally Mapuche land.

The transnational capital behind the forestry industry has threatened to

withdraw change their investments if they don't get the land that they want.

With continued economic development, the 2000 or so small Mapuche reserves in their heartland have been transformed into an archipelago, a string of small indigenous islands surrounded by an "ocean" of export oriented industries. Many Mapuches feel hemmed in, their cultural identity and language endangered, the ecosystems of their land damaged by these neighbouring industries.

The growing conflict represents a clash between two different worldviews - economic productivity and profit versus the Mapuche values of spiritual harmony with the natural environment and a community system of living.

In 1993, the Chilean State promulgated "*The Indigenous Law*," which formally recognised the pluro-cultural and pluro-ethnic nature of the nation. Many Chileans would like to see their country as culturally and racially homogeneous, with the Mapuches gradually assimilating into the general population and disappearing. "The Historic Truth and New Treatment Commission" was set up to investigate ways to improve the situation of the Mapuches and relations with them. The results of this commission have not yet been published.

Militant Mapuches don't recognise Christianity which they see as intrinsically European and culturally destructive. As young Mapuches radicalise, they leave the Church. As the majority of Mapuches remain

Catholics and continues to practice their traditional religious beliefs, an important challenge for the Church is to develop an authentic Mapuche way of being Catholic and Chilean at the same time.

Columban Frs Chris Saenz and Tom Walsh with Columban lay missionary Monica Lewitikana have the pastoral responsibility for Huapi Island. They work with Catholic Mapuches in strengthening their religious and cultural identity and supporting the role of traditional Mapuche authorities such as the chiefs and the shamans.

They participate when invited to traditional ceremonies and celebrations such as *Machitún* (healing ceremonies), *Guillatún* (community religious celebrations), *Eluwun* (funerals), *Palín* (traditional sporting events) and *We Xipantu* (New Year). By living as neighbours and participating in the way of life our missionaries help create a dialogue about how one can authentically be both Mapuche and Catholic.

Australia and Chile are still working out the relationship between western settler cultures and indigenous peoples. What untapped spiritual wealth can we in the Church learn from our indigenous peoples? It seems that God the Creator of all, has gifted our indigenous peoples with wonderful values and spiritual gifts that the technological market driven societies of the Western world desperately need to receive.

Efforts are being made by the Church to promote reconciliation, justice and understanding with

Indigenous peoples. The Chilean Bishops of the southern Mapuche regions are placing a lot more importance on the Indigenous Ministry.

In September 2001, the Bishops of the eight dioceses that comprise the Mapuche heartland, published an open letter to the nation in which they recognised the damage done to the Mapuches by the occupation of their ancestral lands and the policy of cultural assimilation promulgated by the State. They called for better treatment for the Mapuches and for dialogue between them and the owners of industries that surround them.

During some recent holidays in Australia I was pleasantly surprised to discover that many Catholic secondary colleges have appointed an Aboriginal Elder who initiates important college ceremonies and events. While visiting my niece I was pleased to see that an "Indigenous Prayer Space" had been included as a part of the Australian Catholic University.

I feel that much could be gained if the people involved in the Catholic Indigenous Ministry in our three countries could somehow exchange ideas and thoughts about their important work. ■

Fr Dan Harding has been a missionary in Chile since 1991.