



Native American Day Mass
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
October 10, 2011
Cathedral of St. Joseph

On this Native American Day in the State of South Dakota, it is fitting that we come together to pray Holy Mass and receive Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, body, blood, soul and divinity. As a state we celebrate the history and culture of the Native American people which has so beautifully helped shape the uniqueness that is ours as a state. Of particular importance is the respect shown for God's creation and the wisdom of trusting in God's providence. As a church we celebrate the tapestry of cultures that is the universal church. Here all are welcome, here Christ gathers us all as one family.

Native American Day has been designated in our state only since 1990. The history of the church here goes back at least to the 1870s when a Benedictine Abbot named Martin Marty felt the missionary call to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to this territory. Much like St Paul, as noted in the first reading from his letter to the Romans, he was called to be an apostle to preach the invitation to all peoples to "belong to Jesus Christ" and to raise the universal call to holiness. Bishop Marty fell in love with the people and became a strong advocate for Native Americans when he saw how unjustly their treatment by the government was. That special relationship has endured. We are grateful for the religious orders including the Benedictines, Franciscans, Sacred Heart Fathers, OMI's, Jesuits, Oblates of the Blessed Sacrament who followed and still follow his missionary call to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to seek holiness by serving those in need. We are especially grateful to Deacons Bud Jetty and Steve McLaughlin for their ministry of service in the name of the Diocese of Sioux Falls.

It is appropriate that Native American Day fall in the month of October which is respect life month in the Church in the United States. The theme for Respect Life month this year is: "I came so that all might have life and have it to the full." As I said in my homily on Respect Life Sunday: "Sadly, government through court decisions, laws and regulations, and individuals in self-centered decisions giving in to the culture of death, prevent the most vulnerable from living at all, let alone living to the full.

“We must focus on the issue of abortion and embryonic stem cell research at the beginning of life because without being born no other issues apply. We also must focus on end of life challenges including euthanasia and so-called assisted suicide because dying with dignity really means dying enveloped in the love of God. Respecting life is in fact a principle also to be applied to whether people can live with dignity in the years in-between. Thus issues such as abuse, racism, poverty, hunger, housing and health care must be raised as well.”

These are especially important on the reservations and for the Native American peoples. Sadly racism is still with us and the highest poverty rate of any county in the United States is here in our diocese in South Dakota. It is a title we wear with sadness and embarrassment. We must do what we can to address this. But most significantly the Church in the midst of this reality must seek to be a sign of hope.

In the Gospel reading Jesus rebuked the people for seeking miraculous signs to win them over. We too sometimes seek signs when our crosses seem so heavy or we feel the need for reassurance.

A Native American religious sister told of a special gift she received from her mother as a child. She was crying for no reason she knew. Her mother asked her “what’s the matter?” “Nothing, leave me alone,” was the response. Her mother did, and she recalled, “Then I really started crying”. Later her mother said to her, “there are going to be many times in your life when you will cry and won’t know why. You won’t understand and neither will anybody else. I am going to teach you a prayer for the times you are crying and don’t know why.” She told her to stand up and said put your hands around your body like you would hold a baby in your arms. Then close your eyes and rock yourself real good the way you would a baby. As you do so remember you are God’s little girl and that God understands why you are crying. And remember too that God holds you close just the way you are holding yourself because God loves you very much. Then just keep rocking yourself and be comforted.” A very beautiful thought of reassurance: God loves us very much.

How much is reflected in the crucifix raised in our renewed Cathedral and in the Holy Eucharist we are about to share. Jesus reminds us in the Gospel reading that he is all we need. On this Native American Day and at this Holy Mass may we recall the mission of St. Paul and Bishop Martin Marty, which we share, to announce the good news of Jesus Christ. May we by our lives be signs of hope because we know how much God loves us and how much he loves all of us.