

RECONCILIATION & HOPE

THE CHURCH & INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES IN THE AMERICAS CONFERENCE



It began with a prayer. Sister Eva Solomon, C.S.J., a Catholic nun of Anishinaabe heritage, led attendees in a call and response invoking her indigenous tradition. The sold-out conference, held Nov. 4-5, 2016, explored the relationship between the Catholic Church and native peoples throughout the Americas. It brought together scholars and pastoral voices from Chile, Canada, Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru and the United States and the indigenous Mapuche, Chiquitano, Tzeltal, Mayan, Oglala Sioux, Mi'kmaw and Anishinaabe peoples. The event was co-sponsored by LAS's Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology (CWCIT) and the Chicago Theological Union (CTU).

William Cavanaugh, professor of Catholic studies and CWCIT director, welcomed attendees with a statement of purpose: "We talk about North/South dialogue, but both exist in each other's zones. We're here to talk about newer initiatives where robust Catholicism comes out of indigenous expressions."

These are "challenging times for the church in relationship with indigenous peoples. New movements are emerging centered on historic responsibility and being part of a solution," said Michel Andraos, associate professor of intercultural theology and ministry at CTU.

Sister Eva spoke movingly about the racism she faced growing up near Winnipeg, Manitoba. "What racism does to us as people is very violent. It puts us down and demands of us to conform to the colonial way of life."

Yet, as the director of the Building Bridges Project for Canada's Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs of the Assembly of Western Catholic Bishops, she has been able to work toward a truly indigenous Catholic Church.

"The bishops wanted us to teach others to work with indigenous people, but I said, 'No, we must have Catholic indigenous outreach dialogue so that the church can understand what we're talking about and how we can bring that understanding to our own people.'"

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples informs her work on Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "We have 94 calls to action at individual, church and government levels," she said. One statement calls for a plan to implement the UN declaration.

Archbishop Emeritus Sylvain Lavoie, O.M.I., a missionary oblate to the indigenous peoples of north and central Saskatchewan, recounted the tragic history of native children who were taken from their families to be educated in missionary schools. Francis White Lance, a member of the Oglala Sioux tribe and an Anglican Catholic priest, discussed this disruptive fate at length from his own experience.

Pedro Gutiérrez Jiménez, coordinator of indigenous theology for the Institute for Intercultural Studies and Research in Chiapas, Mexico, says he came to understand his Mayan-Tzeltal heritage as a seminarian. Understanding his Christian faith in the context of indigenous faith led him to practice "Indian theology."

"For the good of humanity and Mother Earth, we want to be Christians without giving up our indigenous identity," he said. "Indian theology is present in (the) practices and thinking of Christian churches, and we can develop a synthesis between the two spiritualities."

"Education got us into this mess, and it will get us out of it," Lavoie concluded. "We must choose to enter into cross-cultural experiences, get out of a colonial mindset and complete the apology by listening with the heart, asking for forgiveness, declaring never to do harm again and making amends."