

National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples of Canada

By Graydon Nicholas

The Catholic Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation was created by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) in 1998 to provide resources to increase awareness of aboriginal issues, to support processes of healing and to foster aboriginal faith leadership in the Christian community. In 2002, this Council recommended that each year December 12 be a National Day of Prayer for Aboriginal People. This is a fitting date as it is the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe who is recognized as Our Lady of the Americas.

When the Blessed Mother appeared to Juan Diego between December 9, 10 and 12, 1531, she spoke to him in compassionate terms. She used the words ***my most abandoned son*** in her dialogue contained in the ***Nican Mophua***. Juan Diego did not feel that he was worthy to be the messenger for her to make representations to Bishop Juan de Zumarraga. In fact, when the Bishop would not believe Juan Diego that he met Mary and gave him the message, Juan Diego felt very dejected. He asked Mary to send someone else more important and worthy. Again, Mary told him that she could send someone else. However, she told him that he was her choice to have him speak to the Bishop, so that her desire to have a chapel built where people could be comforted by her, would become a reality. Mary was very much aware of the abuse that Juan Diego and his people were receiving from the conquering Spaniards.

On the morning of December 12, 1531, the Blessed Mother asked Juan Diego to gather the flowers on Tepeyac Hill, to bring them to her, so that she could rearrange them in his cloak. She then asked Juan Diego to deliver these flowers, gathered in his tilma, as a sign for the Bishop. She called Juan Diego her ambassador in whom she had complete trust. Her words to him were ***with all of my strength, I command you that only in the presence of the bishop are you to open your mantle, and let him know and reveal to him what you are carrying. You will recount everything well; you will tell him how I sent you to climb to the top of the hill to cut flowers, and all you saw and admired. With this you will change the heart of the lord of the priests so that he will do his part to build and erect a temple that I have asked for.*** Through her miraculous Image and the acceptance of Mary's message, in a short period of ten years [1531-1541], there were nine million conversions to the Catholic faith by the indigenous people of Mexico. Mary's appearance succeeded where the missionaries and Spaniards failed in convincing the indigenous people to become followers of Jesus.

This is the eight year of this celebration. Now, this date has been renamed as the **National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples in Canada**. Pope John Paul II visited Canada in 1984. In his speech in Huronia, Ontario, on September 15, 1984, he told the gathered aboriginal people that: **Thus the one faith is expressed in different ways. There can be no question of adulterating the word of God or of emptying the Cross of its power, but rather of Christ animating the very centre of all culture. Thus, not only is Christianity relevant to the Indian peoples, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself Indian.**

On this day of December 12, 2014, we are encouraged to gather in prayer and celebrate our indigenous identity with our Catholic faith and be grateful of those who minister to our spiritual needs and to prayer for all of our brothers and sisters.

Significance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the Indigenous People

By Graydon Nicholas

When Our Lady of Guadalupe first encountered Saint Juan Diego on the morning of December 9, 1531, she appeared as a mestizo and spoke his indigenous language. This was referred to by Saint John Paul II at the canonization of Saint Juan Diego as:

[3]..."The Guadalupe Event", as the Mexican Episcopate has pointed out, "meant the beginning of evangelization with a vitality that surpassed all expectations. Christ's message, through his Mother, took up the central elements of the indigenous culture, purified them and gave them the definitive sense of salvation" (14 May 2002, No. 8). Consequently Guadalupe and Juan Diego have a deep ecclesial and missionary meaning and are a model of perfectly inculturated evangelization.

I personally began to know this spiritual and historic encounter in March 2005 when I was asked by the Aboriginal Council of the Canadian Conference of the Catholic Bishops [CCCB] to write a short article for the celebration of the first official Day of Prayer for Aboriginal People [changed to National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples] in Canada for December 12, 2005.

I was overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude that Our Lord, Jesus, sent His Mother to begin healing, reconciliation and respect for the Indigenous people within the Catholic Church in 1531. I first saw the Missionary Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe for Canada in January 2006. I became an instant follower of Our Lady of Guadalupe and had the opportunity to take Her to four First Nation communities that month. The people were deeply and profoundly touched by Her apparitions and especially Her indigenous appearance and language. This was never told to my people by the missionaries and priests about the love of Jesus and His Mother for our people. I committed to bring Her to New Brunswick on an annual basis. I took the Missionary Image in the summer of 2006 to as many First Nation communities in New Brunswick and non-native communities to celebrate Eucharist with them. The priests were very supportive and encouraged by the faith of our people.

Since 2006, I have been the chauffeur of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Ontario where my wife and I have shared the Nican Mopohua and our love of Her. We witnessed many miracles of family healing, devotion to prayer, return to the church and medical healing through Her intercessions [my wife received a healing in August 2006]. I firmly believe that it was the intercessions of Our Lady of Guadalupe that made it possible for me join the Knights of Columbus in June 24, 2009 and to serve as Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick from 2009-14. She is a beautiful advocate in our lives.

Our Lady of Guadalupe is the person who can lead all people of all faiths to reconciliation and conversion to follow Her Son, Jesus. I would estimate that over 10,000 people have seen the Missionary Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe since 2006. I hope to continue this spiritual journey in the future.

2017 National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples in Canada

Since 1980, over 1000 Indigenous women and girls have been murdered in Canada. While Indigenous women make up only 4% of Canada's female population, 16% of all women murdered in Canada between 1980 and 2012 were Indigenous. In June 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued 94 Calls to Action designed to redress the legacy left by the Indian Residential Schools. In Call to Action no. 41, the federal government is invited to launch a public inquiry into the causes of, and remedies for, the disproportionate victimization of Indigenous women and girls; "The inquiry's mandate would include: i) investigation into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls; ii) links to the intergenerational legacy of residential schools." In December 2015, the federal government of Canada announced the launch of the first phase of a public inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls.

The overwhelming grief caused by these violent crimes can be felt throughout the community. Families of victims are looking for answers to understand what happened to their loved one, a demonstration that the public cares, and to be treated fairly. Justice and hope need to come together for each and every one of the victims and their families.

Many are coming together to share in ceremonies, uniting the families of victims, the community and the spirit of the departed to deal with their grief. One such ceremony encourages people to "leave it on the cross", offering tissues with their tears into a fire and in turn releasing their grief to the Creator. The Native Women's Association of Canada has developed a useful guide on how to hold a "**Sisters in Spirit**" walk in communities. These ceremonies can often provide a sense of closure for the victims and their families.

On this **day of prayer** (12 December 2017), we the members of the **Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council**, wish to bring awareness to this important issue. We call on all Catholics to pray to the Creator for hope and justice for the victims and their families. We call on communities, parishes, and individuals to support the national inquiry in any way they can, by participating in ceremonies and truly experiencing them, participating in search and rescue operations, and providing spaces for people to meet. We call on individuals to pray for the victims and their families and to share any information they may have with the proper authorities.

Today we come together in prayer for the victims and their loved ones.

Let us pray.

Creator God, we acknowledge all of the gifts we have been given. We especially acknowledge the gifts of the women in our lives, our mothers, grandmothers, wives, aunts, sisters and nieces. We express our sorrow and hurt for those of our Indigenous sisters who have gone missing or have been murdered. At this time, we ask for blessings for all women, and especially for those who have experienced inexplicable violation and suffering. We ask for comfort, care, and consolation, for those family members left behind. We again acknowledge the gifts of the Spirit we have been given and we ask for these blessings in Christ.

Amen.