

National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples, 2015: Reflection

Catholicism and Traditional Indigenous Spirituality – A Reflection on Commonalities

The following reflection by the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council identifies areas of commonality found in Traditional Aboriginal Spirituality and in the Catholic faith. The intention is to point out bridges for mutual understanding. These will hopefully lead to a deeper respect and appreciation among all Catholics for Traditional Indigenous Spirituality, and at the same time show how Aboriginal Catholics see a relationship between their Catholic faith and their cultural and personal identity.

Introduction

One can say with confidence that there is something to be gained by a focus and identification of aims shared between ourselves as Catholics and those of other religious practices. This is the way of tolerance and understanding; so how do we increase the areas of commonality? And what are the commonalities between Catholicism and Indigenous Spirituality? Sacred Heart Church in Edmonton is an example of integration through smudging and recognition of the four directions when celebrating the Mass. The church is widely recognized and revered by the Aboriginal people of Northern Alberta because of these practices. Although there are many First Nations, Metis and Inuit groups with varying spiritual traditions and protocols, it can be said that pre-Christian Indigenous and Catholic spiritual traditions hold the following in common: belief in a natural world that is good; belief in a benevolent Creator who has a helping team; belief that we can communicate with our Creator, and that the Creator will look with favor on our fasting and self-sacrifice and living a life of virtue and good character.

Belief in a Natural World that is Good

Anishnabe Elder and writer Basil Johnston shares an Anishnabe Creation story in which Kitche Manitou (the Great Spirit) has a vision. He sees a vast sky filled with stars, sun, moon, and earth. On the earth, he sees the mountains and valleys, lakes and islands, forests and plains. He sees the plant and animal worlds. He sets about bringing his vision to life in a way that contributes to the most beauty. In the biblical Creation story, God creates heaven and earth and all the plants and creatures over six days and, as in the case of the Anishnabe Creation story, he sees that it is good. The idea that God's Creation provides a beautiful universe is perhaps best demonstrated in the prayers of Saint Francis of Assisi which are included in the ***Catechism of the Catholic Church***: "May you be praised, O Lord, in all your creatures, especially brother sun, by whom you give us the light for the day, he is beautiful, radiating great splendor, and offering us a symbol of you, most high. . . ."

A Benevolent Creator

The words in the Mohawk thanksgiving address, "everything we need to live a good life is here on Mother Earth", inform us that our Creator has put all these things here on earth for us to survive, and the totality of Creation is where life comes from. Benevolence is demonstrated in all things, particularly in the case of Mother Earth and all her plant, animal and human children,

because these beings are all interdependent. Basil Johnston describes the relationship between humans and Mother Earth as follows: "Men and Women owe their lives and the quality of living and existence to Mother Earth. As dutiful and loving children, they are to honor Mother Earth . . . expressing this affection by rendering in song and dance the feeling of the heart." In the teachings of the Catholic tradition, we are informed that "God willed the diversity of his creatures and their own particular goodness, their interdependence and their order Respect for laws inscribed in creation and the relations which derive from the nature of things is a principle of wisdom and a foundation for morality." This approach is consistent with the teachings of Indigenous spirituality that inform us how the Earth and Sun set an example for all -- of generous giving, by sharing their gifts of warmth, light and sustenance, indiscriminately with everyone.

Creator has a team of helpers

An Anishnabe Elder from Key First Nation in Saskatchewan, in translating his prayers to English, describes Creator's helper and the Grandmothers and Grandfathers of the four directions and the Spirits beyond the earth. These spirit beings can be prevailed upon to mediate with Creator or to bring blessings from the Creator. Also, the spirits of the medicines -- including tobacco, fungus, sweetgrass, sage, cedar, and food at ceremonial feasts -- are part of the spiritual helping system. The Catholic tradition similarly includes a "team" approach: God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, assisted by our Blessed Virgin Mother, the angels, and the intercession of the saints. Incense and candlelight can loosely be likened to the Indigenous medicines in that they are symbolic of holiness and purity. The Eucharist is more than mere holy food as the Body of Christ, but it is also symbolic of holiness, in some ways not unlike the food prepared and served at ceremonial feasts.

Communication with Creator

In traditional Indigenous spirituality, efforts are made to speak to Creator through prayer, song, dance ritual and ceremony. Spiritual practices were extensive prior to European influence, judging by the number of ceremonial dances alone. Plains Cree dance ceremonies included the Tea Dance, the Prairie Chicken Dance, the Whitiko Dance, the Bear Dance, the Elk Dance and the Horse Dance. Katherine Pettipas, researcher and Curator of Native Ethnology at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, describes how the Cree would sponsor a Sun Dance that included fasting, with extended periods of prayer and dancing as a means of asking for Creator's intervention in healing a sick community member. The Catholic approach likewise includes communication with God the Father and Jesus, as well as with other heavenly persons, through prayer, fasting and other forms of self-deprivation, the singing of hymns and the use of musical instruments. Similar to Indigenous ceremonies that accompany rites of passage, sacramental prayer in the Catholic tradition is a means to enrich one's spiritual life and relationship with God.

Spirituality and Morality

A disciplined life based in large measure on spiritual principles is looked on with favor in both Catholic and Indigenous communities. Practice of Indigenous spirituality is synonymous with being a good person. One must live a life of good character so his or her human, plant and animal medicine has strength. A moral life where one develops sound character is arrived at through a lifestyle that includes ongoing ceremonial practices from childhood through to old age. Similarly, in Catholic teaching, one lives a moral life through an ongoing lifelong experience of a faith tradition in a loving relationship with God.

Summary

Admittedly, there are differences between the two spiritualities. For example, the pipe of peace and the sweat lodge ceremonies with spontaneous prayer are different prayer mediums than a Catholic celebration of the Mass comprised of fixed readings of Scripture and the liturgy. Even at the greatest points of difference, however, there is a similarity in that the celebrants of both spiritualities are committed to a relationship with the divine being who is honored for his gifts and kindnesses to the human world. The Mohawk prayer beseeches those praying to move to a place where we are as “one”, “For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greeting and thanks to the Creator.” Perhaps this thought can be applied to creating unity and increased harmony between the two great Catholic and Indigenous spiritual traditions.