

Incarnation, Indigenous Life, and God's Mission

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I want to begin with a story from my home land. A story I first heard long ago. Fr. Baraga, now known as St. Baraga of Sault Ste. Marie, was stationed in northern Wisconsin, on the south shore of Lake Superior, one of the largest fresh water lakes in the world. He needed to go to the north shore with a group of clergy and trappers, so they engaged a group of Ojibwe men, the Indigenous Peoples of that area, to paddle them across the Lake in great big canoes. Soon after leaving shore, a huge and dangerous storm blew towards them, on the Lake. The trappers began to curse in fear, the clergy prayed, but the Ojibwe put their paddles on their laps and began to sing a Christian hymn. This was a surprise to Fr. Baraga, as they were not known to have any relationship to a Christian church. With even greater surprise, they saw the storm disappear from the horizon and the Ojibwe men began to paddle again – as if nothing much had happened.

This story acts as a parable to begin my presentation. A parable of the Church today and the way that God acts among us. At times, God's purpose and power remains hidden in unexpected places and people. I believe that is true today in ways like my story. A hidden purpose and power lives among Indigenous Peoples today.

This is unexpected, to a great degree, because of the seeming vulnerability of Indigenous Peoples. Over 370 million strong, they are often marginalized and threatened in their own home lands. With colonialism still facing them everywhere, they are thought to control a quarter of the world's remaining usable land. The frenzied consumption of resources that accompanies modern life is increasingly aimed at Indigenous Peoples, robbing them of lifestyle, wealth, well-being, and life itself.

The purpose and power of God's work among Indigenous Peoples is also unexpected, because their relation to the churches of a western cultural framework have often been on the hard edge of colonialism, the churches often aiding the West's attempts to eliminate Indigenous Peoples from the Land. In this there was little attempt to hide the goal of much of the West's interaction with Indigenous Peoples. The goal was to make Indigenous Peoples disappear as culturally distinct peoples and, at its kindest and least violent, make them melt into the larger colonial society without a trace. This often became genocidal in both intent and effect, with the inter-generational trauma that impacts so many Indigenous communities being the legacy of the West's encounter with the People of the Land.

So, the horizon of Christian faith among Indigenous Peoples would appear, at first glance to be extremely limited and, certainly, of little comfort or vitality for the larger Church. But, that is what I am here to say. Not that the Western Institutional Church has been good for Indigenous Peoples, but that God has a purpose and plan for the Church through Indigenous Peoples. The emergence of a Christian church among Indigenous Peoples today, has great

promise for Indigenous life and for the life of the larger church. That is what I wish to explore with you today: The Incarnation of the living Word of God in Indigenous life.

Colonial Mission

As mentioned, colonial mission was never very subtle in its plans for Indigenous Peoples. The goal was to make Indigenous Peoples disappear, as distinct peoples and cultures. The method was forced acculturation, designed to “civilize” Indigenous Peoples. Success was measured by the capacity to mimic Western culture and faith. In the history of Western missions, there are very few examples of genuine and respectful inculturation of the Gospel in Indigenous life.

The Gospel was stunted in colonial mission, though some attempted to preach it. For most, however, a counterfeit gospel was manufactured to aid in the civilizing project. It had little success and the missionaries often reported the stubborn persistence of Indigenous cosmology and cultural ways among the people they worked. This led to even more rigorous attempts at forced acculturation: the residential schools and a war on Indigenous family life that caused much misery and pain.

But as Paul noted, the power of the Gospel is not limited by the intent or limitations of the preacher. It has a power to jump from the constraints of human intent to the creation of life among the victims of colonialism. The legacy of the Gospel, therefore, is quite apart from the legacy of the colonial church. Today, we see very different trajectory of faith than one would expect, given colonial history.

The story of this trajectory of faith begins not today, in the closing chapters of a colonial mission. It begins in an emerging story of an Indigenous faith that grew and prospered underground and away from the missionary’s influence. This is the Gospel in the Four Directions; the Four Directions that symbolize Indigenous Life around the world.

An Indigenous Faith

Albert Tritt, the great Gwich’in prophet of Alaska in the early 1900’s, once said, “The way of the white man leads to death, the way of Jesus leads to life.” He clearly saw the difference between the Gospel way and Western culture. For him – and as we are finding, for many like him – the way of the Gospel, the way of Jesus, held great promise. He saw it as a fulfillment of his culture and not a condemnation of it.

Though the story of Western missions among North American Indigenous Peoples is ambivalent, Indigenous expressions of faith developed; traditions of faith that still can be witnessed today. A tradition of hymn singing, for example, developed across North America that spread under Indigenous agency. My opening story is an example. Hymn singing became so popular that it often overshadowed Sunday worship, earning it the opposition of the missionaries. These traditions have been handed down since the early 1800’s and survive today across the land and especially in northern Canada.

If you visit Northern Canada today, you are likely to run into a Gospel Jamboree, where the hymn singing tradition continues. Though the addition of electrified instruments has brought some change, the basic pattern of the evening is the same as the early 1800's: a shared meal followed by hymns interspersed between testimonies, stories, Bible readings, a sermon, and a time for personal healing prayers.

In recent years, scholarly attention has been paid to the work of Indigenous catechists in North America, who translated Christian faith into Indigenous culture and Indigenous culture into Christian faith. The catechists demonstrated Indigenous agency in the development of an Indigenous faith. We now can see that they were brilliant interpreters of their own culture and, at the same time, the Christian faith. They created an outreach that focused on the practice of Christian faith in extended families. This, too, often threatened the work of the missionaries, centred in the life of the institutional church. The catechists, however, were and are seen as heroes to Indigenous People. In the back of the newly built St. John-the-Baptist Church in the Tataskweyak Cree Nation the only picture you can find is one of a catechist, taken in the early 1900's – there are no pictures of bishops. The catechist is the congregation's exemplar of Christian faith.

The examples I give are North American, but there are many others around the world. The story of Te Whiti, the Maori prophet of nonviolence – a Gandhian, before Gandhi - is an example. He practiced a militant form of nonviolence that still influences Indigenous People today.

These brief examples show the power of the Gospel and its impact among Indigenous peoples. At a minimum, they should inspire us with hope in the resilience and volatility of the Word of God, even and, perhaps, especially in the most hostile environments. Further, the faith of Indigenous Peoples is not just an inspiration for contemporary Indigenous communities, it is a living and instructive example of the inculturation that all Christian communities strive to embody.

The Incarnation of the Word of God

It could be said, perhaps should be said, that the goal of Christian mission is the incarnation of the living Word of God into the lifeways of a people. As Orthodox Archbishop Yannoulatos, puts it: Incarnation in such a way that the Word takes on the "personality of a people." The Word made flesh. The Word, as Maximus the Confessor put it, "that desires always and in all places to become flesh."

This was not the method of colonial mission. It could be said that, at its kindest, the attempt was to freeze dry a particular cultural expression of the Word made flesh and transfer it to another place. The hope being, perhaps, that with baptismal water out would pop an Englishman.

Today, the Word made flesh in Indigenous life shows the promise and power of the Gospel, as demonstrated across the globe: in North America, where many Indigenous churches are growing and moving towards inculturation and self-determination; to the Maori Anglican

church, whose inculturation has brought so much benefit to the worldwide Communion; to Indigenous Gospel movements here and around the world; and to the recovery of Indigenous traditional expressions of faith and practice.

This last item, the recovery of traditional expressions of Indigenous practice and faith, is significant. It has great promise for many Indigenous Peoples apart from Christian faith, but it also is providing the “flesh” for an incarnation, an inculturation, of the Word of God in Indigenous life. Inculturated liturgies are being developed, incarnating the Gospel in Indigenous cosmology and liturgical practice – the use of sage and sweetgrass as incense, along with the drum and Indigenous music are all appearing in Christian liturgy in North America.

Here we must say that the Word of God both fulfills and transforms human life. It at one and the same time and movement affirms and challenges cultural practice. This is part of the incarnation, a part of the power of the Gospel and its promise is not limited to any single group or culture. Inculturation is not just an uncritical adoption of non-Christian cultural artifacts into Christian liturgy, it is a transformation of those artifacts, a challenging transformation of culture. There is a beauty of reciprocal transformation, culture is transformed, but so is the church – transformed beyond mere culture-bound religious expression into the reign of God.

In this we see the way that the Gospel is the one thing in life that thrives on translation. If you have even tried to translate jokes from one language to another, you may have some insight into this peculiar and wonderful aspect of Gospel. It says, in a Pentecostal way, that, unlike anything else, the more you translate it, the closer you get to the original.

Today, the translation of the Gospel into Indigenous life is bringing new meaning to Indigenous Peoples, but also to the larger church. It is reminding us of the goal of mission and the horizon of the Gospel. In the decay and diminishment of the Western churches, lies this hope: A Gospel renewed expression of faith stands near by. The missionaries may have meant to destroy Indigenous culture, God can use Indigenous culture to remind the Church of its true horizon in the Incarnation of the Word of God – its life in the Gospel of God.

Indigenous Churches and the Church

As we enter a new era of mission, the Word in Indigenous life has much meaning. In this section, I would like to, briefly and broadly, outline some of the potentiality.

Indigenous People and the Climate Injustice:

As Pope Francis noted in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Indigenous wisdom has paradoxically appeared in our age as saving knowledge to a modern world that resolutely rejected it and even persecuted it. While Indigenous Peoples suffer disproportionately from the effects of climate injustice, their culture and cosmology promises much to the future of our planet.

The wisdom of Indigenous culture can help the church re-discover the environmentalism of its own tradition. Indigenous wisdom helps to uncover the truth that modernity obscured:

there is an inherent environmentalism in the ancient wisdom of the church (as Laudato Si also has reminded us.).

Indigenous People and Inculturation:

The work of inculturation among Indigenous Peoples reminds the Church of its own mission imperatives. The Gospel must be freshly inculturated, incarnated, in every generation. The essence of the Gospel and the Christian tradition must be translated in modern terms and in modern culture. Indigenous inculturation, in the New Zealand Prayer Book for example, demonstrates the potential for this work.

There is both promise and challenge here. The Anglican Church, in many ways, successfully inculturated the Gospel in English life and language. So successfully that it has tempted us to export that work - everywhere and at all times - uncritically. The failures of Western Indigenous mission beg us to do more in our present day. Now, there is a missiological challenge to translate the essence of our fine tradition into a new era and new peoples.

Indigenous People and Mission:

The work of God among Indigenous Peoples helps us see the manifold wisdom and promise of God's work everywhere. Among Western churches, the horizon for mission has been bleak in recent times. The story of God's work among Indigenous Peoples, its growth and vitality in so many places today, remind us of the power and potentiality of the Word of God at all times and in all places, even and, perhaps, especially where it faces a hostile or unpromising environment. Against all odds, despite the intentions of powerful institutions, Indigenous faith survived and thrived. We are reminded that our horizon is not measured by human response – whether indifference or enthusiasm. Our horizon is the Gospel.

Indigenous People and Sustainability:

The churches of a Western cultural framework have inherited a pattern of ministry that requires buildings, paid staff, and other institutional requirements. This has become harder and harder to support. Beyond that, we can say that we have become a church that the poor can't afford. It takes a lot of money to establish a church along our accustomed practice. These embedded assumptions, about what a church is, mean that fewer and fewer churches are sustainable. Indigenous churches – long used to low levels of funding, few, if any, paid staff, and less than adequate buildings – indicate that we can survive without all the presently held institutional requirements, that the basis for church fellowship is less demanding, financially, than we have come to expect.

Indigenous Peoples and Growth:

We live in a time of explosive growth in local expressions of ministry. Indigenous Peoples, in many places, are an example of that growth, especially where they are no longer under colonial regimes and administration. Though this growth has largely passed the Western churches by – our Church's historical ethnic constituencies seem much less interested in what

the church has to offer and, in any event, is not growing relative to other parts of our population – there is no reason to believe that this won't have an impact on us in some way. I hope to speak more on that on Friday. If we are able to have a more expansive view of what ministry is, to whom our ministry and mission is directed, we have every reason to believe that growth is possible, even probable.

Conclusion

As we have said in a number of ways, the Word of God's trajectory among Indigenous Peoples tells us that God has a horizon in Creation and history that confounds human prediction and understanding. God's work is not limited to the human capacity to approve or accept it; God's horizon in Creation and history is not dependent upon human agency. God will find a way to proclaim the God News, whatever our disposition to proclaim it might be. Our task is not to create the conditions for God's Word and work. We are to discern it and respond.