

Manna 3 – Fifth Session

A Reflection on Native American Spirituality: Eucharist and Justice

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Introduction to the theme

The Native American peoples all are aware of the old stories and customs of their people. They are the stories of life and their stories of death. There are the good stories and the bad stories. As one visits many of our Indian people we hear told us legends of their own tribes. I can think of the marvelous Navajo, Apache, Zuni, Laguna, and Acoma stories I have heard as I visit the reservations of my diocese. And they have their difficult stories to tell as well. God's liberating power has many faces and we can see these faces with our own eyes and can experience the liberation and healing that these stories bring into our very flesh and in our individual lives. These Native American stories are like the stories of the Gospel – stories of gift and consultation; of challenge and growth; of freedom and transformation; and of healing and reconciliation.

Let me share with you this one personal story that taught me a lot about Eucharist and justice. It was early on in my personal ministry in Gallup, New Mexico, and I was visiting the residence of the Little Sisters of the Poor who take care of our Native American poor, elderly people (primarily the Navajo).

An elderly Navajo grandmother was preparing to be initiated into the Church but was not ready to receive First Communion. Nonetheless, one day as she greeted me after Mass she said, "Bishop, please, I want to be able to receive some of that healing medicine!" Eucharist as healing medicine! Healing medicine to soothe all the stories of pain, neglect, and injustice.

In Native religions the term "medicine" usually is applied to supernatural power – in particular, the power received by an indigenous person from his or her own protective spirit. If one looks at the spirituality of our Native people, the Eucharist is often referred to as "holy food, Yutapi Wakan," as is the case with the Lakota. The Anishnabe in Ontario often refer to Jesus as "the most powerful medicine" and as a great medicine man. Indeed, Native American spirituality teaches us that Eucharist is medicine for healing and holy food for those who hunger for justice. The message should be clear. Eucharist and justice are inseparable!

Opening Prayer

O creator of the Earth,
maker of wind, water, and fire,
we praise you for your power and presence within us
and around us in the majesty of creation.

We thank you for Jesus, your child
and our great healer
and for the healing medicine of the Eucharist.

May this holy food
strengthen us to be women, men, and children of justice and compassion.
May your great and holy Spirit
visit us with your life, light, and love.

Song Options:

- “The Cry of the Poor,” by John Foley, SJ
- “Jesus, Hope of the World,” by Deanna Light and Paul A. Tate

Work Exercise

1. When you think of the native peoples of the Americas, what thoughts and feelings arise with you?
2. How can we as a Eucharistic community respond to the centuries of injustice that Native American peoples have experienced?
3. What connections can you make between Native American spirituality and your own understanding of the Eucharistic mystery?

The work exercise is followed by a small group sharing and a large group sharing.

Teaching

As the Blessed Sacrament bishop of the largest Native American Catholic diocese in the United States, I am deeply honored to offer this teaching for you on the topic *Eucharist and Justice: A Reflection on Native American Spirituality*. Quite honestly, this is one of the most difficult presentations I have ever had to prepare. The topic is so clearly focused and specific. Yet it contains three major themes: Eucharist, justice and Native American spirituality.

1. The Synod of America: The present reality of indigenous people

I had the great privilege of being a delegate at the Synod of America held in 1997 in Rome from November 16 to December 12. It was a profound experience of collegiality and church. It was a time for leaders of churches throughout the continent to come together in the presence of the holy father to express to each other their pastoral concerns, to set a direction to be taken by the church in the new millennium, and to discuss the issues we faced in common. Many of the Church's challenges are the same in the North and South, but we see them from different perspectives, their impact felt in different ways. In Latin America, the impact is seen in consumption, a social context not too favorable to the family. They are two sides of the same reality.

The awareness that the problems of North and South are interlinked and that we have to face them together is probably the biggest accomplishment of the Synod. Poverty and injustice are tremendously big issues today, as is forced economic migration. So are restrictive immigration laws, possibly unjust, that seek to stop the free movement of people. Also, the drug problem certainly is one that has to be addressed in common. All these were topics for the individual interventions by the bishops of the Synod. As Synod participants we made many new personal contacts and returned to our individual dioceses resolved to make these contacts between North and South more fruitful.

The Church in different parts of the Americas cannot be what it is called to be by the LORD, a fully Christian community, unless we are in solidarity one with the other. For me, the most profound experience of the Synod was to hear day after day *the cry of the poor* from all over the continent, including questions of injustice relating to African Americans, young adults, and street children.

On the day I made my own intervention on behalf of the indigenous people of the United States – it was on Thanksgiving Day, not celebrated in Rome – four other bishops from Canada and Central/South America pled on their behalf. For example, the desperate position of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon was described by Bishop Erwin Krautler of Xingu. Every year, he said, the region lost thousands of square kilometers of forest destroyed by fire. The land was despoiled, rivers polluted by large landowners, woodcutters, and gold diggers, and the Indians infected by imported diseases. Bishop Krautler said care for souls could not be separated from firm defense of human rights.

In my own intervention I observed that everywhere on the continent it was the indigenous peoples who suffered the worst neglect and impoverishment. While many had been baptized, many remained ambivalent about Christianity and many others rejected it completely. Justice was the priority, regarding treaties, land and water rights, education, housing, healthcare, social services, training in jobs, and the use of sacred lands. I concluded by saying it was essential also to root the Gospel in the indigenous culture. Sacramental life, the liturgy, and theology must be appropriately presented. That meant training indigenous leaders, ordained and lay.

A dramatic intervention came from Harry Lafond, chief of the Muskeg Lake Indian Band in Saskatchewan. Repeatedly hailing the pope as “grandfather,” an Indian term of respect, he called for dialogue about the role of elders, including their possible ordination, and the place of Indian ceremonies and rites within the church. The pope joined those who applauded the speech.

In the closing message of the Synod voted on by the 269 participants, these words were addressed to the indigenous peoples of this continent:

We open our hearts to you the aboriginal and indigenous peoples of the Americas, who have suffered so much these past five centuries at the hands of the greedy and violent and who even today enjoy so little of the abundance our lands have produced. As we proclaim to you the gospel of Jesus Christ, we pledge ourselves to honor your culture and to support you in preserving your heritage.

These were profoundly moving words for all of us there but especially for those who have spent years working for the rights and dignity and just treatment of the indigenous people on this continent. And during those moments I couldn’t help think of the people of the diocese I serve and their stories.

2. *The medicine of justice: A response to the cry of the poor*

Just over 32 years ago, the Second Vatican Council reached its climax in the words that opened its document on the *Church in the Modern World* 1:

The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.

In taking this stand in the midst of human suffering and human joys, the council set us firmly on the course of faith-doing-justice in the late 20th century. Twenty-eight years ago, the Synod of 1971 expanded our understanding of the pivotal role played by social institutions and structures in creating or undermining the reign of God in our time, thus making the task of doing justice a constitutive element of the preaching of the Gospel.

The entire church has struggled to climb that narrow road in the years since Vatican II. We have grown – often by starts and stops and with great pain and misunderstanding – to appropriate faith-doing-justice as one of the preeminent and privileged screens through which we see this world. In so doing, we have come to understand more deeply a number of aspects of this commitment, three of which I would like to underscore

First, we recognize that the *option for the poor* is not some political slogan rooted in and restricted to South American social and economic realities. It is, rather, the preferred stance of God who pitched the divine tent in the midst of a chosen and exiled people and whose ears were attuned most keenly to the cries of widows, orphans, and refugees. This stance also reflects the very way in which Jesus of Nazareth came into our midst and ministered to those in need around him, and he taught his disciples that the privileged place in which he could be found was in the pain, suffering, marginalization, and powerlessness of the poor. We have learned, too, that this option for the poor is what Pope Saint John XXIII meant when he called for the Church of the Council to be “the church of all, especially the poor.” And Pope Saint John Paul II continues to preach, as did Pope Saint Paul VI before him, of the preferential love of the poor *and* the church of the poor.

Second, we have learned that the call to justice, having its roots in Gospel love, is a call to change the political, social, economic, and cultural structures that demean our sisters and brothers, create starvation in the world, hinder the proper development of peoples, and promote violence and war.

In Pope John Paul’s words, we have come to understand that there is a “moral virtue” – solidarity – that corresponds to the *de facto* interdependence that links those of us in this church to our poor sisters and brothers in the Valley of South Texas, the streets of the South Bronx, the reservations of the Dakotas, the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and the open boats and open seas of Southeast Asia. This solidarity, as John Paul puts it, is not “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary it is a firm and preserving determination to commit oneself to the common good . . .” (*Sollicitudo*, No. 38). And that commitment involves us in remaking the towns, cities, schools, prisons, and families in which poor, middle class, and rich live and die.

Third, we have learned, as the Synod of 1971 declared, that evangelization and the doing of justice are twins. Preaching a gospel that is devoid of its social content is preaching an anemic word, one which is not true to the nature of the human person or to the creative, salvific action of God in ourselves and in our world. Doing justice without faith and love can become a hard, even violent task that loses sight of the human reality – *made in the divine image* – and of transforming power of grace in individuals and in social reality.

In 1968, the bishops of the Medellin Conference (South America) reminded us of the centrality of our faith in these very simple words, *Love is the soul of justice* (Docs. 2:14). Our self-understanding as church, then, has three points at its heart: 1) the preferential

option for the poor; 2) *the call to justice* or to embody the moral virtue of solidarity in all we do; and 3) *the centrality of justice at the heart of the gospel we preach*.

While the church and many of our religious congregations, including our own Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, have deepened the meaning of faith-doing-justice within our own charisms and ministries, we all recognize that we have many more miles to travel.

3. *Eucharist: healing medicine*

When the Second Vatican Council described the Eucharist in the *Constitution on the Liturgy* 10 as “at once the summit of the church’s activity and the source of its power,” it proposed the central fact of Christian existence. For the Eucharist is the grateful celebration of the primacy of God’s grace. God’s initiative in his revelation is realized again when the Church listens to his word of judgment and of comfort. His reconciling love is powerful again as the church, “many though we are, we are one body for we will partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:17). In the Eucharist, the church again and again draws from the source of its distinctive being and life the strength it needs to be God’s people in the world. The moment in which the church sums up its thanksgiving for God’s mercy in Christ is the moment, too, in which it is again shown mercy and empowered to be the sign and the instrument of that same mercy to the world.

It is a great mistake, then, to separate the church’s liturgical activity from its mission to the world. If the church gathers for thanksgiving to God, it is because it knows the God in whose favor it stands; and if the Church speaks and acts in and to the world, it is because it knows that the gift it has received is a gift for itself to give to others. The two moments are intimately linked, for one is not truly grateful for love and forgiveness received if one is not oneself willing to love and to forgive.

In the early church, it was understood that the communion in God’s blessing celebrated in the Eucharist entailed immediate responsibilities to come to the aid of the poor in the community. But today the question of poverty has become world-wide, and Christian concern for the poor must recognize that even the distant poor are our neighbors. They are not more distant from us than we were from God, and if God has spanned the abyss of our alienation from him, we surely can cross the seas to our needy brothers and sisters. The blessings we celebrate and receive in the Eucharist themselves compel us to this task.

The community of faith, hope and love that gathers for Eucharist, then, must have its eyes and heart open to the needy of the world. In recalling God’s favor to it, it recognizes the free initiative of God towards it and accepts taking the initiative towards reconciliation as its own responsibility. Rejoicing in the new fellowship of the Holy Spirit, it seeks spontaneously to overcome all barriers between individuals and groups. Looking forward to the kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, of love and peace, it judges and criticizes all societies by its light and struggles to improve them. The springs of the church’s distinctive life are the very springs of the love that prevents it from being a

closed group and moves it out to bring to the world the faith, hope, and love by which it lives.

The Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament's *Rule of Life* 37 provides a marvelous and succinct summary of all that has been said above:

Attentive to the cry of the poor and their distress, we discover in every instance of injustice a call of Christ to share in his mission of announcing good news to the poor and proclaiming liberty to captives. Every community that celebrates the Eucharist is called, through a radical conversion, to challenge sin and its structures and proclaim the hope of a new world. In solidarity with those who are working for genuine human advancement, we are alert to the social implications of our actions. The most telling message of our communities is the witness of their lives.

4. *The unfinished Eucharist and the witness of our lives*

Let me conclude by lifting up the example of one who lived and died working for the indigenous peoples of El Salvador because he came to understand the absolutely vital connection between Eucharist and justice. Just three months after being installed as Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero received the tragic news of the murder of one of his priests in the village of Aguilares. Several campesinos also were killed and all the townspeople were driven out of the village. By this time the archbishop had undergone a profound conversion; he now saw clearly the place of God in the lives of the poor and his own role as shepherd of a persecuted church and an oppressed people.

At the first opportunity, he went to Aguilares, defying the army and the forces responsible for the murders. His first words were, "I have the task of picking up the trampled, the corpses and all that the persecution throws along the road." He went on to say, "We suffer with those who have suffered so much . . . we suffer with the loss . . . those who have had to run away and who do not know what is happening to their families. I am with you." And the people believed him. The archbishop would have to die for his beliefs.

His name was regularly mentioned at the Synod and a number of bishops spoke openly of a need for his canonization because of his heroic martyrdom. My friend Bishop Ricardo Ramírez from Las Cruces, New Mexico, has written eloquently of Archbishop Oscar Romero and his unfinished Eucharist. He explains that Archbishop Romero was assassinated at the end of his homily on March 24, 1980. He did not finish the celebration of Eucharist. Neither was the Eucharist of his funeral Mass finished. Gunfire and death were again present, and the people in the plaza in front of the cathedral rushed inside for cover.

Bishop Ramírez explains that the unfinished Eucharist of Romero is symbolic of what has yet to be done in El Salvador and in the rest of the world. While we live in these "end times" we are challenged to contribute to the completion of the unfinished Eucharist of the

Last Supper which Jesus himself left open-ended: “I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. I tell you I will not eat again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:15). In our ministry this is our challenge and our task for years to come. May the Eucharist be for you healing medicine and holy food for the journey. And in the beautiful words of the famous Navajo blessing: *Hozhogo Nashadoo* (“May you walk in beauty.”)!

Resource helps for this teaching:

- *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections*, by Jon Sobrino. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1990.
- “The Unfinished Eucharist: The Spiritual Legacy of Archbishop Romero,” by Ricardo Ramirez, C.S.B., *Canadian Catholic Review*, 1991.

Closing Prayer

If in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, exposition is made during the opening hymn. When the hymn is concluded, the assembly kneels in silence for several minutes. During this silence, the community welcomes the presence of the Risen LORD before them in the Blessed Sacrament and within them as the LORD'S own body.

*Opening Song: “One Bread, One Body” by John Foley, SJ
“Sing a New Church,” by Dolores Dufner, OSB*

Opening Prayer:

Holy God, Holy Immortal One, all praise and honor be yours.
As this incense rises up to you, we ask that you ignite,
within each one gathered here,
a burning desire and a great love for you.
As this incense is consumed by fire,
may our lives become fuel for your blazing love,
that the offering of our hearts may give forth the pleasing aroma of selfless service
and prophetic witness for justice and peace.
This we pray in union with your servant and son, Jesus Christ,
who lives in your love, in union with your Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

First Reading: Isaiah 42:5-9

Period of silence:

Second Reading Matthew 25:31-40 optional

Period of Silence:

Intercessory Prayer:

If in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, incensing of the Blessed Sacrament and the assembled community occurs after the prayers. Consider using the ritual books for Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside of Mass (2024) that provides this ritual texts of prayer, praise, The Lord's Prayer, etc.

Benediction: optional

Reposition: optional

Closing Prayer:

Response: ***Strengthen your servants, O Lord.***

Servant of love,
you know what it means to be without home, warmth, or shelter.
You continue to walk our streets today with all who have no place to call their own.
Make us servants of hospitality. **R.**

Food for the hungry, you satisfied the cravings of body and spirit in becoming our bread.
So many in our world continue to be without food and friendship.
May our Eucharist reach beyond gesture and make us servants of nourishment. **R.**

Accuser of the righteous,
you condemned hypocrisy and cautioned the wealthy who were far from your kingdom.
Preserve us from seeking honors and prestige.
Forgive those who oppose the poor for profit.
May we be humble servants of your gospel. **R.**

Compassionate and merciful Christ,
you reach out your hand to touch the blind, the deaf, the lame,
the diseased, the possessed, and all who are in the bondage of misery.
Many persons continue to cry out in their affliction.
Use now our hands to heal and to comfort; make us servants of consolation. **R.**

Lamb of God, forgiver of sins,
you pardon our wrongdoing and entrust to us the ministry of reconciliation.
You bid us to leave our gift at the altar and first go to make amends.
We confess our sins and embrace your forgiveness.
With clean and unburdened hearts, we are servants of reconciliation. **R.**

Closing Song: “City of God,” by Dan Schutte

Sign of Peace:

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