



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC JOURNEY  
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

## MEETING WITH THE NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE AMERICAS

### *ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II*

*Memorial Coliseum, Phoenix  
Monday, 14 September 1987*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. I have greatly looked forward to this visit with you, the original peoples of this vast country. *I greet you with love and respect.* And as I greet you, I wish to tell you how pleased I am to find among you one of your sons raised to the episcopate - Bishop Pelotte. I thank you for inviting me to be with you and for sharing with me some aspects of your rich and ancient culture.

I have listened to your concerns and hopes. As your representatives spoke, I traced in my heart the history of your tribes and nations. I was able to see you as *the noble descendants of countless generations of inhabitants of this land*, whose ways were marked by great respect for the natural resources of land and rivers, of forest and plain and desert. Here your forefathers cherished and sought to pass on to each new generation their customs and traditions, their history and way of life. Here they worshipped the Creator and thanked him for his gifts. In contact with the forces of nature they learned the value of prayer, of silence and fasting, of patience and courage in the face of pain and disappointment.

2. *The early encounter between your traditional cultures and the European way of life was an event of such significance and change that it profoundly influences your collective life even today.* That encounter was a harsh and painful reality for your peoples. The cultural oppression, the injustices, the disruption of your life and of your traditional societies must be acknowledged.

At the same time, in order to be objective, history must record the deeply positive aspects of your people's encounter with the culture that came from Europe. Among these positive aspects I wish to recall the work of *the many missionaries who strenuously defended the rights of the original inhabitants of this land*. They established missions throughout this southwestern part of the United States. They worked to improve living conditions and set up educational systems, learning your languages in order to do so. Above all, they proclaimed the Good News of salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ, an essential part of which is that all men and women are equally children of God and must be respected and loved as such. *This Gospel of Jesus Christ is today, and will remain forever, the greatest pride and possession of your people.*

3. One priest who deserves special mention among the missionaries is *the beloved Fray Junipero Serra*, who travelled throughout Lower and Upper California. He had frequent clashes with the civil authorities over the treatment of Indians. In 1773 he presented to the Viceroy in Mexico City a *Representación*, which is sometimes termed a "Bill of Rights" for Indians. The Church had long been convinced of the need to protect them from exploitation. Already in 1537, my predecessor *Pope Paul III proclaimed the dignity and rights of the native peoples of the Americas by insisting that they not be deprived of their freedom or the possession of their property* (Pauli III, *Pastorale Officium*, 29 maggio 1537: Denz.-S. 1495). In Spain the Dominican priest, Francisco de Vitoria, became the staunch advocate of the rights of the Indians and formulated the basis for international law regarding the rights of peoples.

Unfortunately not all the members of the Church lived up to their Christian responsibilities. But let us not dwell excessively on mistakes and wrongs, even as we commit ourselves to overcoming their present effects. Let us also be grateful to those who came to this land, faithful to the teachings of Jesus, witnesses of his new commandment of love. These men and women, with good hearts and good minds, shared knowledge and skills from their own cultures and shared their most precious heritage, the faith, as well. Now, *we are called to learn from the mistakes of the past and we must work together for reconciliation and healing*, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

4. It is time to think of the present and of the future. Today, people are realizing more and 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.

From the very beginning, the Creator bestowed his gifts on each people. It is clear that stereotyping, prejudice, bigotry and racism demean the human dignity which comes from the hand of the Creator and which is seen in variety and diversity. I encourage you, as native people belonging to the different tribes and nations in the East, South, West and North, *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 customs that mark the various stages of life, your love for the extended family, your respect for the dignity and worth of every human being, from the unborn to the aged, and your stewardship and care of the earth: these things benefit not only yourselves but the entire human family.

Your gifts can also be expressed even more fully in the Christian way of life. *The Gospel of Jesus Christ is at home in every people. It enriches, uplifts and purifies every culture.* All of us together make up the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Church. We should all be grateful for the growing unity, presence, voice and leadership of Catholic Native Americans in the Church today.

Jesus speaks of the word of God as the seed which falls on good ground and produces abundant fruit (Cfr. *Matth 13, 4ss.*). The seed has long since been planted in the hearts of many of you. And it has already produced the fruits which show its transforming power - the fruits of holiness. *The best known witness of Christian holiness among the native people of North America is Kateri Tekakwitha*, whom I had the privilege, seven years ago, of declaring "Blessed" and of holding up to the whole Church and the world as an outstanding example of Christian life. Even when she dedicated herself fully to Jesus Christ, to the point of taking the prophetic step of making a vow of perpetual virginity, *she always remained what she was, a true daughter of her people*, following her tribe in the hunting seasons and continuing her devotions in the environment most suited to her way of life, before a rough cross carved by herself in the forest. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the great gift of God's love, is never in contrast with what is noble and pure in the life of any tribe or nation, since all good things are his gifts.

5. I would like to repeat what I said at my meeting with native peoples at the Shrine of Saint Anne de Beaupré during [my visit to Canada in 1984](#): "Your encounter with the Gospel has not only enriched you; it has enriched the Church. We are well aware that this has not taken place without its difficulties and, occasionally, its blunders. However, and you are experiencing this today, the Gospel does not destroy what is best in you. On the contrary, it enriches, as it were from within, the spiritual qualities and gifts that are distinctive of your cultures" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Allocutio ad indigenas populationes Canadenses*, 3, die 10 sept. 1984: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VII/2 [1984] 407). The American Bishops' Statement on Native Americans rightly attests that our Catholic faith is capable of thriving " within each culture, within each nation, within each race, while remaining the prisoner of none" (Statement of 4 May 1977).

Here too I wish to urge the local Churches to be truly "catholic" in their outreach to native peoples, and *to show respect and honour for their culture and all their worthy traditions.* From your ranks have come a bishop, a number of priests, many permanent deacons, men and women religious and lay leaders. To all of you who have an active part in the Church's ministry I wish to express my gratitude and support. But the Church has some special needs at this time. And for this reason *I directly appeal to you, especially to you young Native Americans, to discover if Jesus is calling you to the priesthood or to the religious life.* Hear him and follow him! He will never let you down!

He will lead you, in the Church, to serve your own peoples and others in the best way possible, in love and apostolic generosity.

At the same time I call upon your native Catholic communities *to work together to share their faith and their gifts*, to work together on behalf of all your peoples. There is much to be done in solving common problems of unemployment, inadequate health care, alcoholism and chemical dependency. You have endured much over hundreds of years and your difficulties are not yet at an end. Continue taking steps towards true human progress and towards reconciliation within your families and your communities, and among your tribes and nations.

6. One day Jesus said: "The thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy. I came that they might have life and have it to the full" (*Io. 10, 10*).

*Surely, the times has come for the native peoples of America to have a new life in Jesus Christ - the new life of adopted children of God, with all its consequences:*

A life in justice and full human dignity!

A life of pride in their own good traditions, and of fraternal solidarity among themselves and with all their brothers and sisters in America!

A deeper life in charity and grace, leading to the fullness of eternal life in heaven!

All consciences must be *challenged*. There are real injustices to be addressed and biased attitudes to be changed. But the greatest challenge is to you yourselves, as Native Americans. You must continue to grow in respect for your own inalienable human dignity, for the gifts of Creation and Redemption as they touch your lives and the lives of your peoples. You must unyieldingly pursue your spiritual and moral goals. You must *trust* in your own future.

As Catholic Native Americans, you are called to become *instruments of the healing power of Christ's love*, instruments of his peace. May the Church in your midst - your own community of faith and fellowship - truly bear witness to the new life that comes from the Cross and Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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