

NATIVE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

This workshop was attended by about twenty-eight people who brought to it an interest informed by obvious experience. The presenter, Sara Hassenpaugh, of the Mohawk Nation, National Tekakwitha Conference, had the unique experience of being well grounded in her own Native tradition as well as being an active member of the Church from childhood. She explained that the Mohawks have been Catholic from earliest missionary encounters, and went on to detail the parameters of that long encounter. First, she explained the basic principles of her Native tradition, conveying an authentic appreciation for the spiritual wealth it contains. Then she spoke of the sad lapses in understanding that her people have experienced—much of which is a result of the meeting of two entirely different cultural worlds. Next, she brought the discussion into the wider context of the entire Native American community who are also Catholic. She also spoke of her experience in the National Tekakwitha Conference, through which the Native community is striving to gain Church leadership in its own right. Despite the recent installation of two Native bishops, this segment of the Church finds that its own voice and experience is most often not heeded.

In the discussion, points of conflict were recognized as remnants of a not-long-past missionary perspective. Also obvious was the commonality of the experience these peoples have shared with other minority voices in the Church. The workshop clarified particularly well an area where the Church needs to grow and mature in its theology and practice. That this was done by an authentic Native American voice made a deep impact on the audience.

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