



Harmony of the Drum and Cross

THE BLENDING OF NATIVE CULTURE AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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*“Now there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian and Scythian, slave, and free man. Rather, Christ is all and in all.”
(Col. 3:11 NCB)*

It was one of the most memorable masses I can remember. It began, as always, with the ringing of the bells. The congregation rose and waited, expecting the voice of our music director to bid us good morning. But she and the choir were not there. Trumpets blared from the vestibule. Everyone’s face came to life. I could sense this was no ordinary mass. The church was filled with the sounds of singing as the procession began. We could hear guitars, trumpets, a violin, and then the colorful costumes came into view. The mariachis had come to St. Dominic’s. Smiles were everywhere. Children were held aloft to see the excitement. I had not seen anything like this before. The songs were in Spanish, but understanding the words was not important. The meaning and intent of the Spirit was all that mattered. The music had touched our very soul. I had witnessed a mixture of culture, worship, and the universal community in celebration. This is what the Creator intended.

I related the experience to a friend some days later. She often travels to New Mexico and said this type of mass was typical in the churches there. Taos is rich in Mexican and Native American culture. Their customs and rituals are carried into the way they worship, and through a colorful blend of traditions.

The experience of the mariachi mass at St. Dominic’s, and the religious culture common to Taos, are examples of what the Vatican II council envisioned: *“Nevertheless, the church has been sent to all ages and nations and, therefore, is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or to any set of customs, ancient or modern. The church is faithful to its traditions and is at the same time conscious of its universal mission; it can, then, enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves.”* (*Gaudium et Spes*, Chapter II, Section 2, 58) In this, the church comes alive within the faith, ritual, traditions, and customs indigenous to the culture that envelops it. Though this harmonic exchange, both the church and the culture itself are enriched.

In November of 1996, I attended a workshop at the Orinda Campus of JFK University. The seminar was on “Native Wisdom,” and would be presented by Ed McGaa (Eagle Man), an Oglala Sioux. The flier advertised those in attendance would “learn Native American philosophy and spirituality, and universal lessons from indigenous cultures.” We would also be introduced to “the spiritual imagery of the Six Powers of the Planet – East, West, North, South, Mother Earth, Father Sky – that reside under one ultimate power, *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Spirit.” The relation of all races would be explored, we would discover our “natural name,” and learn how to

say it in the Lakota language.” Intriguing to someone whose only reference to Native American culture at the time had been the movies “Dances with Wolves,” and “Broken Arrow,” a 1950 movie starring Jimmy Stewart (one of my favorites). The workshop profoundly changed my life and way of thinking. From the outset, the commonality with my own Christian beliefs became apparent. The teachings of harmony with nature, and the relationship of all creation, filled many holes in my own spirituality. At the end, Eagle Man signed my copy of his book (Native Wisdom, Perceptions of the Natural Way) and gave me my “natural name.” I am *Makpiya Wichastah*, Sky Warrior, because of our common interest in aviation. In the end, the workshop introduced me to Native American beliefs, philosophy, and culture. It also planted a seed. I could envision Native American and Christian people worshipping together. My first thoughts of inculturation took root.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, to find and discuss the subject of inculturation as it is presented in each assigned reading. Second, to answer the question; is a harmonious worship experience possible that blends traditional Native American and Catholic ritual? In addition, one final question comes to mind. What did I learn about inculturation in general, and its application toward Native American people?

“The Church Emerging from Vatican II,” by Dennis M. Doyle, addresses the issue of culture in chapter thirty-three. Specifically, the text discusses the shift in official Catholic thinking as found in *Gaudium et Spes*, Chapter II. This shift was from a “one size fits all” attitude toward culture, to an acceptance, and recognition of “cultural pluralism” as legitimate. The gospel, under the “adaptation model” noted in the text, adapts itself to the customs and values of a particular culture. Not the other way around. “Explicit concern,” Doyle writes, “is expressed for the preservation of the heritage of various peoples,” and “the customs handed down.” Doyle points out that the value of cultures is also addressed in *Lumen Gentium* (LG, 13): “Since the kingdom of Christ is not of this world (see Jn. 18:36), in establishing this kingdom the church or people of God does not detract from anyone’s temporal well-being. Rather it fosters and takes to itself, in so far as they are good, people’s abilities, resources, and customs. In so taking them to itself it purifies, strengthens, and elevates them.” (It should be noted that this quote was taken from “Vatican Council II”, edited by Austin Flannery, O.P., and differs slightly from that contained in the Doyle text) From the comments in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium*, one could argue that the new policy of the Catholic Church, in theory anyway, was one of openness with respect to culture. In adapting Christianity to the values and customs of a particular culture, a new word has emerged – *inculturation*.

“What makes us Catholic,” by Thomas H. Groome, describes *inculturation* as the “give-and-take between Christianity and culture.” Further, it is “an exchange of gifts

whereby Christian faith, remaining true to its core, becomes native within each culture, thereby enhancing both the local culture and the mosaic of Christian faith with a unique expression.” Groome goes on to say that Christian faith is far more “authentic” when it is expressed through a person’s native culture. This occurs when it is “truly indigenous to its local context,” and “lives its faith with the style and symbols of its locale.” Vatican II is identified as the starting point for the process, which began in the 1960’s. Groome reminds us that the Council envisioned a “living exchange” between Christianity and each native culture. This exchange would enrich the church, the culture, and the universal Christian community. Groome concludes that inculturation is an essential part of the church becoming *catholic*. “My point here is that the Church becomes all the more *catholic* as it encourages diverse expressions of Christian faith through multiple local cultures.”

“Building Community,” By Sofield, Hammett, and Juliano, presents three areas that would have a direct effect on the process of inculturation. The need for diversity within a community, the elements of building trust, and dealing with conflict.

Chapter five discusses diversity in the context of community membership. In considering membership within an “intentional community,” the text emphasizes the need for diversity. “The most energizing and life-giving communities,” the authors relate, “are those which have been able to integrate diversity into the group. The more diversity, the greater the potential for creativity and dynamism.” A community that is too restrictive in allowing diversity within its membership, on the other hand, may have a difficult time in attaining an effective level of creativity. While the diverse group may struggle initially to develop a level of cohesiveness, a commitment to continuing dialogue will benefit the group over the long haul. This “continuing dialogue” becomes the “living exchange” described in the Groome text. Inculturation is applied to the small community, though the entire group is enriched.

The elements that help in building trust are outlined in chapter four. Attaining a cohesive group, especially one that is diverse in nature, requires developing a level of trust. Consistent behavior with others, following through on commitments, affirmation, and acceptance of others, avoiding judgment and stereotyping, being trustworthy and honest, are all relational elements that build trust. Prior to Vatican II, were these elements applied to Native Americans in an effort to build trust? I think not. Building or rebuilding trust within the Native American culture is a major challenge to the process of inculturation. In his book, “Nature’s Way: Native Wisdom for Living in Balance with the Earth,” Eagle Man (Ed McGaa) describes the Federal Indian Religion Ban imposed by the Grant administration in 1883. Federal reservation Indian agents, in collusion with Christian missionaries, zealously worked to root out Native beliefs, ridicule their culture, and disrespect their traditions. They were directed to “convince the middle aged and older persons of the

absurdity of their early beliefs.” Indians were forbidden to speak in their native language, or worship in their natural way. “American Indians,” Eagle Man writes, “were severely challenged in their efforts to maintain the value of “one among many” (from the lesson of the Wolf). Like Wolf, who is skittish about relating with Human because of similarity zealous persecution, they were skeptical of what white society offered.”

In chapter seven, “Building Community,” dealing with conflict is discussed. “Conflict is a normal aspect of genuine relationships,” the authors write, “It begins when our needs, wants, values, and ideas clash with the needs, wants, values, and ideas of others.” This certainly applies to the cultural confrontation that took place in 1883. Positive responses to conflict outlined in the chapter include acknowledgement, facing conflict honestly, and dealing with it in a courageous manner. “When recognized, addressed, and embraced, conflict contributes to the growth of relationships and community. When avoided, conflict becomes a cancerous organism draining life from a community.”

In September of 1987, one hundred and four years after the Ban of 1883, Pope John Paul II addressed a gathering of fifteen thousand Indian Catholics in Phoenix. In his speech, he acknowledged the “harsh and painful reality” encountered between cultures that had taken place. “The cultural oppression, the injustices, the disruption of your life and your traditional societies must be acknowledged.” “From the very beginning,” the pope continued, “the Creator bestowed His gifts on each people. I encourage you to preserve and keep alive your cultures, your languages, the values, and customs which have served you well in the past and which provide a solid foundation for the future.” In saying this, Pope John Paul “recognized, addressed, and embraced” the conflict, and began the process of rebuilding trust with the Native American community. In his conclusion, the doors to inculturation were thrown open. “These things benefit not only yourselves but the entire human family. This sharing of cultural riches must also include the Church, Native cultures are called to participate in and enhance.” This is the give-and-take described by Groome, the two-way exchange that is necessary. It is the cultural pluralism described by Doyle, and the communion of cultures in *Gaudium et Spes*. All are necessary ingredients to begin the process of inculturation.

“The Parish as Covenant,” by Thomas P. Sweetser, describes working with Native Americans in chapter four. A group of pastoral ministers and leaders that serve a Native American congregation were having difficulties with structure. A major issue was encouraging participation in church functions, such as Mass, social gatherings, and volunteering for jobs and ministries. “Part of the reluctance to get involved was the hurt feelings and negative memories the Indians had about the “white man’s religion.” This is similar to the skepticism noted in the chapter on “Wolf, one among

many,” in Nature’s Way previously mentioned. The “negative memories” still run deep for many. Eagle Man dreamed of becoming a pilot as a child. He used to build airplane forts to play in. The priests ridiculed him for his dreams. “He was just an Indian after all, Indians do not grow up to be fighter pilots” he was told. That hurt within him still remains, even though he became a fighter pilot, and flew over one hundred missions in Viet Nam. In the current culture that welcomes give-and-take, and promotes an open exchange of traditions, the old hurts still linger. The answer for the pastoral ministers was to find a common focus. Parish participation was prompted by “acknowledging and dealing with the past hurts,” in hopes that “the process of healing these hurts might render people more willing to participate.” Ceremony and ritual are necessary here to begin the process of healing. “Building Community” touched on that issue in the chapter on dealing with grief. In the Jubilee for the year 2000, the pastoral leaders planned an event that included both Christian and Native American rituals. The “passing through a Jubilee door of reconciliation and forgiveness,” was combined with the Native American ritual of purification and blessing, using burning sage and an eagle feather. This is an example of a simple but meaningful ceremony, which blends ancient ritual with Christian practice. This blending of culture, tradition and ritual can be carried into other areas of parish activities as well. In the planned celebrations, holidays, and feast days, the two cultures can enter into a “living exchange” that will enrich both and the parish community as well.

One of the concerns brought by the pastoral ministers and leaders was the participation in the Mass. In chapter five, “Communal Worship,” Sweetser touches upon the diverse community, and the idea of “one size does not fit all.” We are advised to first seek what style of worship would interest a parish, and then be willing to “experiment with different models.” Liturgies offered in many languages, a diversity of music, customs and rituals would be a beginning. The special mariachi mass at St. Dominic’s, and the afternoon mass offered in Spanish are examples. Native American culture and spirituality offer a multitude of opportunities to blend ancient rituals and Christian practices. Eagle Man speaks of a three-fold division among the people. Those that are committed to the old way, those that are committed to the white man’s way, and those that seek a little of both. ‘Many people are too laden with fear,’ he writes in the chapter on “Developed Intuition, The lesson of Orca,” from what I have seen, to step into Nature’s Way; others are not fearful but simply choose to blend Christianity and the realm of Nature. Might be a smart move; they are covered on both bases.” In covering “both bases,” the medicine wheel, the drum, the pipe, the burning of sage, the eagle feather, and payers to the four directions or winds, are all symbols of Native American ceremony and worship. Each has application within the celebration of the mass, although care must be taken to respect what they represent to Native people. In his book, “The Pipe and Christ,

A Christian-Sioux Dialogue,” Father William Stolzman (*Wanbil Tokahe* – First Eagle), compares those who simply go through the motions of a Native American ceremony to people who “receive Holy Communion when they consider this sacrament to be only bread and wine and only symbolically (the body and blood of) Jesus.” We would not consider “playing” at communion appropriate and respectful behavior. “Playing” at ceremony is no different. Given proper respect, and following traditional custom, symbols inherent in Native American spirituality can, and should become a part of the mass. The scriptural reference and associations with each are abundant. This will result in blending two cultures in a ceremony that celebrates their unity of faith. The vision of inculturation comes to life.

What did I learn about inculturation in general, and its application toward Native American people? First, I learned culture, tradition, and community take many forms. Second, through the assigned readings I learned Vatican II provided the initial guidance towards a more personal and inclusive approach to culture. This allows the church to come alive within the faith, ritual, traditions, and customs indigenous to the culture within the community it is called to serve. Then, I learned Christian faith is far more “authentic” when it is expressed through a person’s native culture. And the church becomes enriched, and more *catholic* when it participates in a cultural “living exchange.” Further, I learned a community is stronger and more productive when it embraces diversity, builds trust, and deals directly with conflict. Finally, I learned a parish community must find a common focus, heal old hurts that linger, and find opportunities to blend Native American and Catholic beliefs in a combined celebration. In the final analysis, all the texts noted in this paper directly or indirectly address the issue of inculturation.

As to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: is a harmonious worship experience possible that blends traditional Native American and Catholic ritual?

The answer is an emphatic yes. The mariachi mass held at St. Dominic’s, the worship that reflects local customs and traditions in Taos, New Mexico, are examples of the successful blending of cultures. The Jubilee 2000 ceremony, celebrating reconciliation, forgiveness, and purification used both traditional Christian, and Native American elements. The work and writings of Father Stolzman, Eagle Man, and others, show us a worship experience that would honor, respect, incorporate, and celebrate both Catholic, and Native American traditions, is not only possible, but also necessary. In this way we put into action the vision outlined in Vatican II, honor the promise made by Pope John Paul II, and continue the healing process. Most importantly, we work toward becoming the universal community the Creator intended.