

*“The culture of southwestern Native America is like a great shattered bowl. Historians and anthropologists assemble the broken shards, knowing they will never be able to recreate the original diversity and harmony that once existed.”*

*Gary Carden,*

In 1992 our Church took a courageous step when the USCCB published, “A Time for Remembering, Reconciling and Recommitting Ourselves as a People.” In this document, the bishops recognized the blessing that the faith of the Native American people is to the Church. It also acknowledged the important opportunities and challenges of responding spiritually and pastorally to the needs of our Native brothers and sisters, and to all whose culture and faith have been diminished by dominant society and religious institutions.

The Church recognized past insensitivity in the mistreatment of Native peoples since European arrival. Racism and lack of cultural sensitivity have been a part of the dominant cultural landscape for far too long. For this, the Church extended an apology to native people and pledged to work together to ensure their rights, religious freedom, and the preservation of cultural heritage. The Church also recognized the religious faith expression in prayer, chants, dance and other sacred celebrations of native peoples. A closer look at native spirituality, especially in the Southwest, reveals a fusion of native wisdom and popular Catholicism.

Pope John Paul II affirmed and challenged Native American Catholics. “I encourage you as native people 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... Your encounter with the Gospel has not only enriched you; it has enriched the Church.” His was a call to authentic inculturation.

Every facet of our church must tell the truth about how Native Americans have been treated and how they have endured. The Church has condemned racism of every kind and renews the call to overcome prejudice and discrimination. The Native community now includes almost two million Indians, Eskimos and Latinos who identify themselves as Indian. Native people are a vital, diverse and growing community, yet are

still marginalized. One in four Native Americans is poor. Many families struggle with unemployment, inadequate housing and restricted access to water.

While many are able to improve their lives through education, alcoholism, diabetes and suicide affect reservation communities at disproportionate rates. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development has supported the quest for justice and self-help with substantial resources.

The USCCB recognizes that Latino and African Americans share with native peoples the reality of discrimination and the challenge of achieving full acceptance in society and Church. “*In Lak Ech*” “*Tú eres mi otro yo,*” and “You are my other self,” are words to remind us that that we are all in this project of shaping a truly “Catholic” community – open to all God’s children.

While this document was published almost twenty years ago, it is still timely. Often native expressions of faith, though synchronized with Catholicism, still take place *outside* of church in courtyards and plazas.

The information in “A Time for Remembering” reveals a “community of communities” model of church. But most people don’t belong to just *one* community. Belonging to *one* community does not exclude membership of the others.

The document was intended to open a dialogue, an honest exchange of ideas, and it continues to do so. It continues to impress the reader with the courage and progressiveness of our Church in this area. However, the year 1992 seems like the day before yesterday in Church history, so it is too soon to assess the impact of “A Time for Remembering” for another few hundred years. It is up to us, today, to live our faith in the spirit of solidarity and charity that this document proclaims.

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