

1992: A Time for Remembering, Reconciling, and Recommitting Ourselves as a People
Statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on Native Americans
November 1991

Introduction

The fifth centenary of the coming of Europeans to this land is both a challenge and an opportunity, a time for looking back at where we have been and looking ahead to where we should be as a people and a nation. No specific aspect of this observance challenges us more than the situation of Native Americans in our midst—their past treatment, their current condition, and their future aspirations.

As we prepare for the historic year of 1992, with both its opportunity for dialogue and its significant controversy, the Catholic community is blessed, enriched, and profoundly challenged by the faith of Native Americans in our midst. We ask the Catholic community to join us in seeking new understanding and awareness of their situation and in committing our Church to new advocacy and action with our Native American brothers and sisters on issues of social justice and pastoral life which touch their lives.

In this effort, we build on our reflections of a year ago regarding the fifth centenary, *Heritage and Hope*.¹ In these additional comments, we do not offer a comprehensive historical perspective but rather our reflections as pastors and teachers on the successes, failures, and hopes that shape the relationship between our Church and Native Americans.

We seek to speak not only to Native Americans, but to the whole Church in this land. We speak as pastors, not only about important issues but first and foremost about a people—about our brothers and sisters whose dignity, culture, and faith have too often been diminished and not adequately respected and protected by our civil society or our religious institutions. We seek to recognize and respond to the strengths of traditional Native American culture and spirituality, the pastoral and human needs of native peoples, the many pastoral efforts already underway, and the continuing moral challenge of pursuing justice in the face of continuing discrimination.

In our letter on the fifth centenary, *Heritage and Hope*, we sought to emphasize the ongoing challenge of evangelization, calling for continuing conversion to Jesus Christ and his values rather than emphasize a celebration of past events. We consider this historic year a time for sharing the Gospel with new energy and exploring its continuing demands. This fifth centenary should be a time for remembering, reconciling, and recommitting ourselves as a Church to the development of the people whose ancestors were here long before the first Europeans came to these shores five hundred years ago.

I. A Time for Remembering

In this centennial year we recall the suffering of native peoples that followed the arrival of explorers and wave after wave of immigrants. We have spoken clearly about some of these failures in our letter on the fifth centenary. We repeat these strong words to remind ourselves of lessons which must be learned and commitments which must be kept as a part of this observance:

As Church, we often have been unconscious and insensitive to the mistreatment of our Native American brothers and sisters and have at times reflected the racism of the dominant culture of which we have been a part. In this quincentennial year,

we extend our apology to our native peoples and pledge ourselves to work with them to ensure their rights, their religious freedom, and the preservation of their cultural heritage.²

In this letter, we point out that the coming of religious faith in this land began not five hundred years ago, but centuries before in the prayers, chants, dance, and other sacred celebrations of native people.

We also acknowledge that the encounter with the Europeans was often a “harsh and painful one” for native peoples, and we lament the diseases, death, destruction, injustices, and disrespect for native ways and traditions which came with it. We recognize that:

Often they [European Christians] failed to distinguish between what was crucial to the Gospel and what were matters of cultural preference. That failure brought with it catastrophic consequences for the native peoples, who were at times forced to become European at the same time they became Christian.

Yet that is not the whole picture. The effort to portray the history of the encounter as a totally negative experience in which only violence and exploitation of the native peoples was present is not an accurate interpretation of the past.³

Convinced of the saving truth of the Gospel and grateful for the sacrifices, care, and concern of many missionaries for native people, we point out that “the expansion of Christianity into our hemisphere brought to the peoples of this land the gift of the Christian faith with its power of humanization and salvation, dignity and fraternity, justice and love.”⁴

We bishops urge that in 1992 our nation should give renewed attention to the condition of Native Americans:

We encourage all Americans to better understand the role of native peoples in our history and to respond to the just grievances of our Native American brothers and sisters. We hope that this will be a graced time for rejecting all forms of racism.⁵

Now in these pastoral reflections we seek to offer some direction in realizing this hope. It is not enough for us simply to repeat strong words. The challenge of this historic year is not simply to look back, but also to look around at the current situation of native peoples and to look ahead to future challenges for our Church and society in responding to the aspirations and needs of Native Americans.

II. A Time for Reconciliation

We have also called for “new reconciliation in the spirit of the Gospel among all Americans and to recognize more fully our solidarity.”⁶ The challenge of reconciliation in Jesus Christ requires greater awareness and understanding, increased dialogue and interaction, and a commitment to mutual respect and justice among diverse peoples. Most Americans know almost nothing about the lives and history of the first Americans. Our religious organizations, schools, and other educational efforts must tell the truth about how Native Americans have been treated and how they have endured in this land. History can be healing if we will face up to its lessons.

All of us need to examine our own perceptions of Native Americans—how much they are shaped by stereotypes, distorted media portrayals, or ignorance. We fear that prejudice and insensitivity toward native peoples is deeply rooted in our culture and in our local churches. Our conference has consistently condemned racism of every kind, and we renew our call for increased efforts to overcome prejudice and discrimination as they touch our Native American brothers and sisters.

This reconciliation should also reflect the realities of Native American life today, in our nation and our Church. The Native American community now includes almost two million Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts, including a number of Hispanic people who also identify themselves as Indians. Native Americans are both citizens of the United States and members of their tribes, pueblos, or nations. Native Americans are among the fastest growing populations in our country. They constitute a vital, diverse, and growing community.

Native Americans are present in every state. The largest number are found in Oklahoma where many tribes were relocated. While a majority of Native Americans live in the Western part of the United States, North Carolina has the fifth largest Indian population in the country. Only Oklahoma, California, Arizona, and New Mexico have larger populations. Moreover, well over a third of all Native Americans now reside in large cities. Native American people are an integral part of many of our metropolitan areas, especially in the Midwest and West.

One in four Native Americans is poor. Many struggle with the realities of inadequate housing, joblessness, and health problems including the disease of alcoholism. While significant numbers of Native Americans have become lawyers, doctors, artists, and other professionals, many others live with dashed hopes and bleak futures as a result of discrimination, lack of opportunity, and economic powerlessness.

Within our family of faith we are very blessed to have significant numbers of Native American Catholics, now numbering more than a quarter of a million. Our Church is blessed with two Native American bishops, more than two dozen priests, many deacons, ninety sisters and brothers, and many lay leaders.

There are a variety of significant initiatives focused on the pastoral life and needs of Native American Catholics:

- For more than a century, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions has through the generosity of U.S. Catholics served the pastoral and spiritual needs of Native American Catholics providing for Native American ministries providing more than \$3 million annually.
- The Tekakwitha Conference provides an important voice and gathering place for those who serve the Native American Catholic community.
- Many dioceses have undertaken creative efforts, and religious communities have established ministries to serve the needs of Native American Catholics.
- Our own national conference of bishops has previously developed and adopted a major statement on the Church and American Indians outlining pastoral priorities and a social justice agenda that still are valid today.⁷
- Several dioceses and state Catholic conferences have also made justice for Native Americans a major ecclesiastical priority.

In this task of reconciliation, the persistence and vitality of Catholic faith in the Native American community is an irreplaceable asset. We are one family united in faith, citizenship,

and humanity. However, the Native American Catholic community faces three special and related challenges.

A. Inculturation

The Church is called to bring the saving word of the Gospel to every people and culture. Our goal must be an authentic inculturation of Catholic faith within the Native American community through a vital liturgical life, continuing educational efforts, and creative pastoral ministry which demonstrate deep respect for native culture and spiritualities and which enhance fidelity to the Catholic faith.

This is not an easy or simple task. Authentic inculturation moves in three integral steps: (1) The culture which the word of God encounters is challenged and purified by that word; (2) the best of the culture is enhanced by the truth of the Gospel; (3) the Church is enriched by respecting the culture which the Gospel embraces and which in turn embraces the Gospel.

This task of inculturation is not an unprecedented or new challenge, but it remains an essential step toward an authentic Catholic Native American community within the structure and bonds of the universal Church. As Pope John Paul II has said:

When the Church enters into contact with cultures, the Church must welcome all that is compatible with the Gospel in these traditions of the peoples in order to bring the richness of Christ to them and to be enriched herself by the manifold wisdom of the nations of the earth.⁸

In liturgical, pastoral, and spiritual life, we seek a genuine reconciliation between the essential traditions of Catholic faith and the best of the traditions of Native American life, each respecting, shaping, and enriching the other. Native American Catholics are called to be both true Catholic believers and authentic Native Americans. Far from being incompatible, these two traditions—the Catholic way and the native way—enrich each other and the whole Church.

Our challenge is to make sure that a truly Catholic religious culture interfaces with truly Native American cultures. A highly secularized society can overshadow a Catholic and Native American sense of mystery when encountering God, the created world, and human life.

We call on liturgists, theologians, and pastoral leaders to help us address these real issues as we shape a Native American expression of faith that is authentically Catholic and deeply Native American. It is our responsibility as bishops to encourage and supervise the presentation of the faith in liturgy and catechetics which safeguard Catholic tradition and native ways.

B. Participation

This challenge will require an ongoing effort to increase the participation of Native Americans in the life of the Church. We need to hear clearly the voice of Catholic Native Americans. We need their leadership in the dialogue that can take place between Native American traditionalists and the Church. We welcome their gifts and contributions. We need their active participation in the ministries and life of the Church. We ask their advice about the ways the whole Catholic community can best respond to the realities of injustice and ignorance and their impact on native peoples. We advocate full opportunities for native people and we seek

new partnerships with them in building the body of Christ within the Native American community.

C. Pastoral Leadership

We especially need to call forth and support the leadership of Native Americans—as priests, religious, and lay leaders. We are already blessed with many faithful and creative leaders, but more are needed to preach the Gospel and serve the needs of the Native American communities. We continue to welcome the generosity and commitment of many non-Native Americans who serve this community, but we look forward to the time when Native American bishops, priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, and lay leaders will increasingly shape and carry out the work of the Church in the Native American community and in the larger Catholic community. All those who serve within the Native American Catholic community should be well trained in Catholic theology and Native American culture and ways.

We pray that the blessings of the past and the hard work of the present will yield an even more vibrant and faithful Catholic Native American community. We strongly support the impressive efforts underway to train and prepare Native Americans for leadership in the priesthood, diaconate, religious life, and lay ministries.

In all these efforts we will build on our past and current pastoral ministries, educational commitments, and spiritual care within the Native American community. We acknowledge the failure and misguided direction of some past efforts, but we also recognize the enormous contributions of Indian schools, parishes, and ministries in meeting the needs of the Native American community and developing leaders from among their number. More authentic inculturation, increased participation, and stronger pastoral leadership will strengthen the faith of not only our Native American sisters and brothers, but our entire family of faith in the United States.

III. A Time for Recommitment

A. Public Advocacy

As we seek to respond to these ecclesial challenges, we also recommit ourselves to stand with native peoples in their search for greater justice in our society. We seek to be advocates with native leaders in this effort, not simply advocates for their needs. Together we must call our nation to greater responsiveness to the needs and rights of native people. We recognize that there are groups working for justice and cultural recognition for native peoples at regional and global levels. We encourage these efforts to build bridges among the indigenous people in the Americas and throughout the world.

We once again commit ourselves as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to recognize and act upon the Native American dimensions of our ongoing advocacy regarding health, housing, employment, education, poverty, and other national issues. No group is touched more directly by federal policy than Native Americans. We must be alert and active regarding federal policies which support or undermine Native American lives, dignity, and rights. As a Church committed to a “preferential option for the poor and vulnerable,” we recognize that Native Americans are often the most poor and vulnerable in our midst. We shall actively support

initiatives to meet housing, health, and employment needs of native people, with a priority for measures that increase self-sufficiency and economic empowerment.

B. Respecting Treaty Rights

We also renew our commitment to press for justice in the prompt and fair adjudication of treaty rights. These treaties for which Native American tribes gave up their homelands, keeping only a fraction of what they originally inhabited, are of prime concern to their descendants. In some important ways they are now receiving some greater recognition of their rights, but agencies of government and courts do not always recognize the complexities of tribal autonomy within the territories of sovereign states. Native Americans have the right to be self-determining, to decide the ways their land and natural resources on those lands are used for the benefit of their people and for the broader common good.

C. Ongoing Support for Native American Communities

Our Campaign for Human Development has supported the quest for justice and self-help among native peoples. In its brief history, CHD has provided almost \$3.5 million to support more than one hundred projects focused on stewardship of Indian land and resources, restoration of tribal recognition and rights, cultural preservation, and increased accountability for tribal education, welfare, and legal systems. We support continued efforts to empower and assist Native Americans in their search for justice. We also renew our support for the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and its essential work of evangelization and pastoral care within the Native American community. The American Board of Catholic Missions and the Catholic Church Extension Society also supply valuable assistance and help to the Native American Catholic community. Their support for the Church's work is a crucial resource building a vibrant Catholic faith within our dioceses and parishes which serve native people.

IV. A Call to Action

The Catholic community and our bishops' conference are called in this historic year to join together in renewed efforts to address several important areas which affect our Native American brothers and sisters. We call on the relevant committees of our conference of Catholic bishops to integrate the needs and contributions of native Catholics into their ongoing agenda. Significant work has been done in approving translations of eucharistic prayers, in public policy, in pastoral and social justice efforts, but more is required. Questions of Native American inculturation need to be further addressed by our liturgy and pastoral practices committees; advocacy and empowerment by our domestic policy and the Campaign for Human Development committees; pastoral leadership by our Committees on Vocations, Priestly Life and Ministry, Priestly Formation, and Permanent Diaconate; Indian education by our education committee. We also propose for consideration the establishment of an ad hoc NCCB Committee on Native American Catholics to help oversee this effort and to coordinate our conference's response to this statement.

Finally, we ask all believers to join with us in making this centennial year a time of continuing conversion and reflection on the demands of the Gospel now as we seek to bring greater respect and justice to our ministry among Native Americans. As we said a year ago:

“Evangelization is unfinished if exploitation of the weak, of minorities still exists. The quincentenary calls us to a new commitment as Christians to right the evils of the past and the present, and to be forceful advocates of the peace and justice proclaimed by the Gospel. . . . Our observances should include times of mourning over the injustices of the past and vital efforts at reconciliation with our Native American brothers and sisters through prayer and social action.”⁹ This historic year calls us to both reflection and action concerning the most effective ways we can seek justice and build up the body of Christ within the Native American community.

We recognize that Hispanic and African Americans share with native peoples the reality of discrimination and the challenge of achieving full acceptance in our society and Church. A significant number of Hispanic people share roots and cultural ties with native peoples, as do some African Americans. These ties of solidarity and common struggle can help these communities work together to assist the Church in recognizing diversity as a strength and gift. Native, Hispanic, and African American members of our communities are called to be leaders and allies in the task of shaping a truly “Catholic” community—open to all God’s children.

Conclusion

When he came to our land four years ago, Pope John Paul II affirmed and challenged Native American Catholics as he still challenges all of us in this fifth centenary year:

I encourage you as native people to preserve and keep alive your cultures, your languages, the values and customs which have served you well in the past and which provide a solid foundation for the future. . . . “Your encounter with the Gospel has not only enriched you; it has enriched the Church. We are well aware that this has not taken place without its difficulties and, occasionally, its blunders. However . . . the Gospel does not destroy what is best in you. On the contrary, it enriches the spiritual qualities and gifts that are distinctive of your cultures. . . .”

Here I wish to urge the local churches to be truly “catholic” in their outreach to native peoples and to show respect and honor for their culture and all their worthy traditions. . . . All consciences must be challenged. There are real injustices to be addressed and biased attitudes to be challenged.¹⁰

Solidarity with the Native American community is a special challenge for our Church in this fifth centenary year. We ask the intercession of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and Blessed Juan Diego as we seek to recognize the burdens of history and meet the challenges of today. We hope and pray that 1992 will be a time for remembering, for genuine reconciliation, and recommitment to work for greater justice for the descendants of the first Americans.

Notes

1. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Heritage and Hope: Evangelization in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1991).
2. *Ibid.*, introduction.
3. *Ibid.*, 6.

4. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 42.
6. Ibid., 43.
7. Statement of the U.S. Catholic bishops on American Indians, “The Church and the American Indians: Towards Dialogue and Respect,” *Origins* 6:48 (May 19, 1977): 766–770.
8. John Paul II, Discourse to the Pontifical Council for Cultures (January 17, 1987), *L’Osservatore Romano* [English edition] 6 (February 9, 1987): 11.
9. *Heritage and Hope*, 45.
10. John Paul II, “Address to Native Americans” (September 14, 1988), *Origins* 17:17 (October 8, 1988): 297–298.