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THE MINORITIES IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

INTRODUCTION

"Evangelization" in recent Church history has become a key word in understanding the role of the Church. During the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II, evangelization as the essential mission of the Church has been underscored again and again and in many different ways. ⁱ Paul VI wrote one of his most masterful exhortations on the theme: "Evangelization in the Modern World" (Evangelii Nuntiandi); he changed the name of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to that of the "Evangelization of Peoples"; he became the "pilgrim Pope" for the sake of the evangelization of the world; and when his body was laid out in St. Peter's Square, the open book of Gospels was placed on his coffin to symbolize his enthusiasm for the evangelizing mission of the Church.

Pope John Paul II has continued the evangelization thrust most especially through his numerous journeys to every corner of the planet. He repeatedly calls attention to evangelization in his encyclicals and exhortations, particularly in his talk to the Latin American bishops in Puebla; in his exhortation on the laity, Christifideles Laici; in his encyclical on the church's missionary activity, Redemptoris Missio; in his encyclicals on Catholic social doctrine, Centesimus Annus and Sollicitudo Rei Socialis.

The two Roman pontiffs mentioned above regard evangelization in the wide sense of the term. It is described by them as not only the explicit proclamation of Christ and his word, but also the witness of the lives of Christians. Both Paul VI and John Paul II include social justice as an essential component of evangelization. They echo the 1971 Roman Synod, whose resulting document teaches that all activity in favor of social justice is a "constitutive dimension" of the evangelizing mission of the Church.ⁱⁱ

It is in the light of such an understanding of evangelization that our reflections on the five hundred years of evangelization which we are presently commemorating must be based. Authentic evangelization is mindful of the principles of the respect of the human persons, of their basic rights and of the responsibility of the Church to be a defender of such rights. Indeed, evangelization not only teaches about social justice, but is a means of bringing it about.

If the Church in the United States is strong today, it is probably because of the hard work and vision of Church leaders in the nineteenth century. They served the Catholic immigrants that came in wave after wave from Europe and these, in turn, collaborated in building a new Church materially, structurally and spiritually. But what needs to be seen critically, it the less than successful way in which it related to the minorities, the African, Native and Hispanic Americans. In the re-writing of the history of the evangelization efforts in the Americas, this is an area that merits our attention.

I. THE U.S. HIERARCHY AND THE AFRICAN AMERICANS

Around the time of the American Revolution and shortly thereafter, there was already a sizeable number of Catholic African Americans. These were found in the states of Maryland, Louisiana, Missouri and Kentucky. In 1785, John Carroll, head of the Catholic missions in the United States, wrote the Vatican secretary of state, that there were three thousand Catholic slaves in Maryland alone. Many of these black Catholics came during the early waves of immigration and migrated from the island of Santo Domingo, now known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic.ⁱⁱⁱ

The regard of the U.S. hierarchy and religious congregations to African American Catholics as basically the same as the prevalent U.S. culture. In other words, their enslavement was quite acceptable and it was common practice for bishops and religious communities to own slaves. The Jesuits, for example, owned about 300 slaves on their farms Maryland in the 1830's. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Kentucky owned thirty slaves up to the Emancipation Proclamation. Some women candidates for the Carmelites in Maryland arrived with their slaves. Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore, the first bishop of the United States owned slaves, as did Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget, the first bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky.^{iv} Bishop John England, known for his erudition and great influence, even defended the institution of slavery in the southern states. In a letter to the secretary of state, John Forsythe, that the condemnation of the slave trade by Pope Gregory XVI in 1839 did not really mean the condemnation of the "peculiar institution."^v

Religious communities for African American women met enormous odds and opposition. The first of these was the Oblate Sisters of Providence. They were founded by Elizabeth Lange who was born in Cuba of Haitian parents. Although approved by Pope Gregory XVI in 1831, they were treated with insults and were considered superfluous. Despite many hardships and poverty, the sisters had established schools for Black children even before the Civil War.^{vi}

Another group, the Sisters of the Holy Family whose origins are in New Orleans, for legal reasons, were not allowed to organize themselves as a religious community at first. It took them ten years to be allowed to take public vows and not until 1872, twenty years after their foundation were they allowed to wear a religious habit.^{vii}

The only prophetic voice of the U.S. hierarch was that of Archbishop John Purcell of Cincinnati. On the eve of the Civil War, he came out for the emancipation of the slaves.^{viii}

At the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1866, called to regulate the affairs of the U.S. Church after the Civil War, Archbishop Martin J. Spalding presented a plan for the pastoral care of the newly-freed African Americans:

...it is...the most urgent duty of all to discuss the future status of the negro. Four million of these unfortunates are thrown on our Charity, and they silently but eloquently appeal...for help. It is a golden opportunity for reaping a harvest of souls, which neglected may not return...^{ix}

Archbishop Spalding's plan called for the establishment of a national ordinariate with nation-wide jurisdiction to co-ordinate the efforts and the program for the evangelization and the pastoral care of the nation's 150,000 Black Catholics. The proposal was adamantly rejected by the nation's bishops. The "golden opportunity" was lost. The bishops settled on a short and weak statement in their Pastoral Letter issued at the close of the Council.^x

Notes:

"Color" as an ingredient in the counter-witness of the Church in the U.S. since its beginnings.

Belatedness with which the U.S. bishops exercise their teaching and prophetic mission with regards the African, Native and Hispanic Americans.

II. THE U.S. HIERARCHY AND THE NATIVE AMERICANS

The good thing about all this is that all of a sudden history becomes an important ingredient in conversation. On the occasion of the quincentenary of evangelization in the Americas, excellent debates have taken place and most importantly, consciences have been made sensitive to the negative things that are being discovered in history. We in the Roman Catholic Church at the National Bishops' level have struggled with this debate. Several years ago, preparations began for

the observance of the quincentenary of evangelization of the Americas. What ensued was a debate that took place especially at committee level with those bishops and others who were charged with the task of producing a document on behalf of the entire body of U.S. bishops. What influenced the document was that the Pope himself had made a very strong statement during his 1987 visit to Phoenix, Arizona regarding the approach to the task of interpreting the 500 years of Europeanization. The Pope had called us to ask forgiveness from God and from the native peoples for the wrongs endured.

There were members on the commission who on the one hand, wanted the document to be triumphalistic and celebrative in tone. At one point, the title of the document became "Sounding the Jubilee Horn." It was just too much for some of us who wanted to avoid any kind of triumphalistic approach and that a more contrite spirit be incorporated into the document. In other words, we believed that at the core of our message should be an act of contrition on behalf of the Church and those representing European societies for the elements of invasion that accompanied the Christianization of the Americas. These are some of the things that we said in our December, 1990 statement entitled "Heritage and Hope": "The encounter with the Europeans was a harsh and painful one for the Indigenous peoples." It described the introduction of diseases, cultural oppression, injustice, disrespect for native ways and traditions. "The great waves of European colonization were accompanied by destruction of Indian civilization, the violent usurpation of Indian lands and the brutalization of their inhabitants." The pastoral letter went on to say: "Many of those associated with the colonization of the land failed to see in the natives the workings of the same God that they espoused."^{xi}

Even so, the pastoral letter goes on to describe the positive aspects of the arrival of the Europeans. "The Gospel did in fact take root....it cannot be denied that the interdependence of the

cross and the crown had occurred during the first missionary campaigns by way of contradictions and injustices. But neither can it be denied 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."

In November of 1991, a year after "Heritage and Hope," the bishops at their annual assembly in Washington voted overwhelmingly in favor of a statement on Native Americans on the occasion of the 500th anniversary. The name of this document is: "1992: Time for Remembering, Reconciling, and Recommitting Ourselves as a People."^{xii} Allow me to summarize the contents under each of those titles.

I.A Time for Remembering.

In this first section, we repeat the apology that we had extended to the Native Americans the year before. "In this quinentennial 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." We remind ourselves that the religious spirit or spirituality of native people in the Americas did not begin 500 years ago but centuries before in their prayers, chants, dance, and other sacred celebrations of native people. This section repeats the call to Americans to better understand the role of native peoples in history and to respond to the just grievances of our Native American brother and sisters. We repeat that this is a great opportunity to reject all forms of racism. While in this section, we remember the past, we state that the challenge of this historic year is not simply to look back but to look around at the current situation of the native

peoples and to look to future challenges for our Church and society in responding to the aspirations of Native Americans.

II.A Time for Reconciliation.

We asked that the faithful in the United States seek 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. This, we say, is to be done in all aspects of our liturgical, pastoral, and spiritual lives. The fear, the prejudice, and insensitivity towards native peoples is deeply rooted in our culture and in our local Churches.

III.A Time for Recommitment

The American bishops recommitted themselves in this statement to stand with the native peoples in their search for greater justice in our society. We committed ourselves to be advocates with native leaders in this effort, not simply advocates for their needs. In other words, we have committed ourselves to walk with the Native Americans in their struggles for dignity and justice. We pledged support from the bishops' various agencies of assistance to home missions.

III. THE U.S. HIERARCHY AND THE HISPANIC AMERICANS

ENDNOTES

- i. Dulles, Avery, "John Paul II and the New Evangelization," America, February 1, 1992, Vol. 106, No. 3, p. 52.
- ii.
- iii. Davis, Cyprian, O.S.B., "Black Catholics in Nineteenth Century America," U.S. Catholic Historian, Vol. 5, Number 1, 1986, p. 1 & 2.
- iv. *Ibid.* p. 3.
- v. *Ibid.*
- vi. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- vii. *Ibid.*, p. 5 & 6.
- viii. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ix. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- x. National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, Pastoral Letters of the United States Catholic Bishops, Vol. 1 (1792-1940), p. 203.
- xi. Origins, CNS Documentary Service, December 6, 1990, Vol. 20:No. 26.
- xii. Origins, CNS Documentary Service, January 9, 1992, Vol. 21:No. 31.