

## HERITAGE AND HOPE; EVANGELIZATION IN AMERICA (cont'd)



The great explorer greets the Tainos Indians on Hispaniola island.

For 500 years the Gospel of Jesus Christ informed the life of the Americas, attempting to complete and fulfill that which was good in both the native, and immigrant cultures and confront what was not. The stories of the many evangelizers who strove to spread the good news are numerous and varied. Here are a few examples.

### **Christopher Columbus**

The year 1992 marks the half-millennium of the voyage of Christopher Columbus. He was the son of a Europe freshly astir, reaching out for new resources and new trade routes to the East. It was also a Europe in which missionary fervor ran

high. On Oct. 12, 1492, Columbus planted the cross on the soil of the Americas. He named the land San Salvador—Holy Savior—and thus began the process of bringing Christianity to the hemisphere.

### **Early Spanish Missionaries**

Spain surpassed all other colonial powers in its comprehensive efforts to bring the Gospel to America. The hundreds of missionaries who came to the new land shared a concern for applying the Gospel to all of life.

Secular priest **Francisco Lopez de Mendoza Grajales** dedicated the first Catholic parish in what is now the United States in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565 and began work among the Timucuan Indians of Florida. In 1599 **Franciscan friars** established churches in northern New Mexico to serve new communities of settlers as well as Native American converts. **Eusebio Francisco Kino**, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jesuit missionary to Sonora and Arizona, set the stage for the conversion and transformation of tens of thousands of desert-dwelling Native Americans. The upper California coast

was the venue for the work of one of the most indefatigable of Franciscan missionaries, Blessed Fray **Junipero Serra**. Serra's zeal for the conversion of souls has carried into our times as special inspiration for priestly vocations.

### **Juan Diego and Hispanic Americans: The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe**

That process by which Christianity became not the religion of the invader but the prized possession of the native peoples and of the many peoples of mixed European and Native American descent is perhaps best symbolized in the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. According to the long-established tradition, the Nahuatl Indian peasant Juan Diego recounted his vision of the Virgin Mary appeared to him in Tepeyac in 1531. He told of how she appeared on the site of a shrine to the virgin mother goddess Tonantzin, venerated by the native peoples. As one greater than the sun god, Mary appeared to hide the sun, whose rays shone around her. As one greater than the moon goddess, she seemed to stand on the moon itself. Yet she appeared not as a warlike goddess, but as a young *mestiza*. She wore a little black band that indicated she was an expectant mother. She was beautiful and comforting, promising protection and liberation to Juan Diego in a time of great loss and hardship. The devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe that followed—recently advanced by the Church's beatification of Juan Diego—illustrates vividly how the Gospel was able to find forms of expression that came from the cultures of those to whom it was addressed.

### **The Maryland Jesuits**

It was not only in the Spanish dominion that missions blossomed. The English Jesuits with their pioneer **Andrew White** had great success with the Anacostians and Piscataways despite the persecution of Catholic missionaries by Protestants from Virginia and the decline of the missions in ensuing decades.

### **The Evangelizers in New France**

In New France as well the Gospel accompanied settlement and exploration. French Jesuit missionaries **Pierre Biard** and **Enemond Massé** began their work at Port Royal, Nova Scotia, in 1608. From there they brought the Gospel to Native Americans throughout northern New England. During the 1650s **Blessed Marie of the Incarnation** was part of a small group of Ursuline



Sisters who had come from France to work with the children of Native Americans and French colonists.

In fact, martyrdom was an awful reality for some of the earliest evangelizers. Not all of the native peoples welcomed the missionaries or saw in Christianity a faith and way of life that complemented their own. Brave Franciscan Friar **Juan de Padilla** became the first martyr in North America in 1542. He dwelled with the native people in the Kansas Prairie. Spanish Dominican Friars **Luis Cancer**, **Diego de Tolosa** and lay Brother **Fuentes** were killed in the area of Tampa Bay in 1549. Jesuit **Juan Bautista Segura** lost his life in Virginia in 1571. Eight other Jesuits, who were later known as the North American martyrs, gave up their lives in the spread of the Gospel. Among them were **Isaac Jogues** and **Rene Goupil**, who were killed in 1646 in what is now Auriesville, N.Y.

#### ***Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha***



The word that was brought by the early missionaries to the Native American peoples yielded rich fruit that was nowhere more evident than in the life of the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. Kateri was born in 1656 in the Indian village of Ossernenon (in the area that is now upstate New York). Orphaned as a child, she came to the Christian faith at age 20 through the ministry of a French Jesuit. Her new faith brought upon her abuse and ostracism from her family and tribe. A year later she fled her village to another Christian one near Montreal. There she became known for a life of great charity as she shared her faith.

#### ***Evangelization and the African Americans***

Around the time of Columbus' first voyage, Europe was also taking new interest in Africa. The need for laborers in the American colonies gave rise during the next century to the slave

trade that linked the three continents during the colonial period. The injustice done to the African peoples was profound and deplorable. Despite the oppression, there were those evangelizers who sought to serve their black brothers and sisters. **Alonso de Sandoval** and Jesuit St. Peter Claver who began his work as a priest and physician that resulted in the conversion of over 300,000 slaves to Christianity.

The Gospel took root and bore fruit among the African-American people. Peruvian mulatto **St. Martin de Porres**; in Florida, former slave **Francisco Menendez**; the saintly **Pierre Toussaint**; Mother **Mary Elizabeth Lange** became the foundress of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1829, the first congregation of African-American women religious. In 1842, **Henriette Delille** and **Juliette Gaudin** began the Holy Family Sisters in New Orleans.

**St. Elizabeth Seton**, the first person born in the United States to attain sainthood, founded the Sisters of Charity. In 1840, Father **Pierre de Smet**, a Belgian Jesuit missionary, began an extensive evangelization program for the entire Northwest of the United States. He was frequently called on by the U.S. government to write treaties of peace. His successful missionary work marked one of the most imaginative evangelization efforts in the history of the church in the United States. **Felix Varela**, born in 1788 in Cuba, strove to spread the good news in his native land through his teaching and writing in areas of philosophy and politics. **Isaac Hecker** in 1858 founded the first society of North American priests, the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle. **St. Philippine Rose Duchesne** established 6 schools along the Mississippi and worked among the Potawatomi Indians in Kansas. **Blessed Katharine Drexel** founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People.

Economic, political and religious disruptions in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century occasioned the immigration of thousands of Catholics—Armenians, Czechs, Germans, Irish, Italians, Lithuanians and Poles among others—who were followed by faithful pastors and religious. **St. John Neumann**, himself an immigrant seminarian from Bohemia, served immigrant communities. **St. Frances Xavier Cabrini**, Italian-born founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart and worked among Italian immigrants.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, each generation has tested the resolve and inventiveness of those who tried to spread the good news. The call of the Gospel to penetrate every aspect of human life has been heard by many in our day.

In addition to those who have become widely known for their work, there have been millions who have passed down the faith from one generation to another within the family. The stories of those family evangelizers need to be remembered and told in this time of commemoration.

*To be continued...*