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Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on American Indians



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1. In this statement, we wish to share our reflections on the relationship of the Catholic Church in the United States with the American Indian peoples.
2. As American Catholics, we have learned only gradually and with difficulty that the building of one community can only be authentic if it is based upon respect for the distinctive traditions, customs, institutions and ways of life of its peoples. Indeed, we are only now beginning to understand that unity which grows through dialogue and respect for diversity is far stronger and deeper than conformity forged by dominance.
3. We recall with gratitude the great dedication and sacrifice of the many priests, religious and lay persons, past and present, who have sought to share with the Indian people the Good News of Jesus Christ. They learned the Indian languages, and, insofar as they were able within their own cultural limits, they adapted themselves to Indian cultures. In the name of the Church, these missionaries also offered to the Indian communities their talents and knowledge of medicine and education.
4. Some who have worked with American Indians, however, recognize that efforts of the Church to promote the Gospel among Indian communities have at times been attempted in ways that actually failed to respect Indian cultures. We come to this statement with a keen awareness of our not infrequent failures to respect the inherent rights and cultural heritage of our American Indian brothers and sisters. We offer this reflection on our attitudes and actions in the spirit of reconciliation and with a stronger commitment to be more sensitive and just in our relationships with American Indians.

FAITH AND CULTURE

5. The Church, by its very nature, must always and everywhere proclaim and give witness to God's saving love revealed by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. This is the center and foundation of the Church's

mission—to proclaim that in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all people as a gift of God's grace and mercy.¹

6. This Good News of salvation is not bound by time or human structures. Christ's Gospel of love and redemption, addressed to all people, transcends national boundaries, cultural differences and divisions among peoples. It cannot be considered foreign anywhere on earth; nor can it be considered identical with any particular culture or heritage.² It is the common blessing of all.

7. But persons are vitally dependent upon the institutions of family and community that have been passed down to them. These institutions—political, social, economic and religious—shape their self-understanding and are necessary to their full development as persons. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council affirmed that persons can come to an authentic and full humanity only through those distinct cultures



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which form the basis and heritage of each human community.³

8. The Christian faith should celebrate and strengthen the many diverse cultures which are the product of human hope and aspiration. The Gospel message must take root and grow within each culture and each community. Faith finds expression in and through the particular values, customs and institutions of the people who hear it. It seeks to take flesh within each culture, within each nation, within each race, while remaining the prisoner of none. Pope Paul VI, in his recent statement on evangelization, stressed these themes in calling for “fidelity both to a message whose servants we are and to the people to whom we must transmit it.”⁴

THE CHURCH AND JUSTICE

9. The Church is also required by the Gospel and by its tradition to promote and defend human rights and human dignity. Pope Paul VI has underscored the fact that “between evangelization and human advancement—development and liberation—there are in fact profound links. . . . The necessity of ensuring fundamental human rights cannot be separated from this just liberation which is bound up with evangelization and which endeavors to secure structures safeguarding human freedoms.” The Church, Pope Paul continued, “has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings—the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, of ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization.”⁵

10. In all its activities the Church must seek to preach and act in ways that lead to greater justice for all people. Its ministry cannot neglect the violations of human rights resulting from racism, poverty, poor housing, inadequate education and health care, widespread apathy and indifference and a lack of freedom. These realities are fundamentally incompatible with our faith and the Church is required to oppose them. Pope Paul VI stressed the profound link between the Church’s mission to preach the Gospel and action on behalf of justice: “How in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting justice?”⁶

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

11. We, as American Catholics, should be especially sensitive to these aspects of the Church’s mission. Over the centuries, peoples from every continent and heritage have joined in the formation of the United States. Each group to come has constructed its communities and established its institutions. Gradually, all Americans learned the lesson that to build a nation free and independent, a people must be prepared to engage in a never ending process of change and dialogue. Each group has experienced the tensions that arise between the legitimate cultural independence that people claim for themselves and the pressing need for true and fruitful dialogue with other groups.

12. Today, we Americans are called to reflect upon past injustices and to consider again the need for both unity and diversity, to become



one nation built upon respect for the distinctive traditions and values of many peoples and cultures. Both respect for cultural diversity and dialogue between cultures are indispensable if the legitimate quest for cultural identity is to lead to human development and social progress and not simply perpetuate the bitter divisions of the past. The challenge of this effort is placed before the nation by Black Americans, by Spanish-speaking Americans, by the heirs of Europe's migrations and by the persevering voice of the oldest Americans, the American Indians.

AMERICAN INDIANS

13. The American Indian peoples had developed rich and diverse cultures long before the first Europeans came to the American continent. Migrating across this great continent, they dispersed over thousands of years, from the coasts of the Pacific Northwest to the arid mesas of the Southwest, the vast grasslands of mid-America and the mountains and woodlands of the East. Adapting themselves to changing environments as they went, they developed over 200 distinct languages and a variety of carefully developed social, economic and political institutions to meet their needs.

14. But the arrival of later immigrants created conflicts not yet resolved. Indian ways of life were challenged; their very existence was continually threatened by newcomers who were their superiors in the arts of war. For the Indians, the saga of nation building in America has been a story filled with sorrow and death.

15. American Indians in the United States today comprise less than one percent of our total population. In all, they belong to more than 250 distinct tribes and bands.

16. Many tribes have retained a special trust status with the United States and continue to live on reservation lands held in trust for them by the federal government. Over the long years, however, many tribes have been deprived of their communal lands, and with them have partially or entirely lost the traditional vestiges of their culture, their languages, customs and ways of living.

17. During recent decades, increasing numbers of American Indians, especially the young people, have migrated to cities in search of jobs, shelter and social services which are sorely lacking on many reservations. Those who have chosen or been forced to migrate to cities in response to promises of employment and a better life have too often found only new frustrations and broken dreams. Many contend with a deep sense of uprootedness, trying to maintain ties with their families and tribes while coping with the economic hardships and social prejudices, even racism, of urban society.

18. American Indians today are struggling against great obstacles to renew the special values of their unique heritage and to revitalize the ways of their ancestors. They are striving to achieve economic development and social justice without compromising their unique cultural identity. For some American Indian peoples the struggle is to retain

rights to their land and resources; for some it is to gain employment and economic security; and for others, it is to obtain political power in order to set their own goals and to make decisions affecting their own futures. These goals, to be achieved within the framework of Indian culture and traditions, test the strength of the American ideal of liberty and justice for all. America must respond, not to atone for the wrongs of the past, for that in a sense is beyond our power, but to be faithful to our national commitment and to contribute to a truly human future for all.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

19. As American Catholics, we have a special responsibility to examine our attitudes and actions in light of Jesus' command to love our neighbor and to proclaim the Gospel message and its implications for society. The Church is compelled, both through its institutions and through its



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individual members, to promote and defend the human rights and dignity of all people.

20. Accordingly, we recognize our own responsibility to join with our American Indian sisters and brothers in their ongoing struggle to secure justice. We realize that there is much that we can and must do within our Church and in society to make our support real. We must first of all increase our understanding of the present needs, aspirations and values of the American Indian peoples. This responsibility can only be carried out effectively in dialogue with American Indians.

21. We are encouraged in our efforts by the many hopeful initiatives that Catholic communities in various parts of the country have undertaken on behalf of American Indians. From the national level, the Campaign for Human Development, the National Conference of Catholic Charities and the Commission for Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians have provided support to many constructive local efforts.

22. For over 90 years, the Commission for Catholic Missions Among the Colored People and the Indians, together with the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, has had a particular responsibility to support efforts to advance the life of the Church among American Indian communities. The historical success of this work reflects the generosity of Catholics in the United States. We are particularly encouraged by the recent revitalization of these organizations and hope to see their efforts renewed and redoubled in the coming years. We would also support efforts to broaden the involvement of Indian peoples in the work of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions.

23. We note also the serious and sustained efforts in several dioceses to improve the Church's ministry among American Indians. In particular, the Bishops of Minnesota have offered their own reflection on the Church's relationship with American Indians in their statement, *A New Beginning*.

24. We recommend that other dioceses and Catholic organizations make similar efforts to improve their ministry with American Indians and we pledge our own efforts to cooperate with the American Indian people and the local Catholic churches in these endeavors.

25. One area which deserves our special attention is that of government policy and legislation. Perhaps no other group of people in the United States is so vitally affected by government policies and programs as are American Indians. We have a responsibility to examine these systems and policies in light of the Gospel and the Church's social teachings and to urge the adoption of more just policies and legislation affecting American Indians. It seems to us that such efforts must include advocacy of: the speedy and equitable resolution of treaty and statute questions; protection of Indian land and resource rights; more adequate housing and delivery of social, education and health care services; and increased levels of funding and technical assistance neces-



sary to aid American Indians in achieving political and economic self-determination and full employment.

26. We understand that such efforts will mean little if they are not accompanied by honest reflection on the entire ministry of the Church with American Indians. We must examine the Church's liturgical expressions and social and educational services within Indian communities to ask if they indeed reflect an appreciation of Indian heritage and cultural values. We would encourage national and diocesan liturgical offices to provide assistance to Indian communities to incorporate their languages and prayer forms in the liturgy and other worship services. We urge Catholic educational institutions to examine their textbooks and curriculums and to promote programs and activities that will enable students at all levels to appreciate American Indian history, cultures and spirituality.

27. We also urge that Church property and facilities adjacent to Indian lands or located in the midst of urban Indian neighborhoods be made more available for use by Indian communities for such activities as religious celebrations, group meetings, programs for the elderly, day care centers and educational programs.

28. Perhaps the most important task before us is the development of Indian leadership—clerical, religious and lay—within the Church. This is necessary if the Church is to prosper in Indian communities. We are especially encouraged by the efforts of several dioceses to include American Indians in their permanent diaconate programs and hope that this effort is expanded. In addition, efforts should be made to insure that American Indians have representation and a voice in all decisions made by Church agencies and organizations affecting their communities.

29. Drawing on the two themes of faith and culture, and the Church and justice, and working with all others of good will, we hope to fashion a renewed commitment to serve Indian peoples. In turn, their participation in and challenge to our Christian community will strengthen our common witness to Jesus and the Gospel message.

FOOTNOTES

1. Pope Paul VI, *Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World*, 5, 14-16, 26-27; Vatican II, *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church*, 2-4.
2. Pope Paul VI, 20, 28; Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 48; *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church*, 8.
3. Vatican Council II, *The Church in the Modern World*, 53.
4. Pope Paul VI, 4.
5. Pope Paul VI, 31; 39; 30.
6. Pope Paul VI, 29-36; Vatican Council II, *The Church in the Modern World*, 41.

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