

## CHAPTER ONE

### NATIVE AMERICAN PRESENCE IN THE USA AND IN THE CHURCH

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#### **Provenance and History:**

Provenance in American ideology is often expressed as 'Manifest Destiny'. This was a destructive ideology and certainly not providential for Native peoples. Native people have a concept of God's providence (i.e. 'harmony,' 'blessing' and 'mercy') that does not align with western concepts of territorial gain. For many Natives, the Biblical analogy for the coming of Europeans is the "expulsion from paradise". Traditional religions are seen by many Christian Indians as their own Old Testament to be honored and not simply condemned or dismissed as happened in the past.

#### **Demographics and Context:**

There were between 1.2 million to as high as 5 million at European contact in North America with radical diminution of population so that there were 350,000 Native people by 1900. Now we are less than 1% (single ethnicity) of the population as of census 2000.

Natives and Native Catholics remain invisible people by and large. Native people did become Christian and Catholic and many have remained so.

Native roots are the deepest in the soil, with origins from 13,000 14,000 Before Present for scientists and presence since the beginning for many Native groups and peoples.

More than 340 parishes in the United States serve predominantly Native American congregations. Of all (arch)dioceses in the United States, 30% have an office and/or program specifically targeting Native American Catholics. There are approximately 2,383,500 Native Americans Catholics in the United States, representing roughly 3.5% of all Catholics in the U.S. Only 40% of Native Americans live in reservations or trust lands. Currently, one archdiocese is headed by bishops of Native American ancestry. Most of those ministering to Native American Catholics are members of religious orders; those most likely to be Native American themselves are lay ministers and deacons. Approximately 20% of all Native Americans residing in the United States consider themselves Roman Catholics.

#### **Gifts They Bring:**

The gift of hospitality and welcoming is exemplified in the way we shared the gift of land and its produce with newcomers from Europe in 1492 and subsequent years. Similarly, the "Native Way" refers to the manner in which we care for our visitors by providing food and accommodations.

As time went on and this country developed, the Iroquois Confederacy served as a model in the formation of the U.S. Constitution. We assisted settlers and the Government in many ways, and through marriage, treaties and friendships, we became part of the United States while still remaining a distinct entity. This is a reflection of our gift of political structure and alliances.

The gift of witness has been a source of blessing for our people. We have suffered much in the changes that came across this land, referred to by some of us as Turtle Island. Nevertheless we have remained strong and never despaired and continue to hold tight to our beliefs in the Creator. We stand as witnesses to the importance of keeping promises made among Nations. The health of a Nation be it the United States or the many Native Nations within it is indicated by fidelity to the promises to other Nations as well as our loyalty to our own people, remembering always the 'seven generations'. From Kateri Tekakwitha, to Nicholas Black Elk, Native Americans have witnessed our fidelity to God and our faith.

Our spirituality is a blessing and a gift. We deepen our understanding of God through our relationship with the land and all of God's creation. The Spirit of God is alive in all that has been created by our loving God. In creation we have learned the sacredness of life in all things. Native Spirituality is rich in symbolism, in rituals, ceremonies, dance and song. Native prayer styles give us a rich connection with our God and all of creation especially when prayer is in the four or six directions because we recognize our God as the center of the universe. The Circle and the Medicine Wheel show us a holistic approach to life with our Creator God as the center. These symbols show our connectedness and interconnectedness with the one another, creation, the world and the universe.

There are many foods that have been staples for many different tribes throughout the country that were once unknown to Europeans and the rest of the world. There are hundreds of varieties of corn, and many vegetables such as squash, tomatoes and potatoes. There are a number of sacred plants such as cedar, pine, sweetgrass, greasewood, sage used for cleansing, and corn pollen for blessing. Tobacco too is widely used for prayer offerings and in many sacred rituals and ceremonies.

We relied on fishing, gathering and planting for survival. We depended on the land for food, shelter, and clothing and above all the Providence of God. Different tribes depend on many differed food sources but all depend on the Creator. As America and the Church turn towards sustainability we have lessons and teachings we can share.

Every tribe in the country has its own special games that were played for fun, in competition and for some, as an expression of mourning. Lacrosse, a Native sport is still being played and has become a North American sport in elementary, high schools, and in universities. This is a tribute to the Native people and their enduring legacy. In addition to enjoying games, many Native Americans are skilled in basketry, pottery, art and beadwork of many kinds depicting tribal symbolism, history and stories.

The gift of humor is a powerful ‘medicine’ and a true blessing among Native peoples. After being among Native people, one can recognize the genuine sense of humor that is characteristic of the people. One can witness humor and spontaneous wit in times of joy and sadness by listening to the memories and stories shared by those around the circle. By telling stories of about their loved ones, Native people experience both laughter and healing.

Before Europeans came to North America, Native Americans already had a diversity of peoples with many different languages, social customs and beliefs. Today, we are unified as the original inhabitants of this country and as a group of beautifully diverse people.

Native people have a natural gift to share with others. The gift to share food – there is always room for more at the table and to give a guest a surplus of food and other gifts before leaving. Sharing of material goods is a given among us so that we can provide nourishment, clothing and accommodations for those in need.

Fidelity to family, despite circumstances, is at the core of a Native person’s being. Family is valued far beyond the riches of the world. Parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins are all important and viewed as the extended family –“we are all relatives”.

Finding God in all things is a gift that binds us all together. Long before Ignatius of Loyola asked this of his followers, we were able to find God in the world around them. The Spirit of God is in all peoples and things and known through our senses: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell and inner spirit.

### **Challenges:**

In order to facilitate healing among communities, invite interreligious and ecumenical dialogue among tribal members and promote unity, Native people need to continue to present themselves as Church leaders (both lay and clerical).

Will religious order personnel who form the backbone of Native American ministry remain available to serve in the diocesan programs and in Native American parishes/missions? If not, what are the alternatives?

Of special importance is the need to identify the future commitment of women religious to ministry among Native Americans and to develop new approaches to ministry or new sources of Ministers if the number of women religious continues to decrease. This is a planning project that goes beyond the borders of parishes, dioceses, and even Episcopal regions – and that will be critical to the continued existence of ministry to Native American Catholics.

We continue to need co-workers to partner with us on an equal basis to help us grow in the faith as we also share our gifts with others.

We need to continue the work of inculturation which must expand beyond the sacraments to leadership roles and styles.

Because more of our brothers and sisters are now urban or, more frequently, migratory between urban areas and tribal lands, we need to have a more active ministry in urban areas.

Although the Native American population is small in comparison to the rest of the Church, we need to have distinct representation in dioceses where our numbers are strong and the people wish to participate actively. We need to become more visible and claim our own voices, particularly in the Church.

We need to learn from each other and continue to support our central Native organization, the Tekakwitha Conference. Through the conference, as well as on the diocesan level, we need to address such issues as Native leadership, visibility, historical tribal and personal healing, and active participation in the Church.

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. How is the Native experience unique historically and culturally?  
How does one partner with Native peoples and still respect uniqueness?
2. What are the issues with cultural appropriation of Native traditions such as the “New Age”?  
How does the Church learn from this the path to true inculturation that is respectful to other traditions?
3. How does one both acknowledge the historical trauma suffered by Native peoples and indeed other Catholics and still move forward to receive healing in the present and look to the future?
4. What gifts does the Native Church bring to the rest of the Church?