



Commemorating the 125th Anniversary of the Diocese of Sioux Falls
Reflections by Deacon Steve McLaughlin
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Mitakuyapi Wowapi Wakan Uha Moni Hokshila emaciyapalo nahan iyuha cante wastya nape ciyuzapelo. I know it is not my place to speak before my elders do, and for breaking with the tradition that we all have been taught. My Lakota name is “The Boy Who Walks with the Holy Book, and I shake your hand with a warm heart.” My family gave me this name when I was Ordained to the Permanent Diaconate for the Diocese of Sioux Falls by His Excellency Paul Swain on May 24, 2007. I am a member of the Standing Rock Nation as well as my wife Marlene. We are decedents of Chief Mad Bear, from the District of Wakpala at a place known as Mad Bear Camp. The family had to move because of the construction of the dams.

Your Excellency Paul Swain, Members of the Tribal Council, Priests, Deacons, Religious, Seminarians, Members of the Knights of Columbus, Akicita Oyate, Laity and Distinguished Guests. It is an honor to have this opportunity to talk a little about “ A Legacy of Faith-Past, Present and Future-Celebrating Native American Spirituality and Catholics on the Prairie, and to spend this time with each of you in celebrating the Feast of St. Kateri Tekakwitha.

We read in Sacred Scripture God created the earth, the human race and all life on what we call Mother Earth. Our people have always recognized this from the very beginning and still do to this very day. We have always been a spiritual and prayerful people; this is why we have a ceremony for every aspect of our life, as we travel through the Sacred Circle of Life.

Let me take a few moments to explain this Sacred Circle of Life. We enter this Sacred Circle of Life by virtue of our birth as babies-in this stage we learn trust, we then come to the Youth stage of our lives where we learn Autonomy, Initiative, Accomplishment and Identity, we then move to the Adult stage where we learn what Intimacy is in relation to others and finally the last stage is Integrity. I mention this because if we miss one of these stages of life it results in problems for the individual experiencing it. We can see that it moves in a circle this is why the Circle is so sacred to Native Peoples. We pray in a circle, lived in a circle, the directions are in a circle and as you have heard life is in a circle, and its meaning is so important.

The Chiefs of our people were wise and understood their way of life was coming to an end. They realized that in order for their people to survive in the future, and to live a better life on their lands they would somehow have to change. At this time some groups of people were entering their lands and one of these groups were what they called the “Sina Sapa” or Black Robe. Over time they came to know and respect these Black Robes and out of this relationship a bond of trust grew. The bond of trust between these two groups of people led to a more complete understanding of their relationship with God or the Creator as they knew Him by. The priests of several orders established many schools throughout the State of South Dakota like Marty were we are today to Red Cloud, Stephan and so many more, and so our people became educated contributing to society.

Our people have had and presently have a great spiritual life, but it can be even richer if we take the opportunity to experience what our Catholic Faith offers each one of us. I hear it said that the both cannot mix, I respectfully disagree. Those who believe this should attend a program called “Canku Wakan” as I have and they will come away with a different point of view. I believe one can be both and if we but just give it a try one might just be surprised.

Being 29 years old upon my baptism over time I came to understand my faith more, and I felt a more profound fullness in my life I have never known before. This feeling is difficult to describe it is a feeling one has to experience themselves. From the moment the Bishop placed his hands on my head in prayer, to this very time and place, I have been inspired by the Holy Spirit to be the best that I can. Perhaps this is not the same experience for everyone, but each of us can contribute to our Church in some way, but we have to take that first step, and then the next one becomes easier. Life is short on this earth, but it can be a life filled with fulfillment and accomplishments.

Today we see a decline in the faith in all aspects of our lives. We are being challenged by others because of our belief, and ridiculed by those who differ from us. We have to instill in our young our traditions, respecting our elders and those who are in Leadership positions throughout our country. We need to take on drugs and alcohol, pre-marital sex, suicide, and violence head on in order to save people’s lives. We hear on the news all the time people killing others just for the fun of it, and at this time there seems to be no end in sight, and no one will step up to put an end to it. The Church is not to blame! We are to blame, parents are the first teachers of their children and if anyone has failed it is us and no one else, but that does not mean we have to give up. The Church is not able to do everything, we have to take the responsibility for ensuring that our children are brought up with our customs and the teachings of the Church.

We need to start at the home, practicing our faith as a family, attending Church together, praying before meals, reading Sacred Scripture daily and participating in our cultural events. I believe this is the answer to stop what is destroying lives. Right now too many have no faith, and see life as an endless boring challenge. Parents and Guardians this can be turned around, but if we do not even try or take this responsibility seriously, we will lose another generation to these dreadful behaviors.

We must not let this happen, we need to instill in our children respect for others and give them some kind of hope. This will never be accomplished through human beings, it can only become a reality through faith in Jesus Christ and His teachings. When we start to live by this faith, we will begin to see changes in our children and ultimately throughout society. We must always remember our children act the way they see us act.

Each one of us here today have our own particular heritage that we can be proud of and can be thankful for our Catholic Faith which only strengthens us. We keep hearing a negative connotation when it comes to the church, I for one will always focus on the positive because it has made me who I am today. The past leaders of our tribe's endorsed, and in many cases became Catholic's themselves essentially saying to future generations we will become better individuals for it.

On many of the South Dakota Reservations Native Catechists were very instrumental in keeping the Catholic Faith alive. There were not many Priests at the time so these Native Catechists were able to speak the language passing on the Good News to all that they came into contact with. They took care of the parish in the absence of the priest doing all the necessary things on the parish level. One of the most renowned of these Native Catechists was Nicklaus Black Elk who was an inspiration to his people.

These Native Catechists had to endure not only poverty, but also criticism from others because of their faith, this has not changed from his time to the present. Nicklaus Black Elk knew, as those individuals do today that criticism of us because of our faith and our decision to follow the teachings of the Church is a badge of honor. We endure this because we know and understand what the ultimate goal is, it is the road to eternal life. A life with God the Father forever, this is what we have always believed, it only had a different name for the same understanding.

We have a wonderful Church, but if we do not stand up in willing participation we gain nothing. I am one who knows this as anyone who knew me could tell you. It was only because I was willing to give it a chance and God's grace does the rest. In my life I know many times I have hurt others, even those I love the most. Taking a Good look at myself in the mirror and seeing the reflection that came back was one I did not like, knowing change must occur and not being able to do it myself, meant that only God's Grace was left and that is how I responded, along with surrounding myself with positive influences of individuals who were important in my life. I know that no one is perfect, we all commit some kind of sin because we are human, and this is why we have the Church. If we practice our faith, take advantage of the Sacraments, if we walk that road of life the best way we can in accordance with our faith and the teachings of the Church, if we incorporate those truths that we have learned from our elders, then we will be all the better for it.

We will then respect those who are our elders, we will respect those who are in prominent positions in our society, and we will respect those who lead our Church and have the responsibility to ensure we are moving in the right direction in life. This will not be accomplished by setting around and not getting involved. We all have to stand up, we all have to change ourselves from within in order to project what we have learned from our cultures and Church to better ourselves, our families, communities, and society in general. We can no longer accept, "we can't", do it for and answer, there is too much at stake!

So how do we begin to make these changes within ourselves and project it into our communities? We start by Prayer, study, generosity and sharing. We start each day with prayer thanking God for who we are, and acknowledging Him as the Creator of everything and for our lives. We also have to know who we are by studying our culture, customs, celebrations and our Catholic Faith on a daily basis. Generosity allows us to share the gifts God has provided to us with others who are less fortunate, should we do this then, not only are we following what our Church teaches us, but also the teachings of our elders. Should we become lax in these very important pieces of our everyday lives, we will not be in a position to help our Church accomplish the command Christ gave His disciples when He ascended into heaven, as we read in the last chapter of Matthew "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

How can we follow the command that we just heard, if we do not start at home with our own individual lives. Bishops and Priests have so much responsibility in preparing us for eternal life, but we have to support them in their efforts by our prayers, donating our time and with financial assistance. They will keep us from wandering all over losing our way if we just listen. I believe that all people have some good in them and we at times may not think this is true, but even the most hardened of hearts have been changed because of coming to the realization of God’s love for them.

It was interesting to me as I was writing this talk when I came across a meditative writing of St. Gregory. He was writing about Christian Perfection. He said “Thought comes first, then words, since our words express opening the interior conclusions of the mind. Finally, after thoughts and words, comes action, for our deeds carry out what the mind has conceived.”

I’m sure I have read this writing from St. Gregory many times before, but this time it had real meaning for me. I believe it is because of the training I had experience about one month ago. This training was put on by the Wellbriety Institute. It said basically the same thing! If we want to change things in our lives for the better, in our communities, state, and society as a whole, this change has to come from within ourselves. This training helped me realize many uncomfortable things about myself and has given me the tools to conquer them. Knowing who I am, where I am in life, and where I am going, has opened windows for me letting in the relief of fresh air. I am grateful for who I am.

We all have a mindset a picture of who we are in life. Should we have some kind of negative mindset a choice can be made to move into a positive mindset and this is where we want to be in life so that positive outlooks on life can be realized. Our elders passed on to us values that if lived sets a positive mindset. These values are prayer, respect, compassion, honesty, generosity, humility, and wisdom. If we choose to live these values society is better off. These same values can be found in Sacred Scripture, and I do not believe that this is a coincidence. I believe our people were tuned with the Creator.

Our traditional value system and the teachings of the Church demand that we respect each other for who we are. That does not mean we must agree with everything a person represents or believes, but we must be understanding and non-condemning. The prayer we say each Sunday at Mass “The Our Father” has so much meaning if we lived this perfect prayer it would guide us to perfection in how we relate to others in our daily lives, which will lead us to a loving relationship with Christ.

We can no longer afford to have ill feelings towards one another, if we profess a love of Christ. We must never forget that each of us have God created rights that will get us through this life. So each one of us was created in our own unique way and will emit our love for Christ in the way we live our lives.

I believe that the future for each of us can be bright and strong if we apply these principals. We live in an ever changing world a world that in some ways can be hostile to our beliefs and they can be difficult at times for us to follow, but follow them we must if we want to be true to ourselves and our Church. The example we set as parents, as good citizens will be the measuring stick that our children use when they get out on their own. We also need to look at our Bishops and Priests who have spent years in study, and now spend the rest of their lives in parishes all over the world. We must always pray for them

each day, we should invite them into our homes, let them know that they are appreciated for their sacrificial life and dedication as Men of God.

It is my hope that our men will step up in their particular parishes and serve as an example to their children. Men of God do not abuse their women, men of God do not rob and steal. Men of God are examples to society in how they think, talk and act. This is what we need in building up the Christian Church. We can only accomplish this if we build on those disciplines that we have learned from our elders and the Church.

The future of our world is in peril, but one thing I do know is that the Catholic Church will always be here to help those in need, because Christ Himself has told us so. There are so many great organizations whose purpose is to assist the Church in any way possible. These organizations are too numerous for me to mention. One that I do know is the Knights of Columbus. This group of men and their families are dedicated to assisting our priests and parishes however they can. They also participate in their respective communities with food drives, Coats for Kids, assisting storm victims, and dedicating their time and money any way they can to help people all over the state and the world. This is just a small example of what they accomplish for others, because they believe in helping their fellow man. I have been a Knight for 23 years and have never regretted it because I work with some of the most dedicated men that I have ever known.

Groups such as the Knights will help us keep our faith, no matter what laws are passed to try and curtail it. The way we look at ourselves will be more enlightening and we will have more vibrant parishes, and as a result bring back some kind of sanity back into our society. Those of us who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States were willing to give our lives to protect our way of life. It is hard for me with some of the recent court rulings, make me question if there is anything sacred in this country any longer? I will take one day at a time thanking God for this Church, and a faith that will help me stay in a positive frame of mind.

We must trust what Christ tells us through the scriptures. We have the Holy Spirit, our Bishops and Priests as guides to lead us until the return of Christ. We should not fear what the future might bring and trust that Christ will right all wrongs. When I first started my talk I said that our leaders had a bond of trust with the Black Robes, well that bond of trust still exists because we have the Bishop and His priests present, for this thank you Your Excellency. Now that I am nearing the end of my talk I just would like to say how important positive people can be in one's life. The priests and religious I have known who have helped me along. Deacon Roger Heidt who directs the Deaconate Program. The Priests and religious I presently work with. My Auntie Delores who has always encouraged me. I would like to thank Deacon Alfred (Buddy) and Frances Jetty. They have always had faith in me and have always encouraged me in so many positive ways. I believe that they have helped form the person I am today, and for that I will always be grateful. Thank you Deacon Bud and Frances. Love and admiration will always be in my heart for you.

May each of you here at this sacred place come to know the love of God in your hearts in such a way that it pushes you more and more in the direction of this wonderful faith we have. May God send abundant blessings upon each of you.

Mitakuye Oyas'in

All my relatives