

# neighbors

FALL 2007 A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

## MISSION TO THE FIRST AMERICANS



**F**ifteen years ago, the bishops of the United States issued the pastoral statement *A Time for Remembering, Reconciling, and Recommitting Ourselves as a People: Pastoral Reflections on Native American People*. They said:

The Catholic community is blessed, enriched and profoundly challenged by the faith of Native Americans in our midst. We ask the Catholic community to join us in seeking new understanding and awareness of their situation and in committing our church to new advocacy and action with our Native American brothers and sisters on issues of social justice and pastoral life which touch their lives.

Our country's Native American population is on the rise. In the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 4 million people identified themselves as Native American. Based upon historical tribal affiliation, we estimate the number of Native American Catholics to be greater than 500,000. They are gradually becoming a more visible presence within the Church in the United States—a major change from years past.

“It would be a wonderful gift if we as Native American Catholics were more visible and were treated with greater dignity in our multicultural Church,” says Sr. Kateri Mitchell, executive director of the Tekakwitha Conference, which

promotes the “Catholic way” among Native Americans seeking a spiritual home in the Church. “We welcome the support and encouragement of our Catholic sisters and brothers, so we can stand proud in a worldwide communion that many of our ancestors have embraced for centuries.”

Native American people were the first to hear the Gospel preached on these shores; some families have embraced Catholicism for more than 400 years. Today, however, this historical ministry needs revitalization. One of the greatest problems is the lack of trained Native leaders to nourish the faith among their people.

## FROM OUR CHAIRMAN

FALL 2007

### DEAR FRIENDS,

I'd like to begin by paying tribute to the Catholic agency most responsible for sustaining missions among Native Americans here in the United States. The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions (BCIM), like our own Committee, gives grants to needy dioceses around the country. As the name suggests, the Bureau focuses its attention on Native American Catholics. It takes up the National Black and Indian Mission Collection in most Catholic parishes on the first Sunday in Lent. Please give generously to this most worthy cause.

My own experience with ministry among Native Americans comes from my many years of service in the Alaskan missions, first as a priest of the Archdiocese of Anchorage and now as Bishop of Juneau. The Diocese of Juneau extends for 500 miles, but the Catholic population is quite small—only about 6,600 people in ten parishes and a scattering of missions. Native Americans, mostly Tlingit and Haida people, make up a minority of Catholics, but they figure prominently in the faith life of several communities here. I'm happy to say that the Church has a permanent presence in all but the smallest villages and logging camps, where the congregation may be four or five families, or even four or five individuals. When one of our diocese's 12 priests cannot be present to offer Mass, lay prayer leaders conduct Sunday services for the people.

In the two other Alaskan dioceses, Native Alaskan (Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut) people are more concentrated. The Archdiocese of Anchorage serves many small Native villages and fishing camps around Bristol Bay and out along the Aleutian Chain. A priest flies in by bush plane to offer Mass and sacraments—sometimes weekly, sometimes once or twice a month.

The Diocese of Fairbanks consists of the city of Fairbanks itself, a few smaller towns like Nome, and a sprinkling of villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and along the coast of the Bering Sea. The following excerpt from the diocese's 2006 report speaks volumes about the difficulties of ministry in the near-wilderness of western Alaska: "Our religious ministers in this area of eight Athabaskan villages number two priests, three sisters, and three brothers. One priest, age 78, is responsible for two villages, while the other, in his 60s, tries to cover five. The eighth village is covered by an 80-year-old priest from Fairbanks."

As these stories and this issue's feature article on the Diocese of Gallup show, ministry among Native Americans can be challenging indeed. However, our Native brothers and sisters deserve the same pastoral care as any other members of the universal Catholic community. The Committee is proud to associate itself with the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions in this vital work.

† Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel  
Bishop of Juneau  
Chairman, Committee on the Home Missions

## DID YOU KNOW?

### *Diocese of Gallup, New Mexico*

Founded in 1891 as a railhead for the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad, Gallup is sometimes called the "Indian Capital of the World." It is located in the heart of Native American lands and is home to thousands of members of the Navajo, Zuni, Hopi, and other tribes.

The 55,500-square-mile Diocese of Gallup spans two time zones in northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona. Thirty-eight active diocesan priests serve 53 parishes and 27 missions. Generous religious priests and women religious from outside the diocese, as well as local deacons and lay leaders, collaborate with diocesan priests to staff scattered mission parishes.

Seventy percent of the Diocese of Gallup comprises Native American reservations, the largest of which is the Navajo. Half of Gallup's Catholic population of 58,000 is Native American, and an additional 25% is Hispanic. In this wide-open country, effective ministry requires patience and commitment.

In the late 1890s, Mother Katharine Drexel, founder of the Blessed Sacrament Sisters, built a school on the Navajo Reservation to provide a solid Catholic education for Native American children. Today, the diocese's 12 Catholic schools do their best to serve an area where the average adult has only five years of formal education.

Annual grants from the Bishops' Committee on the Home Missions help sustain the Catholic educational system of this mission diocese. Without this support, the schools would find it hard to simply keep their doors open.

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“Native American Catholicism in this country is at a crossroads,” says Jesuit Fr. John Hatcher, director of New Directions in Native American Ministry. “While hundreds of thousands of Native Americans self-identify as Catholics, relatively few are active parishioners, and their numbers are dwindling. In some places, local churches established in the 17th century no longer have Native leadership. The Church needs to launch a formation program to train Native priests, deacons, and lay leaders, and to extend an invitation to Native Americans to claim the Church as their own.”

New efforts at evangelization that respect Native Americans’ customs, traditions, history, and way of life are called for. In particular, pastoral ministry should encourage Native styles of ministry and healing. The reverent use of Native symbols in parish liturgies can be a unique gift to the Church. A Baptism might include a Native song or a ritual like laying red earth on the child’s shoulders to symbolize her obligation to care for Mother Earth. A celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation could be accompanied by a smudging ceremony—burning a sacred plant such as sage, cedar, sweetgrass, or greasewood for purification and healing. (Of course,

only Native people should perform these rites, since they preserve and reinvigorate Native traditions.)

The United States presently boasts two Native American prelates: Charles Chaput, Archbishop of Denver, Colorado; and Donald Pelotte, Bishop of Gallup, New Mexico.

“We are aware our ancestors lived close to the all-powerful Creator and deeply respected the Earth as God’s gift,” says Bishop Pelotte, whose father was a member of the Abenaki Tribe. “We try to live in harmony with God’s creation and to

walk the sacred way with all God’s people each day. Catholics should see this way of life as a special contribution to the life of the Church.”

As descendants of countless generations settled on this continent, Native Americans are no longer content to be “invisible Catholics.” The Committee on the Home Missions stands with Archbishop Chaput and Bishop Pelotte in recognizing, welcoming, and supporting these brothers and sisters in the faith. All of us should do our part to help them feel at home in their land and in their Church.

**“The Catholic community is blessed, enriched and profoundly challenged by the faith of Native Americans in our midst. We ask the Catholic community to join us in seeking new understanding and awareness of their situation and in committing our church to new advocacy and action with our Native American brothers and sisters on issues of social justice and pastoral life which touch their lives.”**

*A Time for Remembering, Reconciling, and Recommitting Ourselves as a People: Pastoral Reflections on the Fifth Centenary and Native American People (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1992)*

In the words of the late Pope John Paul II, “today, people are realizing more clearly that we all belong to the one human family, and are meant to walk and work together in mutual respect, understanding, trust and love. Within this family each people preserves and expresses its own identity and enriches others with its gifts of culture, tradition, customs, stories, song, dance, art and skills.”

*We are grateful to the following individuals for their generous assistance with this issue of Neighbors: Rev. Raymond A. Bucko, SJ, program director, Native American Studies, Creighton University; Rev. John Hatcher, SJ, director, New Directions in Native Ministry; Sr. Kateri Mitchell, executive director, Tekakwitha Conference; Daniel S. Mulhall, staff, USCCB Ad Hoc Committee on Native American Catholics; Rev. Wayne Paysse, executive director, Black and Indian Mission Office.*

## NATIVE AMERICAN SYMBOLS AND RITUALS

Native American congregations incorporate these symbols and rituals from their cultural heritage into their Catholic worship:

- The practice of smudging (blessing, purifying) with cedar, sage, sweetgrass, tobacco, greasewood, corn pollen
- Eagle feathers for blessings
- Dance to the accompaniment of drums
- Native chants
- Native American naming ceremony in conjunction with Baptism
- Native attire in local and diocesan celebrations
- Four-directional prayer (North, South, East, and West)
- Statues and relics of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha
- The medicine wheel
- Sweat lodge
- The sacred pipe
- Native-designed crucifix and cross
- Native-designed priestly vestments
- Sacred vessels and decorations



## NATIVE AMERICAN CATHOLICS

The Native American population has grown significantly over the past several decades. More than 4.1 million people now identify themselves as Native Americans. The American Indian and Alaska Native population rose by 1%, or 43,000, from 2004 to 2005. The American Indian and Alaska Native population in 2005 was younger, with a median age of 30.7 years, compared to the population as a whole at 36.2 years. About 29% of the American Indian and Alaska Native population was younger than 18, compared with 25% of the total population.

About 12% of this population, or 500,000, are Catholics. Although more people are now claiming their Native American heritage, they tend to be invisible in most Catholic dioceses and parishes. In some cities with large concentrations of Native Americans, the church community provides little or no pastoral outreach.

Most Native Americans still live in rural areas, in small towns, or on reservations or trust lands, but an increasing number have moved to large cities.

The Native American population is concentrated in the Lower Plains, in the Northwest, and in the Mountain and Pacific regions.

Very few Native people exercise leadership roles in the Church. According to the United States Conference of

Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) document *Native American Catholics at the Millennium* (2003), there are only 27 Native American priests, 8 seminarians, 74 deacons, 34 women religious, and 65 lay ecclesial ministers to serve this growing Catholic population.

Fewer and fewer non-Native priests and women religious are available to serve Native people. Time takes its toll on priests and sisters, and replacements become harder to find.

Traditionally, the Catholic Church has served Native Americans by establishing and operating institutions: mission churches, schools, hospitals, and orphanages. There is a crying need today for new, more dynamic methods of evangelization.

The USCCB Committee on the Home Missions, and its predecessor the American Board of Catholic Missions, has been a strong supporter of the Native American Catholic community. Since 1998, the Committee has granted \$4.2 million to support Native American ministry programs.



## NAVAJO NATION

The Navajo Nation is the largest tribe of North American Indians. Marked by four sacred mountains, the Navajo Nation is a Native American sovereignty that covers over 25,000 square miles and encompasses parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The reservation represents the largest land area assigned primarily to a Native American jurisdiction within the United States and is almost as large as West Virginia. The 2000 U.S. Census reported close to 300,000 Navajo people living throughout the United States, of which approximately 175,000 reside within the Navajo Nation. All land is owned in common.

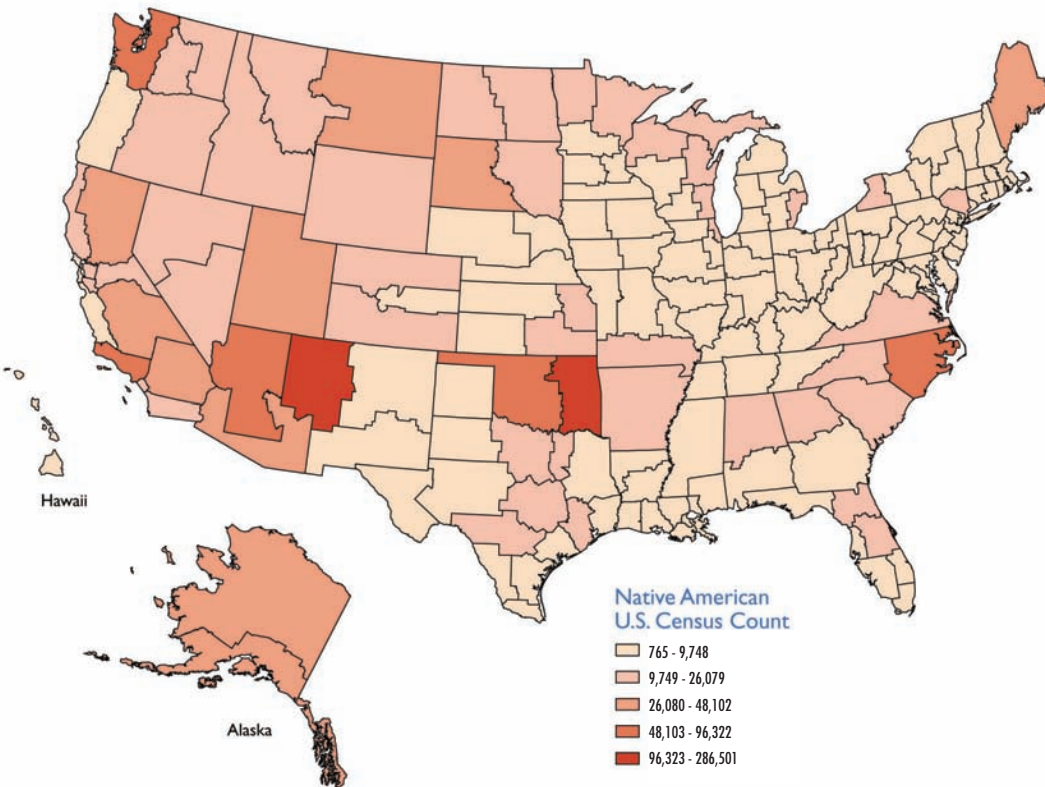
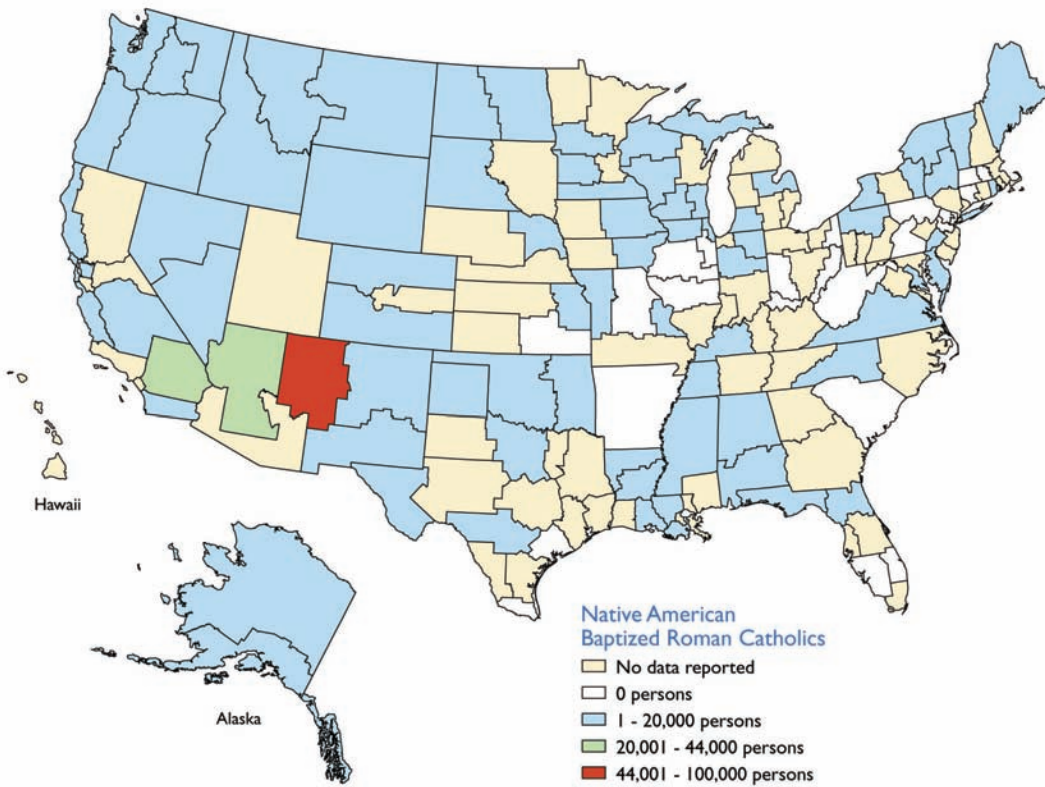
Traditional homes, called "hogans," open to the east so families can welcome the Sun. However, these hexagonal and octagonal bark and mud structures are now maintained primarily for ceremonial purposes. Today, single-family homes are mostly rural-style houses constructed of wood. Most homes lack access to natural gas and electricity, so the people use wood or pro-

pane for heat and cooking. Due to the reservation's remoteness, moreover, many structures do not have telephone or public utility services, a complete kitchen, or plumbing facilities. Rural roads are generally unpaved.

The Navajo Nation's economy includes sheep and cattle herding, fiber production, weaving, jewelry making, and art trading. Within the reservation, families and individuals operate roadside stands selling handmade crafts, especially on major highways or near major tourist attractions. Turquoise jewelry has been a Navaho tradition for hundreds of years.

Education continues to be a significant priority. However, even though young people understand the importance of education and economic success, they cling to their families and heritage in order to retain their Native American identity.





## Helpful Resources for Native American Ministry

Committee on Cultural Diversity  
 Subcommittee on Native American Affairs  
 Director: Rev. Allen Deck, SJ  
 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
 3211 Fourth St., NE  
 Washington, DC 20017-1194

Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions  
 Director: Rev. Wayne Paysse  
 2021 H St., NW  
 Washington, DC 20006

New Directions in Native American Ministry  
 Director: Rev. John Hatcher, SJ  
 P.O. Box 678  
 Rapid City, SD 57709

Sioux Spiritual Center  
 20100 Center Rd.  
 Howes, SD 57748

National Tekakwitha Conference  
 Director: Sr. Kateri Mitchell, SSA  
 P.O. Box 6768  
 Great Falls, MT 59401

Kateri Northwest Ministries  
 330 East Boone Ave.  
 Spokane, WA 99202-1710

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