

Towards a Dialogue Between the Native Peoples of North and South America
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INTRODUCTION

The Tekakwitha Conference this year takes place at the threshold of Latin America. We are a mere few yards from the Mexican border. My task this morning is to offer a reflection on the presence of so many millions of Native peoples just to the south of us. Each native group possesses its own culture and everything that goes with this, which serves to give them their individual pride and identity. At the same time, the Native peoples of Latin America have in common with their sisters and brothers in North America, stories of oppression, poverty, and alienation. They, too, are often a forgotten people, the last on the list of human concern. What all of the Native peoples of the Americas possess is their rich spiritual roots. It is most imperative that we begin a dialogue between the north and the south, in order that we might get to know each other, break down whatever stereotypes that may exist in either direction, and commit ourselves in this era of globalization to be of help to one another.

The peoples of the north and the peoples of the south continue to be a mystery to one another. We must go from mystery to fascination, from the shadows of ignorance to the brightness of truth and from indifference to deep concern for one another. We need to be reminded that we share rich spiritual traditions and values, we share common beliefs and moral codes.

Our understanding of ourselves, of the way we ought to live, the explanation of where we came from and why we are here, are questions that we all ask. The Native peoples of the

Americas find answers to these questions in the creative imagination of myths, stories, and legends that have been passed orally from generation to generation. They convey the deepest and most important truths that give pride and identity to people. These stories lie at the heart of what makes peoples unique. Truths found in these stories are among the precious legacies the Native peoples of the Americas possess and that allow us to recognize our common ground.

SYNOD FOR AMERICA

In 1997, Archbishop Charles Chaput, Bishop Donald Pelotte, and I joined the many bishops and others representing countries from throughout the Americas. The occasion was the Synod for America, convoked by the Holy Father in Rome in one of a series of continental synods. We each gave our talks. The interventions that we bishops gave were listened to carefully and received the careful attention of our Holy Father. I recall that Bishop Pelotte gave a moving talk on the past, present, and future of the Native Americans. In the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation by Pope John Paul II, written a year after the Synod, the indigenous peoples are among those the Holy Father singles out needing special attention. He challenged us to recognize the phenomenon of discrimination suffered by Native peoples. He called for reconciliation between the indigenous peoples and the societies in which they are living.

In my recent visit to the Holy Father during our *Ad Limina* visit to Rome, the Holy Father showed keen interest in the Native peoples of our Diocese of Las Cruces. The Holy Father seemed to be very weak the day that I met with him and was not able to engage very much in conversation. But when I mentioned that in our diocese we had Apache Indians, he perked up and opened his eyes wide and exclaimed in a loud voice “*Apaches Indios!*” It seemed to be the only thing that got him excited during my conversation. So, people of Mescalero, know that you are remembered in Rome by the Holy Father.

CULTURES AND FAITH

Why do we give so much attention to the idea of culture when it comes to the Native peoples? Why should we mention culture in the context of a conference dedicated to Native Americans? First of all, there is nothing more basic to human identity than culture itself. A culture tells us who we are; a culture gives us our self-possession. A nation with an identity is made dynamic by its culture. Each culture has its right to exist and also enjoys the right to its own language and culture through which people express and promote its “fundamental spiritual sovereignty” (John Paul II speaking at the United Nations, 1995). It is true that a nation has to be open and adaptable to other cultures, but it must not permit itself to be absorbed and destroyed by its introduction into it, precisely because of its own spiritual sovereignty.

It is culture that allows a person to have faith inasmuch as faith, by its nature, is self-giving. A people with a culture has something to give, and it is because of the richness of its culture that it is able to have a faith experience that, by its very nature, has to do with the giving of itself. To strip a person of his or her culture, and to reduce a person to an object (these things have happened to many Native peoples), removes the possibility that a person can experience self-determination and self-development. It is no wonder that at the first Pentecost, all the nations of the known world were made capable of receiving the message of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. They were enabled to share their faith, but even before the gift of faith came to them, they already possessed fertile ground to share the faith they were to receive.

At the same time, faith can be seen itself as a culture. There is no such thing as naked faith or mere religion. Faith tells us who we are and how we should be human, for faith creates culture.

THE LEGEND OF QUETZALCOATL

Let me now tell you a story of how peoples to the south of us were prepared for the Christian faith experience. Just as the Native peoples of North America tell many stories that give meaning to their history and are expressive of their identity, so the people to the south of us have many stories that help to answer the basic questions of life.

Quetzalcoátl, that means both “plumed birth,” (*Quetzal*) and “snake” (*coátl*) was one of the great gods of the pre-Hispanic and pre-Columbian peoples. There are various legends regarding Quetzalcoátl, who at once embodied elements of a bird and the wisdom of a serpent. Quetzalcoátl taught the people many things, such as art, poetry, music; in a word, he brought to the earth all that the Indians considered divine. He was tricked by a rival god by the name of Tezcatlipoca. Tezcatlipoca approached Quetzalcoátl with a kind of mirror, probably a smoothed-out piece of metal and showed him his face. When Quetzalcoátl saw the reflection of himself, he got very depressed and nervous. Tezcatlipoca gave him pulque to drink. Pulque is a fermented juice of the maguey or agave plant. Of course, Quetzalcoátl began to feel the effects of the fermented cactus juice and fell into a stupor. Along came the sister of Quetzalcoátl by the name of Xochitlquetzal. He pulled the same trick on her, and that night both Quetzalcoátl and his sister slept together and had sexual relations. When Quetzalcoátl awoke in the morning, he realized that he had done and he was horrified. He was beside himself and traveled to the seashore, where in the presence of all the birds in the world, he immolated, in other words, he set himself on fire, and became ashes. The birds remained in vigil, as it were, for three days, and on the third day Quetzalcoátl rose from the ashes like a flaming star. He ascended high into the heavens and became what we now know as the planet Venus. He is up there as the great wise

person who can answer the deep questions regarding good and evil, light and darkness, truth and ignorance, and life and death. He holds the keys to the secrets of all our basic questions.

THE LEGEND OF THE LITTLE SPIDER

There is another story that I have only recently read about. This is a story of a little spider that is found inside the maguey or agave plant. It is one of those stories that is told to children and handed on from generation to generation, but it is much more than a story, for it conveys the questions that a group of Native peoples, the Hñahñú or Otomíes, ask regarding their origins, existence, and especially tries to answer the question of life and death. Listen to these short verses, there are 34 of them.

¿A Dónde Vas Tangra?/*Where are you going, Tangra?*

1	¿Arañita, a dónde vas? <i>Little spider, where are you going?</i>	1	Where is the world going? Where are all of us heading to?
2	Voy al otro lado <i>I'm going to the other side</i>	2	I am going beyond to the world of meaning, to the transcendent, where we find the meaning of history.
3	¿Qué vas a hacer allá? <i>What are you going to do over there?</i>	3	Why do you want to go to the root of all things?
4	A traer flores blancas <i>I am going to bring some white flowers</i>	4	I am going to bring the truth about death.
5	¿Para qué quieres flores blancas? <i>Why do you want white flowers?</i>	5	Why do you want to know the truth about death?
6	Para ponerlas a los pies de mi hija <i>To lay them at my daughter's feet</i>	6	Because the new humanity is being formed and constructed on the knowledge of the truth about death.
7	¿Qué hace tu hijita? <i>What is your daughter doing?</i>	7	Why do we want a new humanity?

8	Está tendida <i>She's been laid out</i>	8	The new humanity needs death to start anew. Someone must die that we may have new life.
9	¿Por qué está tendida? <i>Why has she been laid out?</i>	9	Why is the new humanity built with sacrifice and death?
10	Porque se murió ayer <i>Because she died yesterday</i>	10	That's the way it's always been. Today comes from yesterday's death; death is in the past of history. Again, the new life comes from death.
11	¿Por qué se murió? <i>How did she die?</i>	11	Why is death the source of the new humanity?
12	La mordió la víbora <i>A serpent bit her</i>	12	History shows that death is before life.
13	¿Qué víbora fue? <i>What kind of serpent bit her?</i>	13	What is the history of death that gives life to humanity?
14	La víbora blanca <i>A white serpent</i>	14	The history of death of a people is the history of its life. Death for others is the only way to arrive at the new humanity.
15	¿Qué hace la víbora blanca? <i>What is the white serpent doing?</i>	15	Explain that which has to do with the history of the death of a people.
16	Está enrollada en las pencas del maguey <i>It is curled at the foot of the agave</i>	16	Because the very source of the life of the Hñañhú is found in the history of the death of the people.
17	¿Qué le pasó al maguey? <i>What happened to the agave?</i>	17	What happened to the source of the life of the Hñañhú?
18	Se ha quemado <i>It has burned</i>	18	The source of the life of the Hñañhú has been cut off, has died, has been sacrificed.
19	¿Qué hicieron con la ceniza? <i>What did they do with the ashes?</i>	19	Of what use was that death and sacrifice of the Hñañhú culture?
20	Remendaron la iglesia <i>They fixed the church</i>	20	Its death gave life to the House of God, gave life to the meeting of

God with people, renewed an old culture, restored it and healed it.

21	¿Qué le pasó a la iglesia? <i>What happened to the church?</i>	21	What happened in that meeting between the people with God?
22	La tumbó el pájaro de plumaje rojo <i>The bird with the red plumage tore it down</i>	22	External religion ended but God remains at the service of the history of the people.
23	¿Qué le pasó al pájaro de plumaje rojo? <i>What happened to the bird with the red plumage?</i>	23	What happened to the service that God gave humanity? Is it good for anything?
24	Se lo comió el perro <i>The dog ate it</i>	24	That service nurtures the soul of the people. We are to continue the work of God. (<i>The dog here stands for the people. It is the people's soul that is being fed in order for us to continue the work of God on earth.</i>)
25	¿Qué le pasó al perro? <i>What happened to the dog?</i>	25	What happened to the soul of the people?
26	Se murió y se lo comió el zopilote <i>It died and the buzzard ate it</i>	26	The soul is food for God. In other words, the people give life to God.
27	¿Qué hace el zopilote? <i>What is the buzzard doing?</i>	27	Why does God exist?
28	Allá arriba está volando, dando muchas vueltas <i>It is up there, flying around in circles</i>	28	God is "up there," beyond us. He is above us. He is creating worlds. He is creating everything.
29	¿Y para qué vuela allá arriba? <i>And why is it flying up there?</i>	29	Why is he up there, and why does he create?
30	Desde allá nos vigila <i>It looks out for us from up there</i>	30	To take care of us in order that we might live.
31	¿Por qué nos vigila? <i>Why does it look out for us?</i>	31	Why does he take care of us?
32	Para saber qué nos pasa <i>So it knows what happens to us</i>	32	The new creation and its history depend on God. He takes care of the history of peoples.

33	¿Qué cosa nos va a pasar? <i>What is going to happen to us?</i>	33	Who knows what is the future of history?
34	Sólo Diosito sabe <i>Only God knows</i>	34	Only God knows where it will all end. The end belongs to God.

THE STORY OF GUADALUPE AND JUAN DIEGO CUAUHTLATOATZIN

Saturday, July 31 we will celebrate the second anniversary of the canonization of San Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin by the Holy Father at the Basilica in Mexico City. San Juan Diego was the first canonized saint from among the Native peoples of the Americas. We hope that soon Kateri Tekakwitha will be recognized officially as a saint.

The canonization of San Juan Diego was a powerful act of acknowledgement and gratitude to the Native peoples of the Americas. It was a moment that was celebrated not only at the Basilica but throughout the Indian world of the hemisphere. The Holy Father, in his homily, said that Our Lady of Guadalupe brought Christ's message and took up the central elements of the Indigenous culture, purified them, and gave them the definitive sense of salvation. The story of Guadalupe and Juan Diego is a model of a perfectly inculturated evangelization.

The image that was left imprinted on the *tilma*, or cloak of Juan Diego, is full of rich symbolism. In reflecting on the image over the years, I keep discovering things such as the four petaled flower over her womb that indicates that she is pregnant with Jesus and is about to give birth to him in the hearts of the peoples of the Americas.

I often wonder about the figure of a plant on the pink portion of her dress. I thought for many years that this had been superimposed on her dress by some artist. When I was in Iximilquilpan in Mexico I visited its 16th century church, a massive fortress-like church with walls that are four feet thick. All around the inside wall I was shown a mural that covered of the walls. There were all sorts of depictions of warriors and animals intertwined in a vine that

seemed to unite the entire mural. I asked my priest friend what that vine was because I knew I had seen its shape somewhere. He told me it was a plant that grows in the area and it dies every winter only to rise every spring. He said that when it is dead, it is really dead and it doesn't look like its ever going back to life. It also has beautiful flowers and the people gather its tiny seeds, mix them with honey and make sweet cakes out of them. It finally dawned on me that this is the plant depicted on the gown of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Even her dress evangelizes, for it tells us about the death and resurrection of Our Lord and about the sweetness of her love.

I also believe that the handkerchief that she has on her hand is to serve a useful purpose, and that is to wipe the tears of all who come crying in front of her image. She has no message except those tender words, "Do you not know that I am here and that I am your Mother?"

Guadalupe spoke Nahuatl, the language of Juan Diego and his people. She appeared at the Mount of Tepeyac in the mystic environment of *flor y canto*, that is, of flower and song. The written account of the apparition is found in the Nahuatl poetic masterpiece, the *Nican Mopohua*. The *Nican Mopohua* is written in the same language Our Lady used, the language of the Aztec, which is still the most spoken native language in Mexico today. This poem was written probably within the lifetime of Juan Diego. Every verse expresses in symbolic and mythical language the philosophical and theological thought, as well as the cosmology of the Nahuatl people. It incorporates the linguistic and symbolic concepts regarding the Indian understanding of everything that is, has been, and will be. The accompanying songs and flowers of the apparitions indicate that heaven is united with earth, that God has descended to reveal truth to this humble Indian. For the Indian to know that there was flower and song there was proof that the message and person of Guadalupe were indeed from God.

Not only is the poem full of meaning for the Indians of Juan Diego's time; it is also an affirmation and elevation of their language and culture. God, through Mary, meets them where they are and begins to walk with them in order that they might be raised to the new knowledge of the story of Jesus Christ. The apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe are truly a loving and powerful encounter of not only God with an individual but the beginning of an eternal encounter between God and all the peoples of the Americas. The mystical elevation of the Indian people represented by Juan Diego is the elevation of all of us, both in North and South America. The tender face of Our Lady of Guadalupe is the way God introduces us to the loving gaze of our God.

Pope John Paul II seems to understand this when he tells us at the canonization that "Mexico needs its indigenous peoples, and these peoples need Mexico! We can translate this to include all of us, America needs its indigenous peoples, and these peoples need America!"

THE PROPHETIC FUNCTION OF NATIVE PEOPLES

Every Native group has a prophetic role to fulfill in relation to the majority. This can happen in any part of the world, where there is a minority vis a vis a majority. Majority groups tend to fall into behavioral and attitudinal patterns that speak of superiority, smugness, arrogance, and intolerance of those who are different, of those who have the defiance to contradict their "way."

A minority group challenges a predominant way and questions the absolutes, values, criteria, priorities, and all that the majority group takes for granted as the undeniable for ever and ever best: the mere presence of a minority group makes the majority group take a second look at itself. This process of discernment is always valuable, since the majority group may either judge

itself as limited or deficient or discover that there is nothing wrong with itself in this or that aspect.

One of the great gifts that the Native peoples have to offer the rest is precisely this function of prophet. This is a contribution in the line of assessment, evaluation, and self-criticism, which any individual or group must periodically undergo as a condition for continued significant existence. The United States and the rest of the Americas must be open to all kinds of cultural exchanges for the enhancement of their authentic development.

THE CHALLENGE FOR AN INCULTURATED THEOLOGY AND LITURGY

The Apostolic Exhortation from the Synod of America refers to inculturation, the process whereby the Gospel takes flesh in other cultures. It has to do with the transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity into various human cultures. It is the Synod for Africa, however, that spells this out in a more developed way. Inculturation, according to the exhortation for the Synod for Africa, is a movement for full evangelization. It seeks to dispose people to receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner. It touches them on the personal, cultural, economic and political levels so that they can live a holy life in total union with God the Father through the action of the Holy Spirit. The Word of Christ must take root in the life situation of the hearers of the Word. Just as the Gospel became incarnated in the Mediterranean world from the beginning, so it must be rooted in every culture of the world.

For this to happen, there needs to be a process of dialogue between what is unique of each culture and the message of the Gospel. This entails dialogue regarding theological themes, such as creation, personhood, the Paschal Mystery, and the glory of the resurrection. It also calls for a rich dialogue on matters having to do with approaches to God in worship and liturgy. The

Native peoples of America possess rich traditions of symbol, story, and ritual. We must continue the search for the bringing together the traditions that are authentically Indian to relate with what is authentically Christian. What will result can be an original and more effective way of celebrating Jesus that is at once the Indian way and the Christian way.

What will contribute immensely in this dialogue between the Christian way and the Indian way will be stories such as the ones I have told today. These stories and the ones you bring possess rich theological and philosophical themes. Some of these themes are essentially Christian, such as those having to do with creation, life and the sustenance of life, sacrificial death, life from death, and the resurrection. Some Indian stories make allusions to the Christian notion of the Eucharist. Many of these stories speak about the responsibility every individual has to community, and many of them point to elements of the Kingdom of God as depicted in the Gospel. Truly, then, as Pope Paul VI writes regarding evangelization, “God, in his infinite wisdom, has planted in every culture the ‘seeds of the Word of God.’” In all these legends, myths and stories, we see how wisely God has prepared all of us to be fertile ground for the sewing of the seed of the Word of God. May it continue to reap harvests of peace, justice, and understanding among all of us, in order that we might do our part in creating a more beautiful world.