

## **Corn Dance of the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo: A Meditation on Baptism and the New Creation**

*Tekakwitha Conference 2013, El Paso, Tx*

I would like to take this moment to thank the planning committee for this year's conference for asking me to be one of the keynote speakers. I am honored to be here and consider it to be a wonderful opportunity to reflect together on our heritage and faith journeys. I come here this morning as an ethnic "outsider," or as one who does not belong to any of the First Nation communities. Even though I originally come from Michigan, I am acutely aware that I was born on that peninsula once inhabited by the Fox, Ojibwe and Patawotomie nations and where epic poems of Lake Superior, like Henry Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, were written for posterity's sake.

However, I also come this morning as a religious "insider," that is to say, as one who shares a common faith in Jesus Christ and vision of what it means to be *in the world* in order to transform it. It is certainly a privilege to be at this conference, for it is a reminder to all of us that the ministry with the Native American peoples is the oldest Catholic ministry on the North American continent. Within this ministry emerged holy people from the aboriginal communities. This is the first time our conference is celebrated with our new canonized member: Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, commonly called the "Lily of the Mohawks" or the "Mystic of the Wilderness."<sup>1</sup> On this occasion we might ask, what is a saint today? A "saint" is a person who radically lived the Gospel in his or

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<sup>1</sup> "Kateri Tekakwitha" accessed at <http://www.kateritekakwitha.org/kateri/> . For the Tekakwitha Oral Project at Marquette University: <http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/Mss/KTP/KTP-main.shtml> . For republication on "The Legacy of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha" see [http://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1033&context=lib\\_fac](http://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1033&context=lib_fac) .

her particular time and place and serves as an inspiration for others. Her canonization continues to stimulate the ongoing discussion among many communities whether one can be Native American and Christian at the same time. Saint Kateri, with her sense of dedication and life of prayer, is a model for all of us who live in the “wilderness of the modern city.” We pray in a special way for her intercession during this conference.

This conference is taking place during a special time and confluence of important events. As we know, it is the Year of Faith, proclaimed by Benedict XVI, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Only a few weeks ago, Pope Francis published his first encyclical *Lumen Fidei, Light of Faith*, a document that complements the previous encyclicals of Benedict on the virtues of charity and hope.<sup>2</sup> In view of this encyclical, we can say that the Year of Faith is truly the Year of Light. It is my hope that our common faith can be a light on our gathering today and mission for tomorrow as we struggle with the big questions and emerging new insights.

We begin by asking why are we here today? What lights are you looking for at this conference? What questions do you bring to which you are seeking answers? What do you hope to take away from this gathering? After a moment of silence, share with the person next to you.

In his encyclical, Pope Francis describes faith as a kind of light or star. *It is the light of faith that I would now like to consider, so that it can grow and enlighten the present, becoming a star to brighten the horizon of our journey at a time when*

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<sup>2</sup> See encyclical at <http://goo.gl/LK32D> (vatican.va). For a blog-podcast on the encyclical, <http://goo.gl/VUZwj>.

*[humanity] is particularly in need of light* (*Lumen Fidei*, 4). Lights of wisdom find manifestation in many ways. Stories contain heart-knowledge, like rays of light, that guide the foot steps of future generations. We tell stories in song, movement and dance, art, symbols, and writing. Due to their transformative powers, these are ways of keeping the spirit and a wisdom message alive. For example, the Eucharist is a story of a “light-filled” individual (*Lumen Fidei*, 30), whose luminosity and memory the disciples wanted to keep burning.

We are surrounded with stories of one kind or another. This green stole I received years ago when I was working in the Diocese of Chulucanas in northern Peru tells a story. It was made by a woman weaver, a *campesina*, and given to me as a gift. I am reminded of the harsh life and struggle of a people in the Peruvian highlands and coastal desert regions. When I wear this stole at Eucharist, I am united with those people in spirit and in faith as we mission together toward a better world of harmony. The different color threads in this rich fabric come together as a beautiful unity. St. Augustine once wrote in his *Confessions* (11,30,40) that our life is an attempt to gather the strands of existence into one unified whole. Behind this stole is a story and a meditation, which brings us to the present topic.

My hope for this talk is that it is a theological meditation on a cultural expression and its meaning for Christian living today. It is *theological* in the sense that it explores a particular context—the Native American—with sacramental categories like baptism. The purpose is to obtain a deeper understanding of God in the world. It is a *meditation* in the sense that the outcome of this exploration is to *lift up our hearts* to the Creator God and

to find the courage to collaborate with the Great Spirit in making the world a *new creation*. This paper will look at three themes:

1. The story of the Corn Dance of the Ysleta Pueblo
2. The story of the sacrament of Baptism as commitment
3. The story of the New Creation as prophetic voice

### **1. The Narrative: Ancient and New**

Why did I choose the title “Corn Dance of the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo: A Meditation on Baptism and the New Creation”? The Vatican II document *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* clearly states that it *rejects nothing of what is true and holy . . . it recognizes that they often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.*<sup>3</sup> The seeds of the Gospel can be found in all cultures and religious traditions. Therefore, it seems appropriate at the Tekakwitha conference to reflect on cultural customs and their link to the Christian faith. We can ask, How does a custom illumine faith, and vice versa? In the background is the question I already mentioned concerning the canonization of “the Mystic of the Wilderness,” St Kateri: Can one be Native American and Christian at the same time? If so, what difference does it make in the 21st century?

I have chosen the Corn Dance of the Ysleta Pueblo as a theme because it is one that I am most familiar. The dance is a communal prayer to the Creator God for rain and

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<sup>3</sup> *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), Vatican Council II, 28 October 1965, no. 2.

abundant harvest. To pray for rain on the crops is like asking for a baptism over the earth.<sup>4</sup>

Another reason why I have chosen this title because it tells a story, a narrative. It is a story of the connection between the Corn Dance and the rhythms of the seasons; all of life is connected and interrelated. Water is a necessity for life in the desert; without water, there is death. Rain is life. Is the narrative of the Corn Dance a kind of prophetic voice that challenges Christians to rethink their connections with the Earth and environment as Mother? Here is the challenge of the Corn Dance (and other Native rituals): to awaken those who follow the message of Jesus to take transformation seriously and to understand what it means to be a “new creation”. Without change, we enter a spiritual desert. For this reason, we must retell the stories – from our ancestors and from the Church’s rich tradition, of the divine *Beauty, ever ancient, ever new* to future generations.

Jesus of Nazareth was a great storyteller. Inquisitively, he asked his disciples about the stories people were spreading about him. *Who do people say that I am?* (Mt. 16:13-16). Some of the Gospel stories suggested that Jesus was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. *But who do you say that I am?* In other words, what story do you have about me? What will you tell others about me? Will I make a difference in the lives of people in the Seventh generation? This is the enduring question: *Who do you say that I am?* Men and women, young and old, all must confront

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<sup>4</sup> For studies on Tigua religion and spirituality, see **Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Archives** – Volume 5. Book Publishers of El Paso, 2003, 390-415. See also Volume 1, 46-49. Note: the Tigua name for Ysleta is *Tchiawipia* (p. 46). Bill Wright, *The Tiguas: Pueblo Indians of Texas*. UTEP, Texas Western Press, 1993, 99-133. Marquette University carries archives on Native American history and Catholicism.

this question from their particular time and cultural context. This is the question of identity and transformation, of belonging to the tribe and to THE tribe, called the Church.

Every year on the feast of San Antonio, the Corn Dance is celebrated at the Ysleta Mission in El Paso. Weeks of preparation precede this great event. The participants practice the dance, review the Catholic teachings of the Catechism, and participate in the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist. To participate in the dance there is the expectation that one practices his or her faith. The ceremony begins with the Eucharist, followed by a single-file procession and song around the Church with the patronal image of San Antonio. Before the actual dance, a long period of purification and cleansing from one's sins takes place at the entrance of the Church. Men and women are brushed with branches, symbolic of the cleansing.

The act of the Corn Dance begins. Intermittent shots from rifles are heard around the plaza in front of the Church. A large circle of men and women forms in the plaza. Women move in artistic rhythm with arrows wrapped in corn leaves, symbolizing the petition for rain upon the crops and an abundant harvest. In dance, corn seed is planted and men shake rattles to symbolize the rain falling on the soil. The entire dance is a prayer to the Creator God for blessing upon the land.

The Corn Dance is a great prayer of petition that requires much discipline. In mid-June, the time in which the feast of San Antonio is celebrated, the morning temperatures can soar to the triple digits. The dance in such dangerous heat is an expression of perseverance, faith, and hope, as well as one of determination and

challenge. After the dance the whole community, including visitors, share in a communal meal.

Some theological themes can be identified within the traditional Corn Dance of the Ysleta pueblo's celebration of the feast of San Antonio. The first thread is the community's recognition of its dependence on God for the necessity of rain and water on the corn crops. Without rain, there is no life. The symbol of the waters of baptism is evoked in the dance. Without baptism, there is no life. In this sacrament, God promises and gives life. Baptism is future-oriented because God promises an answer to the prayer that the baptized will fulfill her or his role in the community.

The second theological theme is the theme of being a "new creation." Rain in the desert transforms the landscape, bringing new forms of life. Seed that have laid dormant for years begin to sprout. Grasses and flowers spring up, ponds are created where frog sing and birds bathe. The nopal gives its red fruit, the Creosote bush perfumes the air. One is reminded that baptism does not exist for itself; it is meant to be shared, to create, to rebuild, and to transform. A new future is linked to the sacrament of baptism. Change, or *metanoia*, is integral to this new reality. The new creation is founded on the reality that all people are created in the image of God -- an understanding dear to St. Kateri -- and that all are recreated in the image of Jesus Christ. His teaching is one of love and compassion, pouring oneself out for the other, like pouring wine out from a cup. The Corn Dance is a story, a collective memory, that is told to every generation. The story is a vital expression of a cosmic baptism by a Creator God pouring out love as rain so there may be a "new creation" and abundant harvest for all to share in.

### 3. The Story of Baptism

Is there a link between the petitionary prayer of the Corn Dance and the sacrament of baptism? Some ideas emerge for meditation. The first idea is that of identity. The Corn Dance defines the people of the tribe; it establishes a foundation for self-understanding, an identity, and a mission. The people of the Ysleta del Sur pueblo are a people of the corn, a people of Catholic Christian faith and of community. The Corn Dance is for the wellbeing and flourishing of the entire community. Similarly, the sacrament of baptism is the foundation and identity of a people whose faith is in the person of Jesus Christ. Baptism does not exist for itself, rather it has a mission character to spread the message of love and compassion. Both the Corn Dance and sacramental baptism are commentaries on foundations, identity, and mission orientation.

#### *Sacraments and sacramentals*

How is it possible to make this link between traditional dances and the sacraments of the Church? The link is possible because of our understanding of sacraments and sacramentals. There is a belief that common, ordinary things can reveal characteristics of God, the *Ever Ancient, Ever New*. Bread and wine are used in Eucharist. Olive oil is used for ordination to Holy Orders and anointing of the sick. A ring and the pronouncement of ordinary words -- "I do" -- are characteristic of the sacrament of matrimony. Water, the basic element for life, is used in baptism. Nature and the entire cosmos reflect God and were called the "first Bible" by St. Thomas Aquinas. The technical term for how ordinary elements reflect God is called the "analogical



imagination.” With it we are able to compare one reality with another, such as candles and incense to the light of Christ and the upward movement of prayer to the divine.

However, the Catholic imagination concerning baptism as the foundation of our identity continues to expand and take on new meaning in new contexts. Modern times have challenged believers to take another look at what it means to be a Catholic Christian in the Twenty-first century. Faith, in its expression, always requires an ongoing reinterpretation according to the times, otherwise it will lose its effectiveness as a credible witness and a change-agent in a world that yearns for peace and justice.

### *Traditional understanding of baptism*

Traditionally, the sacrament of baptism has had a precise definition and purpose. In popular imagination, baptism was to wipe away Original Sin, to give grace, and if the infant were to have an unfortunate death, it will be saved and be in heaven with God and the angels. The idea that an unbaptized infant would go to limbo was a belief that frightened many parents and therefore the urgency for baptism. As we may know, limbo is no longer part of the Catholic vocabulary. Limbo was a miscalculated theological reflection and was never adopted as official doctrinal teaching by the Church. As we see, it is important to evaluate what we believe.

### *Original Sin*

Another aspect that is problematic is the traditional interpretation of Original Sin. How does one explain this doctrine when the Church accepts and takes seriously the

cosmic and biological realities of evolution? Original Sin, which is different from actual sin, but transmitted through propagation and not by imitation, is taught as the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve taking the forbidden fruit. If Adam and Eve never walked the planet, how do we interpret the doctrine of Original Sin that continues to be the driving force for baptism? A new understanding and telling of the mythic story of Adam and Eve and Original Sin are needed if the sacrament of baptism is going to have any relevance for the contemporary believer who happens to take science and technology seriously. Theologians are struggling with this task now.

The Second Vatican Council was convoked so that the Church, by returning to the sources and maintaining an openness to the signs of the times, can make the adjustment to the changes in a modern, technological, and globalized society. One of the adjustments involved the understanding of the sacrament of baptism as a foundational sacrament. If the notion of a sacrament is an intense encounter with Christ, then baptism is an introduction to that encounter upon which the other sacraments are understood and lived. Such an encounter evokes mission.

### *Jesus' mystical experience in the Jordan*

We find this understanding of encounter and mission in the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. When Jesus had been baptized and was in deep prayer, *heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"* (Lk. 3:21-22). Jesus' baptism was a spiritual encounter with his Father; this

sacred moment was one of being loved by the Other. In short, Jesus had a profound mystical, religious experience in the river. The experience of being loved penetrated to the core of his being. Yet, the experience did not end there.

The intensity of the religious experience moved Jesus beyond the cool river banks to the dusty roads of mission and the proclamation of the reign of God. After baptism and time in the desert of deep prayer, Jesus goes into the synagogue where he defines his mission and ministry in Galilee. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord* (Lk. 4. 18-19). Baptism catapulted Jesus into a ministry of compassion to bring those on the margins and in isolation back into the fold of community. His mission was a ministry of love.

### *Baptism as a commitment to love*

Herein lies a new interpretation, or a manner of saying what is ancient in a new way that is understandable to modern consciousness. That baptism is, foremost, a commitment to love. Baptism is the first step toward living the great commandment: to love God and neighbor as oneself. This sacrament is the initiation into the community that holds the principle of love as the defining characteristic of why it exists. Baptism says yes to the invitation to be a follower of Jesus and to put his teaching into practice. All the other sacraments are based on this yes to live the great command to love.

### *Original Sin reinterpreted*

Then where does the doctrine of Original Sin fit in? The doctrine makes sense if it is reinterpreted and connected to the baptismal commitment to love. Original Sin can be seen as the brokenness within humanity. One can say human beings are “cracked pots” in need of healing and of being put back together again. It is the experience of fragmentation and the struggle to create a kind of unity and meaning with our lives. There is a fundamental desire and restless to bring the strands of our existence together into some sort of unified whole. This is Original Sin: the experience of our broken, unhealed, humanity and the effects of that brokenness on future generations.

The Australian theologian Neil Ormerod offers perspectives on how we can understand Original Sin in a modern, 21st century worldview.<sup>5</sup> One perspective is the universality of actual sin; it is a brute fact. The question is open as to how we distinguish between Original Sin and actual sin. Another viewpoint, taken from the German theologian Karl Rahner, portrays Original Sin as an existential, permanent element of the human condition. Sin has an impact on the history of human consciousness. At the same time, Rahner claims that humans have a fundamental sense, called the *supernatural existential*, that orients the person dynamically to God. Finally, there is the perspective where the impact of the history of sinfulness and violence on human consciousness through categories of psychology, for example, the feelings of guilt, low self-esteem, and feelings of victimization. It is interesting that the expression “the Satan” means “the Accuser.” This expression is used in the book of Job. We have the tendency *to accuse ourselves* of not being worthy, that we cannot be better, and that all is

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<sup>5</sup> Neil Ormerod, **Creation, Grace, and Redemption**. Orbis, 2007, 68-89.

hopeless. We listen to the tape recordings in our minds that tell us we simply are not good enough. In reality, the core of Original Sin and its meaning is the *universal victimhood of humanity*. We are all victims of another's sin.

(Tell the Story of Santo Domingo: child, fear of the dark, light of Christ).

Baptism, then, "washes away Original Sin" by removing the conviction of the "Accuser" that one is worthless and replacing it with "You are loved; you are special in my eyes." One does not live in darkness, but in the light of faith. This sacrament, understood very well by St. Kateri, must create a religious space in which one has an experience of being loved by the community and thereby live the commandment to love others. Yes, we are victims of another's historical sin or a people's hostility; we are products of our past, but we are not prisoners of it. Being freed from the clutches of guilt and low self-esteem, we can now speak about another operative sacramental reality: Original Grace.

#### *Original Grace: gift of Jesus Christ*

Original Grace emphasizes more the gift of Jesus' presence over the guilt inherited by the sin of Adam and Eve. There is a tendency within humanity to flourish, to become more than what it is, to transcend its limitations and to reach out to ultimate possibilities. This propensity is what is called spirituality; it is "Christian" when the Gospel is its foundation. Original Grace, therefore, is the intensity of the presence of Christ in space and time to move humanity and all that exists toward becoming a "new Creation." Original Grace is the energy of the Holy Spirit that is always present and in

which “we live, move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Original Grace propels humanity toward mission, toward becoming that new human presence in an anticipated “new Creation” that begins now.

#### **4. The story of the new Creation**

Baptism involves mission and the enhancement of community in all its dimensions; the sacrament does not exist for itself or for private salvation. The commandment to love must be a construction of the civilization of love. Baptism opens the way to becoming a change-agent in the world.

What can a Native American, baptized Catholic Christian community do to be a change-agent in contemporary society? One, among many areas of possibility, is what the Corn Dance of the Ysleta Pueblo symbolizes: a greater respect for the Earth and all nonhuman life forms as well as natural resources. As we know, the planet’s capacity to maintain life at a stable level is being exhausted by human activity. Human beings are becoming schizophrenic where it loves the world in all its splendor, and on the other hand, hates it. Ecosystems are being destroyed and thousands of diverse species are disappearing every month. We can obtain some inspiration if we reread Pope John Paul II’s message for New Year’s Day 1990 entitled *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*. The Pope addresses the situation of widespread destruction of the environment. He states that respect for life must include all that which supports and gives birth to life, namely the planet.

It is at this crucial point of caring for “God’s beloved creation” where we need to hear the prophetic voice of the Native American communities. Scholars of all different

traditions have also contributed to how we can link the baptismal call of the command to love to include the Earth. Three responses can be given: *the contemplative, ascetic, and prophetic*.<sup>6</sup>

*The contemplative response* “gazes on the world with eyes of love rather than with an arrogant, utilitarian stare.” It learns to wonder and stand in awe at beauty in all its splendor. The contemplative dimension includes and values silence to see and not merely look. One begins to see that all is gift from the Creator, rather than a source for profit and plunder. The world is a sacrament and everything in it is a window to God. Earthly things like bread, wine, water, oil, fire and the embodied sexual relationship of marriage can be carriers of grace. The Earth is *charged with the grandeur of God*, says the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. The project that lies before us is how do we recognize earthly wonder in our liturgies, prayers and meditations? Do we see the world as God sees it?

*The ascetic response* practices discipline in using the material things of the Earth in harmony with things of the spirit. The purpose of asceticism has always been to help people recognize and remove blockages in the channels of God’s grace. Traditional practices have been questioned these days because of an affinity with a dualistic worldview. Spirit is prized over things of matter. Salvation is interpreted as a flight from the world and the body, to use Plato’s words, is a “rag that we carry around.” In this perspective, matter, the body, sexuality, and feelings are dismissed for things spiritual.

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “God’s Beloved Creation” in *America*, April 16, 2001. Accessed online at [www.americanmagazine.org](http://www.americanmagazine.org).

Another way of viewing God's creation is to embrace a spirituality of the Incarnation that reflects new ways of embracing the traditional practices of asceticism. Practices such as fasting, retreats, silence, and almsgiving can take on new meaning when we fast from shopping at the malls, teach young people the art of gardening, promote the inconvenience of a green household. We do these things not because we enjoy suffering, but because of a new understanding of our relationship with the Earth's resources. We tend to become enslaved to a consumerist economy and false advertising that lead to a confusion between needs and wants. A simple life style that appreciates an Earth sensitive view and a healthy balance between matter and the spirit can be provocative as well as countercultural. As the theologian Elizabeth Johnson says, an Earth-affirming spirituality *enables us to live more simply, with greater reverence for the earth and its creatures, out of religious conviction.*

*The prophetic response* moves us "on behalf of justice for the Earth." If it is true that the Earth is God's creation, the divine *grandeur* that Hopkins speaks of, and that God *saw that it was good*, then for Christians the ongoing destruction of the environment and careless squandering of resources is a reflection of the consequences of Original Sin and of actual sin. To care and to protect the environment and all nonhuman life forms is an additional moral imperative. The operative criterion is no longer centered on the human situation, but on how human decisions, as individuals and as communities, affect the global environment and its interdependent relationships. How will the decisions we make today affect the children of our grandchildren? It is here where the voice of the Native American communities must be heard.



## Conclusion

We are witnessing a time of a dramatic paradigm shift on many levels, from a human-centered universe to a global, multidimensional, community-centered reality called the Anthropocene Era that has enormous implications on the future of the planet.<sup>7</sup> The Corn Dance of the Ysleta Pueblo is a prophetic challenge and critique to all of us on our awareness of an interdependent relatedness with all of existence because God is Creator Spirit. Our baptism urges us to live the command to love, to love the poor and to love the Earth, our neighbor and our Mother. The command *Do not kill* envelopes all of existence. Let us return to our communities and retell the stories of creation in our songs and dances. They are a carrier of wisdom we need to hear today and down to the Seventh Generation. In that way, we embrace our baptism and become a “new creation,” for we have struggled with the perennial question: *Who do you say that I am?*

Robert Dueweke, OSA

Director of the Tepeyac Institute, El Paso, TX

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<sup>7</sup> Peter G. Brown, *Ethics for Economics in the Anthropocene*. Teilhard Studies #65, Fall 2012.