

NATIVE PEOPLES IN NORTH AMERICA

The workshop, moderated by Achiel Peelman, centered on a paper presented by Michael Galvan, Ohlone, pastor of St. Monica Parish in Moraga, California, and director of the Office of Clergy Formation in the diocese of Oakland.

As a general introduction to the workshop, the moderator first presented an overview of the sociocultural complexity of the Native reality in Canada. He insisted both on the contemporary spiritual revival of North America's Native peoples and on their ongoing struggle for cultural survival in a society still dominated by social attitudes and colonial policies that aim to assimilate them, leaving them dispossessed of their culture, their language, their children, their economy, and their power of self-determination.¹ Quoting Canadian Judge Thomas Berger, he pointed to the heart of the matter when raising the question: Do we really believe and accept that Native cultures are viable in contemporary North American society?² The moderator also presented some observations on the theological meaning of "inculturation" in reference to the Native reality. Reflecting with John Webster Grant on the historical encounter between the Christian missionaries and the Natives, he recognized that most Indians had become Christian but that Christianity had not become Indian.³ This failure notwithstanding, Christ or the gospel is deeply incarnated in the Native consciousness. The moderator invited the participants to adopt a Christ-centered rather than a church-centered understanding of "inculturation."⁴ The gospel, proclaimed to the Natives, will continue to challenge Native cultures while interacting with them. Native cultures will continue to challenge our Western understanding of Christianity. This encounter (the mystery and the process of inculturation) will produce new fruits that extend far beyond our present dreams and expectations. Are we ready to welcome and to evaluate all the results of this encounter between the gospel (Christ) and Native cultures?

Michael Galvan spoke out of his own pastoral experience as member of the Board of Directors of the Tekawitha Conference and out of his own family experience as an Ohlone of the San Francisco Bay Area, evangelized by Spanish Franciscans in the eighteenth century, but now striving for the integration of the Native tradition and the Christian faith. His paper, centered on the importance of

¹Geoffrey York, *The Dispossessed. Life and Death in Native Canada* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989).

²Thomas Berger, "Native History, Native Claims, and Self-Determination," *B.C. Studies* 57 (1983): 10-23.

³John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime. Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter Since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

⁴Achiel Peelman, *L'inculturation. L'Eglise et les Cultures* (Paris: Desclée; Ottawa: Novalis, 1989).

oral traditions and of the spoken word, sparked a lively discussion on the development of a truly Native Christianity in a pluralistic church. Galvan acknowledged the emergence of Native Christian leadership and community experience, but questioned the ongoing "missionary" attitudes and strategies of the churches. He spoke of the uneasiness created in many Native communities by former rejections of the Native traditions and the contemporary efforts to integrate them in the churches. From a Native cultural and spiritual point of view, he stressed the importance of the community, the whole of creation and the concrete relationship to the land. But he invited the participants to resist the temptation of romanticism. He concluded his paper with an urgent call for new dialogue and encounter between the Native and Western traditions.

Throughout the discussion following this presentation, several participants stressed the need for a creation-centered theology. They acknowledged the fact that many Natives find themselves today in a bifurcated world due to past rejections of their traditions by the Christian churches. They insisted on the importance of healing and reconciliation in church and society, while sharing several interesting examples which illustrate the vitality and the dynamism of contemporary Native cultures. Speaking out of their own experience with Native peoples, some participants observed how difficult it is to cope with change in aboriginal societies. One participant observed that the Second Vatican Council developed its entire theology on the background of our Western and secularized world, while Natives continue to define themselves as "spiritual peoples." We are coping today with the vestiges of sometimes very bad missionary practices and attitudes which now divide the Native communities. Older generations of Natives often do not want the Catholic Church to change. Younger generations are tempted to throw out everything that is Catholic. This situation is typical of oppressed peoples who had to go underground spiritually in order to survive culturally. The discussion concluded with the observation that cultural sensitivity and the willingness to learn from Native peoples and to share their experience as it unfolds today, form the cornerstones of any future encounter between Christianity and the Native cultures.

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