A Challenge to Recover

_Eleanor Doidge, LOB_

On the basis of more than one hundred trips to the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations to listen carefully to Native Americans share painful experiences of Christian mission efforts, this author challenges today’s ministers to engage in “humble listening.” Only then can they recover the church’s mission of love for those who suffered and/or continue to suffer from prior church work.

I am a recovering Catholic.” This is a phrase often repeated by our host, Matilda Black Bear, when we visit the Rosebud Reservation (Lakota Sioux) in South Dakota with students of mission and cross-cultural ministry. She knows that most are preparing for ordination and lay ecclesial ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. She uses the term as one might talk about an addiction:

I hold the church accountable for many of the things that have happened to our people. I see many of the discrepancies of the church, the weaknesses, failures, and some of the destruction caused by the teachings and practices of the church.
(Black Bear, 22)

Black Bear names both the actual and perceived offenses causing many indigenous people to blame the church for the painful memories, thoughts, and feelings resulting from their experience with missionaries. She adds the following challenge, using words that capture a history of personal, social, and cultural suffering and disruption:

_Eleanor Doidge_ is associate professor of cross cultural ministry at Catholic Theological Union. A member of the Ladies of Bethany, she has accompanied more than one thousand students on traveling seminars to the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations in South Dakota.
I believe that when you critique something then you should be prepared to offer something else in its place. . . . We work on the premise that when these people [preparing for ministry] come to us they are given an insight into themselves, not only as individuals, but insight into the world that they represent to others. . . . If they go out into the world to work as missionaries based on what we have shared with them and what they have experienced here at Rosebud then they can be more respectful of other cultures and other ways of thinking and doing things. When they are respectful, when they go to other cultures they need to leave intact what they find there, so that they are not repeating the kind of missionary work that was done to us to assimilate us under the guise of educating us. . . . It is a matter of being responsible, because I make those challenges to the church and want to hold them accountable and responsible. (22)

Black Bear speaks only for herself, but her words highlight both the historical problems arising from past and present missionary efforts and the challenge to a renewed understanding of the mission of the church today. Responding to one aspect of the question of the “multicultural church,” this article will address the case of mission among Native Americans: the past, the present, and challenges for the future.

I am a third-generation Scottish, Irish, English woman who has participated for more than twenty years in traveling seminars to the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations. More than one hundred visits with students and mission personnel have provided us with many personal stories and testimonies about the relationship of the church to their culture and spiritual traditions. Equally important are the many stories told us by our Native American teachers and friends in the Chicago area. Because these stories are personal and illustrative of individual experiences, memories, and interpretations, they can serve an important role in supporting the research of Native American scholars, church personnel, mission theologians, and social scientists.

The Past

My brief survey of the work of the church among Native Americans will rely on a few general reflections of Native scholars and the interpretations of individuals. Open to critique and rebuttal, these interpretations are nevertheless the sustaining myth that feeds the quality of relationships, both positive and negative, of Native American Catholics with the church. Marie Therese Archambault, O.S.F., (Hunkpapa Lakota) writes: “In the past the church has obscured the face of Christ through ignorance of or outright dismissal of Native cultures. It has attempted to enter the reality of Native people at superficial levels, almost always from the European viewpoint and perspective. . . . Native cultures were
devalued and rejected by the church’s missionaries” (Archambault, 139). She continues by reflecting that “it is no wonder that many Native people mistrust Christian churches and frequently appear outwardly ‘religionless’ in this land.”

**Personal Stories**

Personal stories of harrowing experiences in the reservation boarding schools operated by missionaries abound, particularly those concerning the treatment of the children when they first arrived at the schools. The hair of both girls and boys was cut short, their clothing taken from them and exchanged for uniform “European” dress. Perhaps most traumatic, young children away from their families for the first time and living in a regimented environment were forbidden to speak their own language. These accounts raise questions that are among the most important missiological concerns, such as theological issues of inculturation or contextual theology. They are very basic human issues, bound to be traumatic on some level and to remain deep in the psychic memory. A baptized former Roman Catholic, Karol Parker (Mandan-Hidatsa), writes: “My mother’s experience was a mixture of respect for the religious training with a strong distaste for the treatment received at the hands of the nuns. Most employed corporal punishment and forbade the speaking of Hidatsa” (Parker, 220).

**Spiritual Traditions**

Charles Alexander Eastman (Santee Sioux) wrote in 1911: “The religion of the Indian is the last thing about him that the man of another race will ever understand” (Treat, 3). Indeed, the history of treatment received by Native Americans at the hands of the U.S. government and many Christian missionaries because of the misunderstanding and negative judgment of their spiritual practices still lives in the memories of individuals today (Costello, 74).

Although some research (Enochs, Bucko, Costello) offers a different interpretation of the relationship of the Jesuit missionaries to Native American rituals on both the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations, local Lakota remember priests checking who was in attendance at a Lowanpi (a ceremonial prayer and healing service conducted by a medicine man) or other ceremonies. Enochs acknowledges that “the Jesuits opposed the medicine men because they believed that they were influenced by the devil and were deceptive charlatans who conspired to cheat the Lakotas out of their money and possessions” (104). However, he also acknowledges that some Jesuits had more positive attitudes regarding Native practices (152). Only after the 1978 passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act did Native Americans enjoy some measure of protection from the U.S. government for practicing their traditional rituals.

It was not unusual for Christian priests and ministers present on the reservations to do whatever they could to insure the salvation of Native Americans’ souls. An urban elderly woman (Arikara) frequently tells the story of being
baptized a total of five times by various Christian ministers and priests. Hers is not an extreme case or unique; similar stories abound on the reservation. The elderly woman is a practicing Christian. She also continues to practice many of the traditional ways taught her by her grandparents on the reservation.

The Present

The March 2003 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ report on Native Americans and the Catholic Church provides the following reflections: 4.1 million people identified themselves as Native American in the 2002 Census (USCCB, 4). Native Catholics number 493,615, or about 12 percent (USCCB, 8). The estimated percentage of the total population of Native Americans who were baptized Catholic ranged from a high of 29 percent in 1940 to a low of about 17 percent today (USCCB, 5). While these numbers are all estimates, reports from dioceses indicate that approximately 42 percent of those baptized are “practicing” (USCCB, 17). Just under one-fourth of all U.S. dioceses have an office or program that deals specifically with Native American Catholics. They serve territories where more than 85 percent of the Native American population resides (USCCB, 9). Very few dioceses have a pastoral plan addressing Native American concerns (USCCB, 10). The incorporation of Native symbols and rituals in communal worship is much more common in parishes/ministries serving Native Americans on reservations or in rural communities than in urban settings (USCCB, 12). More Native Americans enter the diaconate than any other church ministry (USCCB, 18). The bishops conclude: “This study of the oldest ministry of the church in the United States focuses the need for immediate attention to the many challenges among the Catholic Native communities. The study raises awareness of the wide-spread presence of Native people in dioceses throughout the country. It demonstrates that very often these people are invisible to the local church” (USCCB, 20). The bishops also challenge diocesan personnel to “risk new initiatives to help Native peoples build strong local church communities that reflect their culture and religious heritage” (USCCB, 20).

The USCCB survey raises questions about the role of the church in the life of Native American Catholics today. Certainly there is some attempt on the part of the Bishops’ Conference to become better informed. At the same time, their
efforts would have been strengthened had they been attentive to historical and persistent reasons for the negative attitudes and feelings of many Native Americans toward the church.

**Relationship to the Church**

Native American teachers in the city and on the reservation, through observation and research, reveal a complex social and cultural reality that affects many aspects of people’s lives. As Black Bear’s statement reflects, the relationship with Christianity and the Catholic Church is tied to the way Native American individuals and communities interpret their experience with representatives of the church. This results in a wide-ranging continuum of spiritual practices among Native Americans. This is also true for baptized Catholics. As the bishops’ report reflects, while the percentage of Native Americans baptized Catholic has dropped remarkably since 1940, the number of those baptized who are actually practicing is very difficult to ascertain. On one end of a continuum are the practicing Catholics, with regular attendance at the Eucharist and non-participation in traditional spiritual practices such as the *inipi* (purification ritual also known as the sweat lodge), Sun Dance, or other ceremonies; at the other end are individuals who, although baptized, do not practice Catholicism or Christianity. Every marker along the continuum is likely to be represented by people who practice some elements of both Catholic and traditional Native spirituality (Enochs, 159). Achiel Peelman writes: “Some Lakota easily pass from the traditional to the Christian religious system, and *vice versa* according to the spiritual needs of the moment” (Peelman, 139). Positive attitudes toward the church reflect positive encounters with clergy and/or teachers. For some it is the result of the fear they were taught to have of the traditional spirituality and of medicine men (Jacobs, 238). Negative feelings against the church result from painful experiences they or their extended family had with a clergyperson or teacher. Some, like Black Bear, hold the church and the missionaries accountable for the erosion of their culture.

**Spiritual Practices**

The passage of the 1978 Native American Religious Freedom Act marked a decided shift. A renaissance of traditional practices, particularly the Sun Dance (Peelman, 212), has taken place on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations. There has been an increase in the number of Sun Dances and their participants. Typically, family and friends also attend, praying in the outer circle for the dancers. Individuals who formerly would have spoken out against these practices now attend to support dancers, and some have made the commitment themselves to dance.

At the same time, the Catholic Church continues to respond to some of the challenges put forth in the USCCB 2003 report. Most noticeable is the work of
the Sioux Spiritual Center located in Howes, South Dakota, sponsored by the Rapid City Catholic Diocese and the Wisconsin Jesuit Province. The Center offers ministry retreats, recovery retreats, inculturated weekend retreats, a national workshop for Native catechists, and a ten-day education program for missionary personnel, cosponsored by the National Tekakwitha Conference and the USCCB Ad Hoc Committee for Native American Catholics. The National Tekakwitha Conference sponsors a yearly gathering for Native American Catholics and missionaries to Native Americans.

Is There a Future?

When Matilda Black Bear challenges students preparing for mission and ministry to approach the people and cultures to whom they are sent with different attitudes and actions than in the past, I believe she is challenging the church to be true to its mission. Similarly, she is challenging the church to its own “recovery.” It is a challenge to recover the mission of the church, to participate in the missio Dei. Missiologist David Bosch paraphrases Ad Gentes, 1.2, when he writes: “Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is possible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people” (Bosch, 392).

While Black Bear’s challenge springs from Native American experiences and the belief of many that the church remains unrepentant and unchanged in its negative and destructive practices even today, her first hearers are not individuals planning to work among Native Americans; they are seminarians and students of cross-cultural mission and ministry, many of whom come from non-Western, non-Euro-American cultures. They have been invited to an experience of “mission-in-reverse” (Barbour, 1984, 304), learning about mission in dialogue with people who were formerly the objects of mission, now claiming their rightful role as subjects. These students recognize similarities with their own stories: about ceremonies performed away from the missionaries’ eyes and ears, their elders’ painful memories about the church and Christianity clothed in colonizer’s garb and tongue, preaching not only the life and message of Jesus but also condemning their cultures. And now their challenge is to show a different face of the church of Jesus in their ministerial lives.

The Church with a Different Face

Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder offer the following understanding of mission:

As the Roman Catholic bishops of Asia have expressed it, mission (in Asia, but from our perspective, in the whole world) needs to be done in a threefold dialogue:
with the poor, with culture and with other religions. It needs to share the life of the poor—who are in any case the majority of its members—and speak out about what keeps them that way; it needs to appreciate and critique human culture and guard it against any encroaching leveling of cultural differences; and it needs to engage the truth of other religions while maintaining the conviction that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6). (Bevans and Schroeder, 349)

The church, together with Native Americans, is challenged to enter into a new phase where the commitment is to a radical form of dialogue born out of listening very carefully to all positive and negative analyses. An attitude of absolute humility in the face of the stories of anger, pain, oppression, injustice, and abuse is a must because it allows one to acknowledge the truth, to make an intentional choice for adaptation and change (Lederach, 107). There is a predominance of negative stories, in fact antagonism, at the very least apathy and disengagement, against the church and Christianity; hence the first step in the process of reconciliation is, as Stephen Bevans says, “. . . the challenge for outsiders . . . in the ascesis of close listening even when they think they know what is being said” (Bevans, 2000, 143–44). Listening can serve as the most effective form of dialogue.

The church cannot divorce itself from the national legacy of social and economic scandal in relationship to Native Americans. While not the author of the treaties and reservation system, the church in mission has the responsibility to speak out against the resulting economic and social inequalities and injustice. Some unemployment rates on reservations are as high as 85 percent (Costello, 180). The critique of Western Christianity’s greed and colonialism by the great holy man and Catholic catechist, Black Elk, remains true today: “Today the Lakota continue to live in the same poverty as other colonized peoples of the Third World. The rejection of Christianity by many Native Americans is far from unwarranted, for they live in a world created by those who have emptied the gospel of its meaning” (Costello, 180–81). This challenge is another opportunity for the church to listen to the people and the context, to pay attention to the stark reality of poverty, unemployment, and the attendant social ills of disease, poor health, alcoholism, teenage suicide, and domestic violence. At the same time it is important (though unaddressed in the bishops’ 2003
report) for the church to do the analysis necessary to understand the root causes
(Holland and Henriot, 100) and to do what it can to address them.

Finally, the church, in fulfilling its call to continue being a sign of God’s love
for the world, cannot avoid the necessity to make amends for its role in the
suffering of individuals and tribal groups (Schreiter, 111–12). The church is chal-
 lenged “to overcome, with others, narratives of pain and violence” (Barbour,
2000, 202). There are individuals who have suffered from emotional, psychologi-
cal, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of those serving the church mis-
sions. Culturally and socially, past church judgments against Native rituals and
cultural expressions forbid Catholics to participate in certain traditions. Even
today there are individuals who fear the traditions and/or condemn others for
participating in them. Some are confused by church attempts at inculcation by
using certain elements such as the pipe, the drum, sage, and the eagle feather in
liturgical celebrations. This is a perfect opportunity to engage in a serious dia-
logue about the church’s former understanding and to make amends for the past.
Indeed, there may be reasons for reparation and compensation to individuals for
the harm done. At the very least the time has come for “truth telling” (Schreiter,
2000, 179) and humble listening.

Conclusion

W hile the relationship of Native American Catholics to the church is not
specifically an issue of multiculturality in the church, it does represent
one dimension of the need the church has to recover its participation in the missio
Dei, particularly in relationship to people who have suffered and continue to
suffer as a result of the efforts of the church. The report by the Ad Hoc Committee
on Native American Catholics, while revealing the statistics, leaves the question
of why unanswered. Humble listening is the next important step. This is but one
more way in which the church is challenged to enter its own form of recovery: to
recover its participation in God’s mission of love poured out for all people.

References

Archambault, Marie Therese. “Native Americans and Evangelization.” In James Treat, ed.,

Barbour, Claude Marie. “Seeking Justice and Shalom in the City.” International Review for

______. “Shalom Ministries and Community: Mission Statement.” In Stephen Bevans,
Eleanor Doidge, and Robert Schreiter, eds., The Healing Circle: Essays in Cross-


