



The Oblate Mission among Indigenous Peoples

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Who are indigenous peoples?

It is estimated that there are more than 370 million indigenous people spread across 70 countries worldwide. Practicing unique traditions, they retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. Spread across the world from the Arctic to the South Pacific, they are the descendants - according to a common definition - of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived. The new arrivals later became dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement or other means.

Among the indigenous peoples are those of the Americas (for example, the Lakota in the USA, the Mayas in Guatemala or the Aymaras in Bolivia), the Inuit and Aleutians of the circumpolar region, the Saami of northern Europe, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia and the Maori of New Zealand. These and most other indigenous peoples have retained distinct characteristics which are clearly different from those of other segments of the national populations.

Understanding the term “indigenous”

Considering the diversity of indigenous peoples, an

official definition of “indigenous” has not been adopted by any UN-system body. Instead the system has developed a modern understanding of this term based on the following:

- **Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.
- **Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies
- **Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources
- **Distinct social, economic or political systems
- **Distinct language, culture and beliefs
- **Form non-dominant groups of society
- **Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.

A question of identity

According to the UN, the most fruitful approach is to identify, rather than define indigenous peoples. This is based on the fundamental criterion of self-identification as underlined in a number of human rights documents.

Indigenous People: A People with a Past, a History and Culture They will never die...Conquered: maybe!...Forgotten...never!

Oswald FIRTH, OMI
First Assistant General

To the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, living and working with indigenous people is akin to second nature. From their very inception they have been close to the ‘Inuk’, the indigenous inhabitants of the North Pole. There is many an idyllic story being told of the travels and travails of the Oblates among these indigenous “Inuits”, meaning ‘people’. They accustomed themselves not only to the Arctic Climate, but also to the eating habits of the Eskimos who often lived a wandering life in search of seal, salmon and caribou.

Then there were the ‘First-Nation People,’ the Amerindians among whom the Oblates worked, providing them with education, health and other humanitarian assistance. Perhaps, the violation of their fundamental rights, particularly the right to their land, resources, culture and their human persons never figured prominently in the minds of the colonizers of these people as it does today in a post colonial era. That these aberrations are being brought to light and consciousness raised among nations through the United Nations Second Decade dedicated to the

rights of indigenous people is a matter that should receive the widest publicity.

In more recent times, Oblates have been in the forefront in the struggle of the indigenous people of Bangladesh to overcome ostracism and regain their land rights. Working outside of the din of media fanfare, where indigenous people and their cultural practices have become museum exhibits or tourist attractions, the Oblates have helped the beetle growing Khashias and the farming Garos, and now the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to gain recognition at the United Nations. Their representatives today are carrying their cause to the UN Economic and Social Council with compelling evidence, resili-

ence and inner courage of their right to land, cultural values, language, resources and life itself.

Whether we are speaking of the Campesinos of Bolivia, or the Chiapas and Zapatistas of Mexico, or the Mochicas of Peru, or even the Guaranis of Brazil who suffered under colonial exploitation, humanity needs to realize that it is these people of the land who have safeguarded the environment and cared for and cultivated the most precious elements of nature – namely: earth, air, fire and water – so much needed for our life. In modern man's frenzied attempt to fight pollution, we tend to forget that the secret of life for centuries was preserved by indigenous people as the following lines remind us, not without a sense of irony:

*Everything on Earth has a purpose
Every disease has an herb to cure it
And every person has a mission
This is the Indian theory of existence
(Sahish)*

The Oblate Mission with the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America

Loudeger MAZILE, OMI
General Councilor for Latin America

The indigenous peoples are as many and as varied as the countries in Latin America where they are the original inhabitants. There is but one word to describe their condition: misery. The indigenous nations are considered second-class citizens in their own homeland – what a contradiction! This is the reality, at present, of the indigenous nations in Latin America. They, with the Afro-Americans, are the visible faces of poverty in the continent. This poverty is a product of more than five hundred years of exploitation, discrimination and exclusion on all levels.

The “re-awakening” of the indigenous masses is symbolized by the take over of political power in Ecuador and Bolivia by indigenous candidates. This is the culmination of a slow and long process of formation and “conscientization” in which the Oblates have played a part. In various countries of Latin America, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate have continued to help the indigenous peoples,

particularly in evangelization that restores their dignity, respects their cultures and traditions, and in organizing the indigenous masses in various groups and associations to defend their basic human rights.

In Paraguay, the first “land fall” in Latin America, the Oblates have helped the indigenous people educate themselves in their own tongue. They transcribed their native language in an orthography that is still in use today in the country.

In Bolivia, the OMI mission with the indigenous people consists in formation and conscientization. They also help in the establishment of associations and unions that will assist the masses in defending their human rights. This work is especially facilitated by a community-based radio network that through the years has given a voice to the poor “campesinos” and workers in the mines.

In Peru, amid persecution and massacre of the in-

indigenous people by the rebels and the regular army, in the far flung zones of the country, the Oblates have taken their side to help them defend themselves and to denounce abuses against the victims. This help is also extended to the people who have sought refuge in the city. The Oblates have helped in placing a mantle of protection to sustain the indigenous people in a hostile and alien environment.

In Mexico, the Oblates offer to the indigenous people opportunities to educate themselves and to have access to basic health services. Through a solidarity campaign led by more enlightened members of the community, they are able to construct schools and clinics that give free access to health services with the help of medical volunteers who are friends of the Oblates.

Whether in Paraguay, in Bolivia, in Peru or in Mexico, the OMI missions with the indigenous peoples are many and varied. Evangelization is always accompanied by self-organization towards education and conscientization of the masses – both respecting their cultures and traditions and defending their basic human rights.

Today, the Oblates can be proud of the fruit of their labor. Together with other missionaries and with the indigenous peoples of Latin America, they affirm gradually and unequivocally the struggle of the indigenous peoples in reclaiming their rights on all levels, especially in the political sphere. No doubt, this political and social “re-awakening” is the prelude to the disappearance of misery in Latin America.

On Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines

Federico LABAGLAY, OMI
General Councilor for Asia-Oceania

“Endangered species” can be a tragic yet perhaps an apt description of so many “Indigenous Peoples” in the world today. Being endangered and struggling for survival mark their predicament. Such is the case, for example, of the many cultural communities in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao (where many of the Oblates who belong to the Philippine province are currently working). Ironically, these indigenous peoples are defenseless and are gravely facing extinction in their very own home environment. Among the many critical issues that they currently face are the following: being dispossessed of their ancestral domain thus being also consigned to abject poverty, being victimized and dehumanized by dominant groups (being plagued by new forms of colonization or neocolonialism), being estranged from the wellspring of their own culture (cultural disintegration) due to progress and development which do not only wreak havoc to their environment but do not also respect their indigenous way of life, and so forth.

Indeed, the Indigenous Peoples or IPs can be considered as among the poorest of the poor. This is one of the reasons why the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, inspired and impelled by the

charism of St. Eugene de Mazenod, have deliberately chosen to journey and do ministry with them. Ministry to the Indigenous People or *Lumad* (this is the generic name given to all the IPs in Mindanao) is now one of the key apostolic involvements of the OMIs in the Philippines. In varying times and circumstances, Oblates in the Philippines have journeyed with the different indigenous tribes in Mindanao—with the *Dulangan Manobos* in Sultan Kudarat, the *Tedurays* of Maguindanao, the *Arumanen Manobos* of Cotabato province, the *Badjaos* and *Mapuns* of Sulu and Tawi-tawi, just to cite a few examples. In reaching out, many Oblates have experienced the pains of these dispossessed ones. In an effort to accompany them in their journey, many Oblates have experienced putting their lives and limbs on the line. And in the struggle to be solidarity with these poorest of the poor, many Oblates have also vicariously tasted the deadly pangs of marginalization.

Current mission studies have coined certain terminologies in order for missionaries to effectively minister to these peoples. Words like *liminality*, *convivence* (missionary presence as being *with* or living with the poor rather than doing *for* them),

mission-in-reverse (learning from the poor rather than teaching or doing something for them), among others are now becoming a part of the missionary parlance. There are other hosts of mission concepts which are worth exploring about. This is not to make the missionary over and above others in a ministerial milieu. This is meant rather to make the minister discover a more sound praxis in ministry with the disenfranchised peoples so that one's missionary presence and journey with them would indeed be liberative and life-giving rather than domineering and death-dealing (it can be recalled, for example, that there were instances in the past in which missionaries had but become unwitting instruments of colonial designs and domination).

There is a call and challenge then nowadays for a boundary-breaking ministry to the IPs at the margins (for indeed many IPs are now precariously situated at the margins). Paradoxically, in spite of their

poverty, there are so many valuable gifts that the IPs can offer—especially to those who would dare to reach out to them. As Francis ZABALA wrote in his doctoral dissertation:

It could even happen that, if heeded well, it is the most marginalized themselves who would liberate the world from its dominating tendencies. But what is most important perhaps is that it is God who is taking the initiative in calling the missionary to come to the margins. Thus, an encounter with the most marginalized may well facilitate also an encounter with God. And the journey with the most abandoned in their struggle to move away from the precipice could well be a journey also with God. For God is with the people. God walks and journeys with the people in the margins. The missionary then is called to journey to the margins to join God and the people as they struggle to journey away from falling into the void.

Our Ministry with Indigenous Peoples in Brazil

Michael BRADY, OMI

“500 years of suffering, of massacre, of exclusion, prejudice, exploration, extermination of our peoples and cultures, raping of our women, devastation of our lands, of our forests, which were taken from us through the invasion... We are in mourning. Until when? Are you not ashamed of this memory which is in our soul and in our heart? We tell this story for the cause of Justice, Land and Liberty” (Words of Matalaue, a young member of the Pataxo People on 26th of April 2000 during a celebration of the Eucharist at Coroa Vermelha, to mark the arrival at that spot 500 years ago of those who “discovered” Brazil).

I take these words from the basic text of the “Campanha da Fraternidade” 2002. This “Campanha” is prepared each year by the National Conference of Bishops. That year the Bishops called all to solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples. We, being Oblates, heard this call and responded in whatever way we could according to the circumstances in which we found ourselves.

Joao ALTINO, who ministers in a Parish in Mato

Grosso, entered more deeply into dialogue with the Ofaie People who live in an Aldeia not too far away. Some land which these people had a Constitutional right to had been illegally occupied and so Joao, with some members of the Missionary Council for Indigenous Peoples, helped them to know their rights and seek to have them honored in practice. Joao continues to accompany these people. They are entitled to some Government grants which he helps them to know about and obtain. When the money comes, he sits with them to think out how best to use it. He told me that if he did not do that, they would use it to buy an old car or cow. He helps them to have transparency in the use of the grants; otherwise the well would dry up! He also helped them to buy Bee Hives and they are now selling honey.

Here in Goiania, there is a “Cäsa do Indio” where Indigenous people come in the case of serious illness. When they come they are normally accompanied by members of their families. In 2002, on “Dia do Indio,” we invited these families to a celebration with the members of the “Comunidades de Base.”

The day went very well. The Indigenous People spoke about themselves, and as they did so, their beautiful human qualities shone through and expelled the darkness of prejudice and stereotype images from many minds. Since then we have kept up contact.

During Holy Week this year, we received a phone call from some "Xavante" People who were in Goiania because of the illness of a member of their family. They asked us if they could join us for the celebration of the Eucharist on Easter Sunday. One of them read the first reading which was Peter's words in the house of Cornelius – a lovely coincidence! Some of these people have decided to be baptized, through the missionary activity of the

Salesians in Mato Grosso. Sometimes they ask us to visit their sick relatives in the hospital. Recently, a young Xavante who had come from an Aldeia with his sick grandfather asked me to go to the hospital and pray with him. When I got to the bed, I thought that communication would be impossible; he was a Xavante - 102 years old. Then the grandson told him that I was a Padre. His face lit up and he stretched out his arms like a two year old and embraced me. Some theological questions had been hanging around as I drove to the hospital, but when he embraced me as a friend, I realized that the event was bigger than any report. So I suppose it can be said that part of our presence with the Indigenous people is a response to an invitation rather than an execution of a pre-made plan.

Oblate Ministry among the Aboriginal People of Northern and Western Canada

Camille PICHÉ, OMI

The Oblate apology at Lac St. Anne in 1991 had already stirred the Oblates and the Church of Canada deeply. In this apology and in front of 20,000 aboriginal people, Doug CROSBY, OMI, then president of the Oblate Conference of Canada, admitted that the "systemic cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious imperialism that Oblates were part of.....continually threatened the cultural, linguistic and religious traditions of the Native people. Thinking that European languages, tradition and religious practices were superior, he said, they saw it as an advantage to take the children away from their parents," Many welcomed the Apology and thanked the Oblates for daring such a courageous and prophetic act while others described it as simply outrageous.

In the 15 years since then, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate have continued their ministry among First Nations but have had to deal with thousands of lawsuits from former students of Indian Residential Schools (IRS). The schools were begun out of necessity once the buffalo were gone and the fur trade collapsed. With small pox, Spanish flu, tuberculosis and such epidemics recurring frequently, the native population was decimated and the people destitute. The Government of Canada thought it was the end

of the Red Race or "Indians" as they called the natives of Canada and spoke of them as a "vanishing race." The future, according to them, was with the new European immigrants arriving in Western Canada by the thousands.

Vital GRANDIN, OMI, bishop of St. Albert, Alberta and Father Albert LACOMBE, OMI, thought differently and developed a plan in the early 1880's for educating Indian children in Western Canada. Journalist Ed Struzik wrote in December 2005: "Having lived with the Blackfoot, Cree and other tribes when they were prosperous hunting cultures, both priests were mortified to see how the Indians had been reduced to catching gophers and mice and killing their own dogs to feed their starving families after signing treaties and settling on reserves." He continues: "Regarding the destitute Indians of the prairies in the same light as de Mazenod saw the poor of France as valued but uncherished members of society who had to be saved.....he (Lacombe) felt it was their Christian duty to provide them with skills they needed to take part in the new white man's world".

Begun with good intentions however, a number of factors contributed to serious problems, not the least

of which was Government's under-funding. Lacombe's vision was to "get the most talented and dedicated people teaching at the IRS; instead Assistant Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed responded: "It is expected that residential schools will employ officials at less wages and buy necessary provisions at a cheaper rate." This pretty well set the stage for the next 125 years: chronic lack of funding plagued the schools throughout their history, resulted in poorly built schools, poor education because of a lack of books and qualified teachers. There were an inadequate staff and poor health standards. In those circumstances, the results were predictable. Added to that, although serious efforts were made by many missionaries to learn aboriginal languages, nevertheless, during his visit to Canada in 1936, Father LABOURE, OMI, Superior General, admonished school directors for "abandoning aboriginal languages," adding also: "Regulations forbidding children to talk in their mother tongue even during recreation are so strict in certain schools that the least infraction is severely punished; so much so," he adds, "that children came to believe that talking in their language was a serious fault and returning home, were ashamed to talk with their parents." Former students rightly added linguistic and cultural abuse to their list of grievances. The Apology was offered in the context of this history of the IRS.

Since then, Oblates have continued ministry to aboriginal communities as thousands of former students (there are over 80,000) filed lawsuits against the Government, the Oblates, religious communities and dioceses with a whole litany of grievances, from forced confinement to physical and sexual abuse. Oblates and church people struggled to "find the truth," saying that if wrongs were committed and abuse proven, they must be righted. Not an easy task, as we are dealing with records with 125 years of history in many communities and the fact that most accused Oblates are dead and are unable to defend themselves. Validation of claims became an important justice issue, not only for students who had been hurt, but also to safeguard the reputation of the Oblates. Particular attention was paid to cases of sexual abuse which left deep scars and profoundly affected the lives of young students in our care.

Throughout these last years, many have identified IRS litigation as a heavy cross to bear. It would be

too easy to dismiss all accusations and say that we are being unjustly accused. The cross is a redemptive act for everyone, and through unenlightened colonialism, Aboriginal people throughout the world have had to bear the brunt of injustice, in many cases with their lives. It is true that we imposed our Latin language and rituals, our religious customs and ways and too readily interpreted their spirituality as superstition and, as mentioned in the Apology, "broke their peace pipes."

Perhaps now, if these events can be understood as a certain purification of our mission, we can continue our ministry with a renewed dialogue. In-kind commitments will require that we work *along with* native people, or First Nations as they now choose to be called, and not *for* them. According to the agreement, ministry, projects, and programs will have to be approved and assessed by both the Oblates and the Aboriginal people. The Apology stated: "recognizing that within every sincere apology, there is implicit the promise of conversion to a new way of acting, we, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate of Canada, wish to pledge ourselves to a renewed relationship with the Native People of Canada." We now have the occasion to do so. Oblates have now committed significant amounts of money and personnel to aboriginal ministry for the next 10 years, offering us the challenge of a "renewed relationship."

Since the missions to Canada began in 1841 under Bishop DE MAZENOD, Oblates have been evangelizing the Indigenous peoples throughout the North and in Western Canada. Marked by noble acts of heroism as well as personal failure, the Oblates of OMI Lacombe Canada are now writing a closing chapter to this 160 years of history and in the Spirit of St Eugene de Mazenod, have pledged themselves to journey with the Native people on the path of healing and reconciliation.



Native Ministry in Canada's Capital

Ed MAC NEIL, OMI
OMI Lacombe Province

The focal point for the Ministry of the Native Peoples in Ottawa is at the Bronson Centre, a building made available for this and many other ministries, by the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns). The Centre is one of education and leadership training.

A monthly Eucharist is celebrated, followed by a potluck feast and socializing. The facilities of the nearby Chinese parish are offered to the Native Community. This gathering assists in building a strong faith community. Special feast days are marked by increased numbers and a spirit of solidarity with people who travel from the surrounding areas to celebrate. One such gathering is the *Homelands Mass* held at Notre Dame Cathedral with Archbishop Gervais presiding and welcoming representatives of various nations that make up the people of Canada. On occasion it is the Eagle Staff carriers of the Native Community who lead the procession.

Over the past seven years the *Annual Kateri Native Healing and Prayer Conference* is held. This is a time of instruction, prayer, music and sharing under the patronage of Blessed Kateri.

The celebration of our Christmas Eucharist is a time of special joy. Drumming, dancing, and songs of praise add up for an event that attracts all ages, races and creeds. This celebration is held at the Odawa Native Friendship Centre, a modern facility for the city of Ottawa and area.

A very special part of the work is the Men's Ministry. Volunteers and/or professionals assist in guiding men in need of inner strength, confidence and healing, to move out on their own and live productive lives. Men were received into this ministry who lived on the streets and/or were addicted to drugs and alcohol. In a supportive environment, these men discover the love of God as well as their God-given talents. Several have discovered their call to minister and have begun studies to be better prepared to share what they have received with others. Here is a quote from the Annual Report of the Kateri Ministry:

In some cases a man needs to attend literacy classes to learn to read and write, others must receive treatment at alcohol and drug treatment centres, some need professional and/or nutritional counselling, they have medical needs, etc., that need to be addressed. After all of this is completed, then comes the time for a process of discerning if ministry is their call. However even if ministry isn't the path they choose, the majority do become Christians". At present our residence is filled to the maximum.

Darren is one of our men who was homeless, hopeless, struggling but going nowhere in his life because of his drug addiction. However God in his mercy heard his mother's prayer as well as the prayer of the faithful and blessed Darren with a profound spiritual awakening. He was so incredibly moved that he has now devoted his whole life to Christ, to the Kateri Ministry and to the evangelization of his native people. Darren plays guitar, sings, and has taken leadership of the Kateri Music Ministry.

He has travelled extensively with the Ministry..to give his powerful testimony of how God's great love and healing power changed his life and made him whole. His burning desire is to spread the hope of the Gospel to everyone, most especially young people. He wants them to know that our God is a God of the impossible and nothing is too great for him to heal.

Other elements of the Ministry are: leading Prayer Days, preparing people in other areas of Ontario to celebrate their first Native Eucharist, assisting in hosting youth gatherings, Journey to Wholeness Program, hosting healing sessions and training sessions for Christian leadership.



My Ministry among the Cree

Peter ALTAMIRANO, OMI
OMI Lacombe Province

Since Father Sylvain LAVOIE was named Archbishop of Keewatin-Le Pas at the end of August of 2005, I have been doing ministry primarily on the reserve of Makwa Sahgaiehcan while Bro. Kurt STANG does ministry on the Waterhen Reserve, Saskatchewan. My ministry consists of house visiting, teaching catechesis at home and in school, praying, celebrating the Word of God in their houses, tutoring in school when I am needed and playing volley ball and soccer with the children. I believe that forming a relationship with the people of the whole reserve is paramount to work with our First Nation people.

HOUSE VISITING I visit people on a daily basis, from Mondays to Sundays. Being present to the people and listening to their problems of employment, marital difficulties, raising children who do not have parents and so forth is a big part of my ministry. At the end of my visits I try to pray with them so as to invite God's peace into their hearts and mine. I am always thankful to the people for allowing me to come into their homes and share with me their concerns and their hopes and I love seeing the smiling faces of children who are generous in welcoming me.

TUTORING Last December, while I was talking to the principal of the school, the grade 3 teacher came into the office and asked the principal if she could take three days off because she was sick. Since they could not find a substitute, I suggested that I could do the job. To my surprise they accepted my offer and I ended up teaching twenty-five children for those three days. It gave me the opportunity to get to know the children and visit their homes. Soon after, I volunteered to tutor Math and English, helping write papers, with students of grade ten, eleven and twelve. I have helped a few of them but I was very sad to see the lack of academic interest on the part of the students who do not seem to see the need to have a good education. The problem with the students is not just one of academics. As the principal told me: "How can we ex-

pect the students to learn anything if when they get to school many of them have not had breakfast yet or have not slept properly because they were up until three in the morning watching movies?" Nevertheless, I am always glad when I can help one of them with his or her homework and I am able to get to know that student better. Many students have asked me to teach them Spanish.

CATECHESIS At present there are about ninety children registered for our catechetical program called *The Kateri Klub*. The principal of the Makwa Shaghaiehcan School, after consultation with the School Board, gave me permission to teach religious education after school hours. She has provided for a classroom and transportation for the children to get home after Religious Education. Mother Cynthia, a consecrated lay missionary of the St. Joseph Missionaries of Sacrifice, and I teach catechism once a week on Tuesday from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. Often, the children do not want to go home because they want to stay with Mother Cynthia. She is a tremendous catechetical teacher who loves those children. In our classes, we share our love for God with them and encourage the children to get to know each other better, to work together, to respect themselves and each other, to respect their parents, grandparents, elders and everyone in their communities. We constantly remind them that God loves all of us unconditionally and that He wants to have a close relationship with each one of us. In return, all He asks of us is that we love Him and one another. We begin our classes with prayer; we pray before our snack of cookies and juice and we end with a prayer of thanksgiving and with a kiss on their forehead, which Mother Cynthia gives to each child. The principal and vice-principal have told us that it is the best-attended class in the school. We thank God for this awesome opportunity to share His love with these children.

SPORTS Volleyball and soccer have become part of our gatherings when I visit families. Last year I began teaching catechesis at home and one day af-

ter class I noticed that one of the children had a volleyball. I immediately asked the children if we could form two teams and we played that afternoon for about an hour. It became obvious to me that children learn quicker if they are having fun while learning. So from that day on, I have incorporated playing volleyball, soccer, going to the lake and having ice cream and pie after our catechesis. They are so eager to do things with me that last year we planted ninety-eight little pine trees, about ten inches high, in front of the school and along the football field to help beautify the community. I always wanted to have twelve kids but was never able to find the women who would agree to it. But, God is so generous that He has given me about 100 children. No one can outdo God in generosity.

PRAYING AND CELEBRATION Praying is a big part of my life and my ministry. It is what enables me to put all the events of the day into perspective. I try to always pray with the people I visit. At times it is spontaneous prayers and at other times it is the Rosary. I remind people that in Mary, they have a most tender Mother who cares about every aspect of their lives as she cared for Jesus. Recently, I have started to meet with two families on Sundays for a celebration of the Word of God. We learn the meaning of the different aspects of our celebration and the importance of collectively coming together as a family to tell God every week that we love him and

to thank Him for His many blessings.

I am so thankful to God for allowing me to serve our First Nation people in the community of Makwa Sahgaiecan. At times I have been very sad to see so much apathy, hurt and pain in our Native communities. However, it is not the suffering that saddens me but the fact that often times these sufferings are wasted. Our First Nation people know God as Creator but not so much as Redeemer. As one educated native man, who is a traditionalist, told me: "I have never been able to understand why the creator allowed the Europeans to steal our land." I told him that it was the Creator's permissive will that allowed this to take place in the same way that He allowed His only begotten Son to be killed by the same creatures He had created and that in the person of Jesus, the Creator and Father has provided a meaning to our human suffering. I told him that Native people were in good position to teach others to forgive if they would accept what happened in the past as a way of redeeming those Europeans. This would help them to once again embrace life and have confidence in the Creator who continues to love them deeply. He has since invited me to his house. As I walk with our native brothers and sisters, my desire is to share our common human values and spiritual virtues that inform and guide our lives and enable us to be the best people God created us to be.

The Garo and Khasi indigenous peoples face eviction from their ancestral lands

Sanjeeb Drong
Bangladesh

Sanjeeb Drong is a layman and a close collaborator of the Oblates working with these indigenous people in Bangladesh.

The Garo and Khasi indigenous communities live in the north and northeastern part of Bangladesh close to the Indian border. The majority of the Garos and Khasis live in Meghalaya, India. Some of them live in Tripura, Koch Bihar, Assam and Mizoram. Their total population in Bangladesh is about 120,000. The Garos and Khasis belong to a matrilineal society and

most of them have become Christians through the years.

For centuries, the indigenous peoples in Bangladesh have been facing the severe effects of government policies like land grabbing, forceful migration, and human rights violation including the colonial policy of divide and rule.

Since 1947, after the British rule, the then government of Pakistan organized a population transfer

program to the Garo region; thousands of Bengali Muslims settled on indigenous land. Now the indigenous peoples have become a minority in their own homeland.

Hundreds of Garo and Khasi villages completely disappeared. Land was the source of life and livelihood for them. But lands were taken by outsiders from the indigenous peoples. After the loss of land, many of these indigenous people migrated to the towns and cities for jobs.

The Bangladesh Government does not have any policy for the development of indigenous populations. Many times these people have faced forceful eviction from their homeland in the name of development projects like dams, national parks, Eco-parks, protected areas, reserve forests and even military bases. Thus, indigenous peoples have become the most marginalized and vulnerable group in the country. Bangladesh, in its thirty five years of independence, has never recognized these indigenous peoples in the constitution.

Eco-park posed to evict Khasis and Garos nations from Modhupur Forest

The indigenous peoples of Modhupur Forest are now in danger. About 25,000 Garos are facing serious violations of human rights: killing, torture, oppression from filing false cases, imprisonment, rape

etc. The state policy of Bangladesh is going to destroy their life totally by evicting them forcibly from their ancestral homeland.

The Bangladesh Government plans to establish an Eco-Park in the Moulvibazar district, which will take up more than 1,500 acres of indigenous peoples' ancestral land for tourism. This plan was initiated by the government in July 2000 without consultation of or consent of the indigenous peoples who have been living in the area for centuries. Nor did the government mention the villages of the Khasi and Garo people in their project proposal; instead, the government treats them almost as illegal inhabitants of the forest.

Seven indigenous hill villages will be affected: 1,000 Khasi and Garo families will face forceful eviction from their homelands where they have been living for thousand of years.

Indigenous peoples have been struggling for a long time to cancel the Eco-park project, but the government continues to support it. This is the source of continuing tension within the Garos and Khasis communities.

The Garo and Khasi indigenous peoples in Bangladesh seek international support for their very survival.

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