

NATIVE DIACONATE - "WE HAD NO TEACHER – WE TAUGHT OURSELVES"

During a period of 8 years, they travelled over 150,000 kilometers to attend workshops that were 9 hours journey from home. They would arrive at Anderson Lake the second Friday of each month in a second-hand car, usually a former police vehicle obtained at an auction, or sometimes in a pickup, or one of their son's cars. They travelled at their own expense, always bringing something for the Theology weekend. Ron and Sheila Boyer from Kahnawake would join Peter Manitowabi and Joe Fox, the alcohol and drug addiction counsellors and family therapists from Manitoulin, who have been engaged in a 10-year cribbage tournament, between sessions. Peter claims to be ahead.

Peter Johnson, the band administrator from Cutler sometimes joins them. Millie Johnson, as in Peter and Millie, arrives with all her notebooks, questions, and suggested readings. Margaret Toulouse, a young veteran mother, health care worker, Native Spirituality teacher and now a University student speeds in almost on time for the opening gathering. Jean McGregor-Andrews, an education counsellor, and president of the Diocesan Native Sector smiles her way into the group, almost never quite on time. Dennis Wawia, sombre, serious, and witty, a nickel miner on disability, and coordinator of Native Ministries in Sudbury is always the first to arrive and make sure that the fire is kept up. Dominic Eshkakogan, a parish administrator, herbalist and healer is on staff at the Anishinabe Centre and so is the unofficial and shamelessly officious dean of the group.

These, and occasionally others, are the deacons, diocesan order of women members or ministry people who have been gathering for almost 10 years to explore theological questions that relate to their ministry, and to the spiritual questions of native ways.

"We had no teacher, we taught ourselves", according to Ron Boyer. **"We discovered that the Spirit was present in the various members of the group and speaking through them."** This was said as a tribute to a fine teacher, and to the process that was used. Carl Starkloff, S.J., of the Toronto School of Theology has been accompanying this group for 10 years since the very first days of the Anishinabe Centre at Anderson Lake near Espanola, Ontario.

This group recently came together to talk about their experience in Native ministry and wonder about encouraging others to follow in their footsteps. There were no romantic answers. All had experienced isolation, non-acceptance, fear, community resistance, a difficulty in balancing work and ministry, and an undefined role with **"no funds and all fringe benefits."** The most obvious and most serious challenge was that of finding their own way, in the diocesan and local Catholic Church. **"This ministry is unique in that it brings native tradition and catholic tradition together"** says Margaret Toulouse. She speaks about a native way of reading scripture. **"When I look at things from my native perspective, from the perspective of the Medicine wheel, I feel so good reading about the eagle, the mountains, the rocks, the teachings in Scripture."**

The business of Native ministry is clearly identified as coming to terms with **"who we are"** and carrying on. On the one hand there are those who are so strong in saying that you cannot combine both Christianity and native spirituality. **"It hurts when people expect us to turn our backs on one tradition or the other."** And these pressures come as much from within the church as from the native traditional teachers. Not one of these native ministers and theologians has been exempted from experiencing that dark night of the soul, where there are no teachers, and where the Spirit is awaited in painful and redeeming solitude at the crossroads of two cultures. The refreshing newness of these committed people is that they veritably are not taught by any one guide. They are finding their own way.

"We have an old spirituality which can bring us back and bring you (non-natives) back as well." This is Martin Assinewe's reminder as he urges his classmates to return to the earth, back to the fundamentals. There is nothing romantic in Dominic Eshkakogan's statement about needing **"to continue on our path to develop our native spirituality and then bring Christianity into it, trusting Jesus' precept that he came to fulfil, and not to destroy."** Pope John Paul, at Midland and Fort Simpson made it clear that the native ways need to enrich Christianity. An equally relevant question might be whether the native ways can welcome Christianity and survive. There are medicine wars that still bring fear and have prompted some to turn away from their culture. There are others who see that native spirituality needs the same tools of discernment that are required in Christianity. **"Sometimes two plants may look very similar,"** says Dominic Eshkakogan, **"but have very different effects. One may heal, while the other is**

sure to bring poison ivy." One mushroom is a delicacy and the other is poison. There is good and bad medicine. Others see Jesus is the most powerful of medicine people. **"Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him" (Mark 4:41).** Jesus is also one of the grandfathers in the sweat lodge who takes on ail that is broken in body, mind, heart, and spirit. He is the healer, as well, in the cedar Tree of Life of Blake Debassige's painting. There is considerable pain in simply finding a place in the church, a place for couples, a place for native people who have some teachings to bring, a place for this new ministry in the church. Among these deacons and ministers, a power and an eloquence, have surfaced as they have been searching for their own way at the urging of the Spirit and with the respectful accompaniment of their learner-guide theologian.

"We know that we are called by the Spirit" says Ron Boyer, we want to say **"Did I say that?"**

Sheila Boyer adds that they have come to know in faith that **"when we pray for another family, our family will also become blessed."** They are finding their way, they are blessings in the Church.