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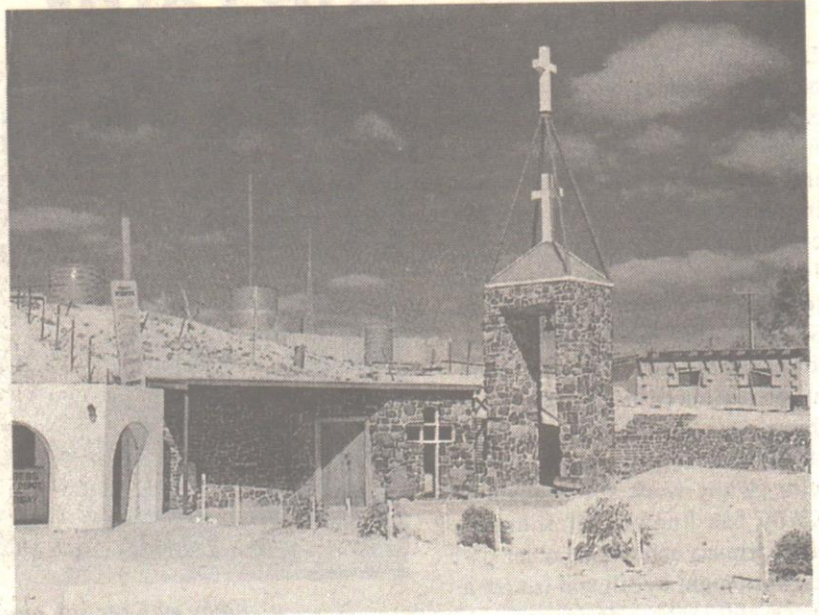
Faith in the Desert

Coober Pedy has an amazing number of different cultures living here, from Hungarian to Chinese, there are all sorts. This fact really makes the town unique, like no other in the world, but what is also extremely interesting is the different religions and churches here. So each fortnight I am going to meet and interview the churches and priests of Coober Pedy, in order to educate and maybe answer a few questions the general public have. This is the second issue running the "Faith in the Desert" story and this issue I have interviewed Father John about the Catholic Religion.

Roman Catholic's trace their origins to the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Approximately 2000 years ago Jesus formed a group of Disciples, he wanted them to bring a new people of God into being. Later after his death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus close friends with the 12 apostles brought other communities into existence around the Mediterranean and even as far as Rome. These communities constituted the beginning of what we call the Catholic Church.

The Church is called Catholic because the name means "Universal", this has the implication that each community lives in communion with other Christian communities around the world. Fr. John told me that because of the changes and divisions over the centuries, there are now in existence several Christian bodies, eg. Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and many others. These churches today have friendly relationships with each other and are in dialogue to attempt to resolve differences that still exist. But the Church's are moving towards greater unity at quite an astonishing pace at times, an example of this being the joint declaration on Salvation, by the Catholic and Lutheran Churches in the latter part of 1998.

There are over 1.64 billion Christians in the world today, that is 33% of the



The Coober Pedy Roman Catholic Church

world. Out of the 33%, 907 million are Roman Catholic. 173 million are Orthodox, 322 million are Protestant, and 52 million are Anglican. It is therefore a reasonable assertion to say that Catholics are found in almost every country throughout the world.

The most important ritual Catholics participate in is the celebration of Sunday Mass, which is held each week to celebrate the day of Christ's resurrection. Fr. John said "One could liken it in some ways to a family meal, it is a regular source of nourishment for our life together. It is also a sign of our unity as the body of Christ." Catholics have many other rituals for celebrating life and commemorating events connected with birth, death, marriage, forgiveness and healing. Some of these rituals are called sacramental celebrations because they have special significance, eg. a wedding, a baptism, as they form part of or relationship with Jesus Christ.

Change is part of a religious faith, that is developing and a conviction that the Holy Spirit leads the Church into a future that is God's plan for the world. Catholics today are faced with the 'good' and the 'bad' news, the ups and

downs as the Church journeys through human history. As Jesus Christ himself underwent suffering and death before resurrection so to does the evolution of the Church participate in a death/resurrection cycle. Fr John said "You might say, some attitudes and habits have to die for new expressions of truth to bud. This may force the church to ask some unsettling questions at times and call for creative and courageous decisions.

The beginning of the Catholic Parish here in Coober Pedy was in 1964, when Bishop Gallagher suggested that Fr. George Arlaski a Franciscan Priest might like to go to Andamooka Opal field, and also look after Coober Pedy as well. In 1964 Fr. George Arlaski visited Coober Pedy and celebrated first holy communion with 4 children.

It was during this visit, that a committee was formed to look at the possibility of constructing a church building and to begin some fund raising for it. After Fr. George returned to visit his native country of Bulgaria.

Fr. Frank Cresp replaced Fr. Bill Wauchope on the inland mission in

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1965 and took up residence in Coober Pedy in a caravan, before graduating to what is now the Church sacristy before the Priests dugout was to a stage of being lived in. Fr. Frank Cresp had much territory to cover on the inland mission and was often away. The Church digging was very slow work as it was dug by hand with jack picks, explosives, wheel barrows, hand winches. Almost all involved were volunteers.

On June 25th 1967 on the 1900th anniversary of the Martyrdom of St.s Peter and Paul, (to whom the church is dedicated) Bishop Gallagher officially opened the Church. In 1984 the Church extensions were undertaken by Fr. Adrian Noonan, who made use of the Novosel's family tunnelling machine. They made the Church twice as big as it was originally and in the shape of a cross.

This was done in such a way to preserve the original church and show a simple contrast between the old and new ways of removing dirt when mining. Varnishing on the walls of the church has preserved the natural colourings and stopped peices of sandstone chipping off.

There have been many improvements over the years, with developments such as the Bell tower, the St. Anthony stained glass windows and the reasonably successful tree planting project.

Fr. John said, "putting it simply Catholics are, a body of people, a community and a family with a story, a history and a purpose. Catholics believe in Jesus Christ the son of God, they share a common vision for life, and seek to live in a spirit of love. Catholics are not just a social club or a spiritual fill up station but have a life long love relationship with God. We are alive in the spirit of Christ. We are people with a sense of mission to proclaim Jesus to the world and share our life with others so the world may believe and share our joy.

Thankyou to Fr. John and the Catholic Church for there time and effort in this article.

Samantha Yates