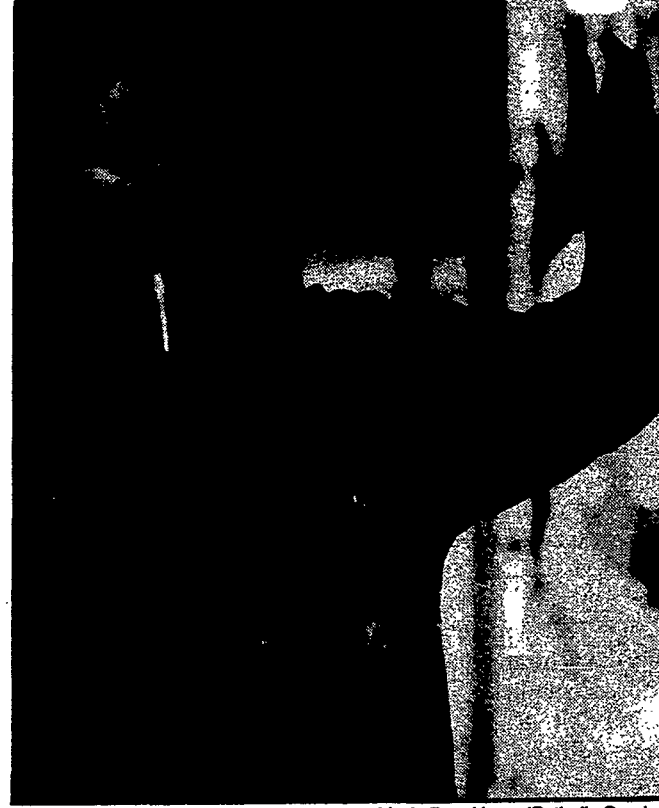


Sister seeks to share Native American ways



Sister Jose Hobday, OSF, displayed a range of enthusiastic postures during her homily presentation at Corpus Christi Church on Friday, Oct. 20.

Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Corpus Christi Church echoed with the voices of children enthusiastically chanting the Navajo greeting, "Yut te hey, Shaidoni."

"Welcome, come in Great Spirit," the children recited again in Navajo.

Leading the chant was an animated woman in a loose-fitting print dress. She moved back and forth in front of the children, urging them to be more enthusiastic in their prayer.

"I get a lot of inspiration from the youngsters," she explained later.

Sister Jose Hobday, OSF, can apparently derive inspiration from any number of sources — from children, from the rain pouring down, from Scriptures, from the feel of dirt beneath her feet.

Above all, however, Sister Hobday draws inspiration from her own dual heritage.

The daughter of a Seneca mother and a father who had Seminole ancestors, she promotes understanding between the main-

stream church and approximately 500,000 Native American Catholics by traveling throughout the United States. She works as a retreat leader and as a member of the Tekakwitha Conference, an organization of Native American Catholics named after Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk woman beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1980.

The spiritual heritage of Native Americans belongs to all American Catholics, Sister Hobday told audiences at Corpus Christi, where she directed a retreat Oct. 16-19.

"It's your heritage," she said. "Every Native American wants you to share in that heritage."

She continued, "Thomas Merton said unless the people in the United States study and learn Native American spirituality, they will always remain imports because you cannot learn the spirit of the land in 300 years that even touches the knowledge of 20,000 years."

Sister Hobday asserted that Native American and Catholic spirituality are es-

entially the same. Both traditions share a love for ritual, and a recognition of symbols and signs.

"Native American spirituality is essentially and naturally more Gospel than Western tradition," she said.

To illustrate her point, she cited teachings of Jesus that are part of Native American tradition — hospitality, exaggerated sharing, simplicity, celebration, respect and a love for the land, an understanding of death, an effort to divide aspects of life and the world into categories of either holy or secular.

Native American spirituality is essentially creation-centered, she maintained, adding that, "Native Americans consider themselves in relation to the earth."

Franciscan spirituality — which she regards as closest to Native American spirituality — adopts a similar focus. "Both share a reverence for nature," she explained.

That reverence for nature is not a kind of pantheism, Sister Hobday explained, but a recognition that "everything carries life power."

Because of this sense of the spirit in the land, Native Americans see themselves not as owners of the land, but as stewards — a concept, she observed, much in line with church teachings.

Sister Hobday is in a rare position for seeing links between Native American and Catholic beliefs. She was raised by parents who cherished both traditions. Her mother, a convert, played an important role in that development.

"She loved her Catholic tradition, and she loved her Native tradition," she said.

From her mother, Sister Hobday learned to recognize that all actions can be prayer, and that all nature is full of the Spirit of God. She recalled after-dinner walks with her mother, when the two "prayed" in silent contemplation of nature.

"I grew up with a mother who said it was a pleasure to walk with God," she explained, "so I grew up with that spirituality."

Sister Hobday's own spiritual journey grew out of these Native American roots, and thus it is tinged with humor and a down-to-earth appreciation for the simple and seemingly insignificant things in life.

During her talk about Native American spirituality at Corpus Christi, for example, she spoke about the importance of common forms of "moisture" in people's lives — spit, sweat and tears, and bodily fluids that lead to creating new life.

These forms of moisture, Sister Hobday said, enable such things as speech and purification of the body to take place.

She said that Native American spirituality also calls for times of silence and solitude — two conditions American society seem to reject, even to fear. "You can't feel compassion toward a raped and scarred land unless you sit silently and quietly and reverently, and look at what the wounds do," she said.

Mainstream Catholics can also learn from Native American acceptance of death. "We can only accept death if the whole family can back us up and support us," she said. "To be truly spiritual you must develop a spirituality of grieving for the dead."

The church has allowed Native Americans to incorporate elements of their traditions into Catholic practices, Sister Hobday observed. The Mass is celebrated in Navajo and Choctaw. Chants and dance have also been incorporated into the Mass.

The pipe ceremony, a service of reconciliation and peace, and the "sweat" — a rite of purification in which prayers and chanting are recited under the direction of a spiritual leader — have also been allowed.

Still, Sister Hobday said, Native Americans would like to see more of their traditions used in church. She said that even though some elements of their traditions have been included in Catholic practice, the church lacks sufficient Native American priests, or priests who understand the traditions enough to make use of them.

"The mainstream Catholic Church needs to get down on the humble knees of its heart and take seriously the learning from Native American tribal ways," Sister Hobday said. "Study it, get to know the leaders. We have saints in our tradition that are just as strong as the saints in the church's tradition."

Sister Hobday said that Native American wisdom is accessible to anyone who cares to make the effort. She pointed out that children seem to have an ability to sense the heritage of the land, and to be able to plunge into Native American ways.

She recalled having dinner at one home, where she led the children in chanting and dancing. The same opportunity is available even to adults, she said.

"Get the beat of Mother Earth," Sister Hobday said. "Get the beat of your heart to the beat of the Holy Spirit, and you understand the dance of the cosmic, the dance of the universe."

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