

Signpost

Kateri Circles Vol. 7 Issue 1

January



St. Tekakwitha Opening prayer:

God of all nations and peoples. You have filled Your Creation with

Your mighty presence. Through Your handiwork You speak to our heard words that satisfy our every desire.

You called Your servant the Mohawk maiden Saint Kateri Tekakwitha to embrace the Gospel of your Son Jesus Christ to do Your will and to serve others with the gifts You gave her.

May she who held tight to the cross of Your Son through her short life marred by sickness, suffering and persecution, be our intercessor during our own trials. May her embrace of the Catholic faith and her openness to sharing Jesus with others inspire us to be new evangelizers to all cultures and peoples.

Amen

Who do we need to bring in the circle?

Who do we need to pray for:

Family members who are sick. Family members who have died. Struggles that we are facing.

Let us bring our joys and sufferings into this circle.

Direction:

Winter

North

Black

Sin - Hopelessness/Despair

Fruits of the Holy Spirit - Joy/Gentleness/Redemptive suffering

Gifts of the Holy Spirit - Fortitude/Fear of the Lord

Topic:

Pastoral Framework

The Family

For thousands of years, Indigenous communities have expressed how sacred it is when a man and a woman profess their love together. From this bonding of love and compassion, the Indigenous family has been a source of strength and resilience throughout history. The family is a traditional source grounding what is spiritual and good among all its members.

In Catholic teaching, the family is likewise the first place where God is worshiped and faith is practiced. In addition to serving as the foundation and school of faith, Indigenous families are the most important threads in the rich fabric that makes up Indigenous cultures. Indigenous families pass on their rich traditions and cultural aspects from one generation to the next.

A celebration of the Order of Celebrating Matrimony, for instance, might incorporate Indigenous cultural elements that emphasize the spiritual nature of both the wedding ceremony and the marriage. Including these cultural elements helps the spouses and their community connect faith and culture. The rich cultural symbols also strengthen the bonds within family, clan, and Tribe.

The Church desires to support Indigenous spouses and help couples marry in the Church. A new model for marriage preparation—one that features more direct mentorship and addresses specific issues that Indigenous couples face—should be developed to help them recognize the grace that flows from sacramental marriage in the Church and to prepare them to face together any marital issues that arise. Each Indigenous community has its own traditions with respect to marriage. Many have expressed a desire to incorporate those cultural traditions that are compatible with Catholic doctrine and the liturgical norms and practices into marriage preparation and into the wedding ceremony itself.

Native Catholic leaders should be employed to develop these programs and resources. Providing culturally appropriate counseling to individuals and couples, as well as other structures of support, will help spouses recognize when and where they need help.

Because the family is crucial to the health, happiness, and stability of every community, the Church—along with Tribal leaders and even government agencies—has a vested interest in supporting the long-term commitment of love, respect, and mutual support between husband and wife. This social dimension of marriage is an important focus of the Church’s advocacy. The endurance of marriage and family is important not only for the spiritual life but also for the well-being of Indigenous communities. Such endurance is also an important way to combat poverty, racism, and many other social evils. We must also understand that, for Indigenous communities, the concept of family goes beyond the nuclear family to encompass the extended family, clan, and Tribe.

Native cultures esteem and value their Elders, especially the matriarchs of families. One example is Mary Kummagaq Kamkoff of the Yup’ik, as explained by Dr. Stephen “Walkie” Charles, professor and director of the Alaska Native Language Center:

Mary had the gift of knowing her “heart language,” the Yup’ik language, as well as the English language, which was very rare to find in the region at the time. She had learned English while in the care of some missionaries who treated her for tuberculosis, which unfortunately had devastated the region in the early 1900s. Rev. Martin J. Lonneux, SJ, joined the Yup’ik people of northern Alaska in the early 1930s. Father Lonneux worked with Mary to create a writing system for the Yup’ik people of the region. It has been more than eighty years, and still today, the Catholic Yup’ik of northern Alaska pray and honor God and the Church “with prayers gifted to us by Mary Kummagaq Kamkoff and Father Martin Lonneux,” say the people’s Elders.¹

¹ Cellam Yua, or the spirit of the universe, is recognized by the Yukon River delta Yup’ik people in Alaska. The Yup’ik/Cup’ik of Alaska know it by other names, such as Ellam Yua and Cillam Cua, and the Inupiaq people know this spirit as Silam Inua. Professor Stephen “Walkie” Charles, Ph.D., summary of written interview, January 19, 2023, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK.

Along with love and respect for Elders, attention to Native youth and young adults is an urgent matter. Repeatedly, Indigenous young people have spoken about a lack of hope. The high rate of suicide among younger generations of Indigenous People seems to corroborate that finding. Many feel disconnected from their culture and from the Church. They deal with issues at home that make them feel misunderstood and uncared for. They appreciate it when Elders take the time to teach them traditional Native values like prayer, respect for Elders and others, caring, honesty, generosity, humility, and wisdom. Experience shows how much identity formation hinges on passing on cultural values, traditions, and Native languages.

However, the breakdown of family and support systems often interferes with the passing down of traditional values. Some young people leave family and Tribal environments to seek educational or work opportunities elsewhere. This also contributes to cultural alienation.

Historical traumas are a significant contributor to the breakdown of family life among many Indigenous Peoples. In response, youth and young adults are disaffiliating from the institutional authorities such as the Church, community, and their Elders. Many have rejected Christianity and turned to pre-Christian Indigenous religious practices. Many long for belonging and acceptance and might find solace in social media and other outlets.

To fight this hopelessness, the Church recognizes a need for the revival of family life, meaningful community involvement, and investment in healing intergenerational trauma. When initiatives or programs require too many resources, materials, and personnel, it can be difficult to sustain these efforts at a mission church, a Native Catholic center in an urban setting, or parishes with limited finances. Diocese/eparchies, parishes and Catholic organizations dedicated to fostering ministries with youth and young adults should consider creative ways to engage Indigenous young people, and train pastoral leaders with the tools they need to accompany these

populations. Additionally, the Church should seek out pathways for Indigenous Catholic youth and young adults to become “protagonists of this transformation”² in developing such initiatives.

An example of good work being done with Native young people is the youth ministry at St. Francis Xavier Mission in South Dakota’s Rosebud Reservation, home to Sicangu Sioux, a Tribe of Lakota: “St. Francis Mission provides programs for basic re-evangelization of the Catholic population . . . religious education, recovery programs, programs that support Lakota language and culture. These are foundational requirements for leadership at Rosebud. To provide an educated and ethically responsible group of leaders, in the long term, St. Francis Mission must also provide a quality Catholic education.”³ Sapa Un Catholic Academy is part of the evangelization work. Based on the ‘Nativity model’ of schools, which has a proven track record among high-risk populations of producing students who are able to graduate from colleges and universities, Sapa Un is unique in that it requires students to learn Lakota language and culture in a Catholic context. St. Francis Mission also has a vibrant religious education program. It is unique in being able to hold release-time religion classes during the school day. Mission staff teach at three different schools, and St. Francis youth ministry participants are involved with community activities and collaborate with Tribal programs.

Another example of a best practice for engaging Catholic Native young adults is found in the USCCB *Journeying Together* process of intercultural dialogue from 2020 to 2023. By listening to and working with Catholic young adults from Indigenous communities (among other cultural communities), by working with those who minister among them, and by allowing them to lead intercultural dialogue sessions, we have learned about the needs and concerns of Catholic Native

² Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 174.

³ St. Francis Mission Among the Lakota, “Sapa Un Catholic Academy,” accessed April 17, 2023, sfmission.org/sapa-un-catholic-academy.

young adults—and about how better to respond to them. Through this process, the USCCB has been able to identify and encourage these young adults to carry out leadership roles as young prophetic voices within their communities and the larger Church.⁴

Like any other cultural family, Indigenous Peoples need support, fellowship, and community to persevere in their faith. However, some have expressed that the fellowship and community they seek are not currently found in the parish communities where they live or attend Mass. Church communities need to offer family support structures for Indigenous Peoples. We encourage priests, permanent deacons, men and women religious, others in consecrated life, as well as lay teachers, catechists, and adults to seek out and accompany Indigenous Peoples, particularly young people. By the ministry and guidance of these adults, we know that many Indigenous men and women may be open to hearing God's call to their vocation and mission in life, through marriage, the priesthood, permanent diaconate, or consecrated life.

Traditionally, many priests and consecrated sisters and brothers, working hand in hand with Native Elders, served as spiritual leaders. As bishops we have heard from some Native leaders that their communities feel a deep sense of loss in the current lack of priests and religious to live and work among them. We also encourage the promotion of Native catechists for these communities. Therefore, we encourage local church leaders to seek out lay men and women to step into ecclesial service and ministry alongside those who are ordained and consecrated, and that this investment be a pastoral priority for the evangelization and accompaniment of God's people.

⁴ See USCCB Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, *Journeying Together: Intracultural and Intercultural Proceedings Report* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2022), 25-28, www.usccb.org/resources/Journeying%20Together%20Proceedings%20Report%20May%209%202022_0.pdf.

Commentary:

In this section of the Pastoral Framework is the focus on the family, especially what makes the family such a strong value in Native cultures and the Catholic Church. The Framework connects the ability to survive historical trauma as both a cause of family breakdown but also a strength of family unity. One of the most important factor that helps Native families become stronger through the past and present trauma that it faces is by relying on the faith and spiritual structure that not only helps Native families but also all families.

Not only in this section, but throughout the document, the Church also is both an institution that has helped families and has been an instrument in harming families. The Church has provided the strength through the sacraments and has focused families on the love, compassion and forgiveness of Christ. However, through the boarding school period and the associated historical trauma the Church has inflicted great sorrow and destruction of family life. This is one of the most important aspects of the Framework, to work to build on what helps the family, and reconcile the Church's past sins against the family to help start the process of healing.

Discussion Questions for the Pastoral Framework:

- 1) What are the most important virtues of Native families?
- 2) What are the ways that might harm Native families?
- 3) What are the historical Native traumas that are a danger to families?
- 4) How does the Sacraments help family unity?

Discussion Questions for the Church and Indian Country Podcast:

Closing prayer:

From the Black and Indian Mission Office:

God of all nations and peoples. You have filled your creation with Your mighty presence. Through Your handiwork You speak to our hearts words that satisfy our every desire.

You called Your servant, the Mohawk maiden Saint Kateri Tekakwitha to embrace the Gospel of your Son Jesus Christ, to do Your will and to serve others with the gifts You gave her.

May she who held tight to the cross of Your Son throughout her short life marked by sickness, suffering, and persecution, be our intercessor during our own trials. May her embrace of the Catholic faith and her openness to sharing Jesus with others inspire us to be new evangelizers

to all cultures and peoples. May she who sought our Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament lead up to similar reverences for the Eucharist so that, like Saint Kateri, our last words may be, “Jesus, I love You.” Amen.

Notice:

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Rev. Mike Carson