



In Joy and Hope

by

Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy

Go west, young man

The familiar saying of Horace Greeley is part of our heritage. Countless people responded to this challenge over the years, and they continue to do so today. I didn't realize that I would receive the same injunction over fourteen years ago when I was asked to serve as bishop of the Diocese of Great Falls, Montana. For someone born and raised in Chicago, Montana was a land far away that often served as a background for adventure movies of the Old West.

However, as I reflect on what took place in my life years ago in being asked to serve in Montana, I consider it a grace and a blessing. The experiences I had in Montana, as well as the experiences I continue to have here in Western Washington, have given me an appreciation of new realities which I would never have had if I lived my entire life in Chicago.

I learned to appreciate the value of the rural community, and the wonderful vitality present in small towns. I gained a whole new insight into the commitment of lay people to share their gifts in their parish communities through incredible volunteer efforts. Eastern Montana provided me with a unique gift of appreciating a land and a people.

The gift of Native Americans

However, there is one unique gift that became part of my life as a result of serving the Church of Eastern Montana. I became aware of the presence and giftedness of the Native American community. Within the Church of Eastern Montana, there are five reservations, in addition to the presence of many Native Americans in the urban areas of the diocese.

Eastern Montana became a live textbook for me to understand a history of a people whose roots go back long before we thought Columbus "discovered" America. I became an avid student of the historical events which led to the expansion of the United States across the Great Plains to the Pacific Ocean, and the struggles and challenges of the Native American people. It is a unique part of our history as a nation which deserves study and reflection.

Spiritual gifts and insights

There is no doubt that we could well have a romantic idea about the Old West and Native American people. However, one of the benefits which came to me as a result of serving in Eastern Montana was the spiritual gifts and insights that are part of Native American life. We could learn much from the Native American appreciation and respect for life - our own human life as well as the life of our land and environment. Native American people gave me a new insight into the meaning of "sacred" time and space. In so many instances, I was asked to put on a new "lens" through which I could have a different perspective to much which I took for granted.

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There is no doubt that challenges have developed as a result of different cultures coming in contact with each other, with the resulting conflicts and divisions. However, as we live out the present moment in our country with the influx of so many new cultures and people coming to our land and enriching us with their presence, there is the ongoing struggle to preserve values and traditions. This could well be a time as well when we assist Native American people to preserve their culture and traditions.

The Quincentennial - A graced time

As celebrations take place this coming week to mark the Quincentennial of Columbus coming to America, it could well be a graced time for us to discover the gift that was present here long before Columbus set foot on this continent: the gift of Native American people. In taking time to become aware of Native American people and their history, we are able to learn much about the spirit of a people who have a rich history and an innate spirituality which can enrich all of us. I know I have benefitted from this experience and I continue to do so today. May God's grace and peace be yours.