

Jesuits and the Indigenous Peoples of Canada and the United States

Father John Paul, director of Red Cloud Indian School, writes from Pine Ridge, South Dakota, "A favorite t-shirt worn in Indian country these days reads, "If Columbus discovered America, then who were those people who greeted him?" " It is difficult to know whether to commemorate the fifth centenary of Columbus' voyage and how to mark that of the first preaching of the Gospel in the Americas, or to make a general evaluation of the effects of the interactions of peoples – and the role of Jesuits – in the intervening centuries. There is, of course, the danger of oversimplifying a long and complex history involving a number of diverse cultures, both European and Native American, in a theater covering a considerable part of the face of our planet.

Still one can take to heart Father John Paul's invitation to imagine the long-term effects of being "discovered" on Native Americans: "Foreigners invade your land, destroy all you hold dear, and attempt to remake you in their own image. They forbid you to speak your own language or practice your religion in the ways of your ancestors. Your children are taken away to be "educated" in their way and have all connections to their traditions broken.

Your elders are ridiculed. Your own livelihood is denied you. You are presented to the world as savage, blood-thirsty war-mongers, having no respect for life. These foreigners talk to you in words not found in your vocabulary and pressure you into agreements based on concepts unfamiliar to you. your dignity is utterly destroyed when you become a stranger and prisoner on a small corner of what was once your land. Back in the 1850's Chief Seattle found himself in just this situation and said, "This is the end of living and the beginning of mere survival".

Presence of the Jesuits

For better or for worse, for some four centuries now, Jesuits – with all their ignorance, limits, and defects, as well as their good will, talents, and God's grace – have gone among the native peoples of North America. They have done so following their vocation as stated in their Constitutions "to travel through the whole world and live in any part of it whatsoever where there is hope of greater service to God and of help of souls". One of the best known is Father Peter DeSmet.

Last year religious and civil leaders gathered with the people of Stevensville, Montana, to dedicate large wooden statues of Chief Big Face of the Flathead tribe and Father DeSmet at site of the mission called "St. Mary of the Rocky Mountains". It was the 150th anniversary of its founding. Father DeSmet and five Jesuit companions went West from Missouri in 1841 after being invited by three delegations of Flatheads who visited the city of Saint Louis in search of Black robes or Jesuits. DeSmet had come to Missouri in 1823 as a very young Jesuit, along with Charles Van Quickenborne, Peter Verhaegen, and others. In one way or another all of these pioneers ministered among Native Americans, and St. Mary's in Montana was only one of many such foundations.



Deacon Ron Boyer trained at Anishinabe Center

Father Pedro Menéndez de Avilés seems to be the first Jesuit of all to seek to go among Native Americans in what are now Canada and the United States. Already in 1566 in what is Florida today, he gave his life trying to make a beginning. Various attempts were made in Canada, and the third in 1632 proved enduring. It is perhaps enough to mention the heroic lives, work, deaths of Saints Jean de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues, and their companions (background to the recent and somewhat controversial film *Black Robe*, as well as the explorer of the Mississippi River Father Jacques Marquette. In 1634 Father Andrew White and his companions arrived in the new colony of Maryland and immediately began to go among the local native peoples. At the end of the 17th century Father Eusebio Kino's travels and work took him among those of what is now Arizona.

These early Jesuits and those of the last century like DeSmet set a pattern. In 1886, for instance, Fathers Paschal Tosi and Louis Robaut arrived among the native peoples of Alaska. Today Jesuits are found among the Eskimos, the Anishinabe, the Mohawks, and the Sioux – to mention only some of the peoples among and with whom they live and work. Several Jesuits dedicate themselves completely to them. Many others touch Native American communities and individuals and are available to them in the context of more general pastoral service and educational ministry. Many of those in the first group engage in fairly traditional essential parish and school work. Others promote new, hopeful developments.

Spiritual centers

"Mahpiya Na Maka Okoigna" is the Lakota (Sioux) name for the Sioux Spiritual Center in Plainview, South Dakota. It means "Between Heaven and Earth". The name was chosen by Catholic Lakota people to suggest that this place would be a place of healing and forgiveness, a place of spiritual strength for individuals and for the whole people. The Center serves five reservations. People come for retreats, days of recollection, and short courses. It is also the focal point of a ministry formation program which includes those preparing for the Permanent Diaconate. Ministry people come to the Center for courses, spiritual direction, and retreats. They return to their villages to act as deacons, prayer leaders, parish assistants, religious education program coordinators, and teachers. The Center is the heart beat of an effort to develop an indigenous Church.

The Kateri Northwest Ministry Institute is a culturally specific ministry training program for indigenous peoples in the Catholic Church in the Northwest United States. It was developed to relate to their histories and meet their cultural needs, which differ from those of the mainstream and those of transplanted European traditions and ways. Operating out of both Great Falls, Montana, and Immaculate Heart Retreat Center in Spokane, Washington, the Institute provides practical training and guided experience in the basic ministries of the Catholic Church. In addition to increasing the number of Native Catholic ministers, the program seeks to build up the people's sense of dignity and confidence in themselves, striving to reduce the rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, and family disfunction. Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane explains that the Kateri Institute is committed "to the revitalization and the renewal of the spiritual life of the Native American peoples of the Northwest". The Native lay leaders participate in the program with enthusiasm and great dignity, drawing upon the wealth of their own cultures and rediscovering their own Native ways and spirituality.

The Anishinabe Centre at Anderson Lake near Espanola, Ontario, is called "Wasseandimikaning", or "the Place of Spiritual Enlightenment". It also strives to be a focus of reconciliation and healing, as well as a place for general pastoral ministry and formation for service and ministries in the Church. In recent years there has even been one vocation to the celibate priesthood, who was able to begin and do part of his studies at the Centre. It, too, puts much emphasis on the