



San Carlos
Apache Reservation
Fr. Gino Piccoli, OFM

Nick Rayder



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Cover Image:

Cover and book design: Tau Publishing Design Department

The Documents of Vatican II

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4727 North 12th street

Phoenix, AZ 85014

ISBN# 978-1-61956-016-1

First Edition, 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published by Tau Publishing, Phoenix, AZ

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Words of Inspiration



Author's Note:

The importance (and practice) of honoring and incorporating various beliefs and customs of native cultures into Catholic Life by Catholic missionaries is discussed at length in “The Missionary Spirit Of Vatican II” an addendum to this paper found on page 37.

Many thanks for Sister Ruth Barbara CSC for her efforts clarifying and editing my writing and to Cynthia Owen for guiding my Mac.





Some Background for the Interview:

On a recent visit to the San Carlos Apache reservation I had a chance to talk at length with Fr. Gino Piccoli, OFM. I asked about his efforts to embrace and incorporate aspects of the Apache culture into Catholic Life on the Apache reservation.

Fr. Gino has lived and served on the San Carlos Reservation for 15 plus years. Previously, he served and taught at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Arizona. While there, Fr. Gino, an accomplished carpenter and artist, designed and built the liturgical furniture currently used in the church. After leaving the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Fr. Gino went to serve the Apache and other tribal people at San Carlos. Besides his administrative and pastoral responsibilities, he is using his creative design and building skills to renovate the Mission Church. As a missionary in Guatemala, Fr. Gino adopted the wonderful thoughts of the Latin America theologians on “sharing the faith” with an indigenous culture; a culture not your own.

Nick Rayder,
Scottsdale, Arizona 2011





The San Carlos Apache Reservation is located 125 miles East of Phoenix, Arizona on 1.9 million acres of mostly desert land. Approximately 10,000 Apache tribe members live on the San Carlos Reservation.

The adjacent White Mountain Apache Reservation is on 1.6 million acres and is located North of San Carlos on mostly forested land. Father Eddie Fronske, OFM has been the pastor of the White Mountain Reservation for 23 years. The northern White Mountain Apache tribe has approximately 12,000 members and is part of a logging economy.

Each reservation is about the size of the state of Delaware. The devastating 2008 forest fires in northern Arizona, the remoteness of the two reservations and the downturn of the U.S. economy has resulted in unemployment and poverty rates of between 70% to 85% for the two tribes.





I first asked Fr. Gino to discuss the relationship between the Apache people and Catholicism.

Fr. Gino:

When I first came here and to some extent even today, the Apaches said they cannot mix the Catholic Church, or any church for that matter, with their culture and life. One Apache told me that “When I’m in church, I’m Catholic, when I’m outside the church, I’m Apache”. Many Apaches here feel that you cannot be Apache and be Catholic at the same time because that is what they were taught in the past. But I tell them that following Jesus is a WAY OF LIFE not just random religious ceremonies.

There are a lot of Evangelical churches on the reservation. These churches are not open to any native customs. For many born-again Christians anything Indian is pagan and evil. So they teach folks that if you’re going to be a good Christian, you don’t do any Indian dances or say any Indian prayers. You should never go to a medicine man. They are told all those Indian practices are evil. Sometimes, a Christian burial is denied a Christian of a Protestant community if the deceased went to a young girl’s “coming of age” dance in the previous year. They are told to forget all the “Indian stuff”. Well, most Apaches can’t

forget “all that stuff” because it’s their life and heritage! What we’ve tried to do here is to show that it is possible to integrate the Apache Way into Catholicism.

Nick:

How did you start?

Fr. Gino:

I started with our paintings and the statues. I searched for an image of Mary that looked Apache and had a kind and loving face.

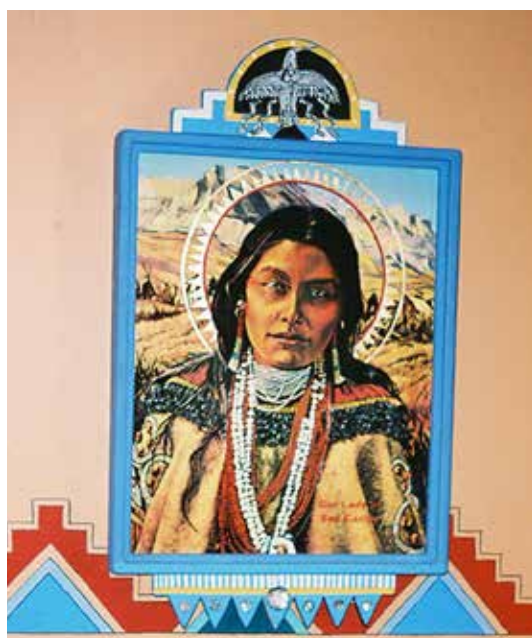
Nick:

That is the painting?

Fr. Gino:

Yes. I didn’t do the painting. I only added the halo. I think it was painted by a Lutheran pastor years and years ago, possibly in the ‘30s. I saw a print in a book. I enlarged it, painted on the halo and made a frame for it.

For Jesus, I found a picture painted by a priest-artist back East named Giuliani. Well, I copied the picture and painted a red Apache headband on it.



Nick:

It's wonderful! I saw that picture of the "Apache" Jesus hanging on the wall as you enter into the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale.

Fr. Gino:

Good! I think I gave them one. Next, I installed a Franciscan crucifix over the altar which is easier for the Apache to understand. It is important for Franciscans and it's very important to me. It's not really Apache-culture, but I needed something from my Franciscan roots to keep Gino going!

After going to some of the Apache Sunrise dances, the next thing I did was to rearrange the seating in the church. The Apache Sunrise Dance occurs when a young girl first menstruates and enters puberty. The dance is for young girls who are about twelve or thirteen. Within a few months of their menstruation, there is a big dance which lasts about four days. The dance celebrates the fact that now the girl can reproduce the race. She is then a potential mother of the Apache future. The blood of the family goes through the women, not through the man. It is matriarchal like Judaism.

So, when I went to a number of dances, I

realized that at these ceremonies they all stood in a big semicircle on a great big piece of barren land. At one end was the medicine man, facing East, where the sun rises. It was a big horseshoe-shaped community facing East.

I thought, maybe this would be a good way for us to pray in church if that's the way they pray on the dance grounds. So we moved all the benches in the church into a U-shape, facing East. This is also the traditional way to orient Christian churches signifying Christ came from the East.

Nick:

So, when you preach the Word of God, the congregation is facing East?

Fr. Gino:

That's correct, and they are also facing each other. Some say that in the Synagogue in Nazareth, where Jesus prayed, the community faced each other. In fact, all Synagogues at the time of Jesus were arranged this way.

Nick:

How's this working?

Fr. Gino:

I guess I've lost 20-30 people, some of whom

were old-timers who are convinced that they have to keep the White man's religion and the Apache way separate. They feel that they have to be Christian inside the church and forget they are Christian outside because that's the way they were taught. Others hung in there and seemed to like it, but weren't sure because it was new and different. It is somewhat like going into English after Vatican II. It's hard for some to make the connection that the way they're praying in church is the same as the way they were praying in the camp ground during their ceremonies.

Nick:

How many come to church?

Fr. Gino:

We have around 60 people each Sunday. They come when they can and want to attend but they don't have any guilt feelings if they don't come. But the nice thing is that more people are coming regularly every Sunday!

Another thing we did is put the altar table in the middle of the church as the Catholic churches have done. Now the Apaches are standing in church the way they stand at the camp grounds. They are now more free to talk and say "hello" to each other at the

sign of peace. Then I thought I'd make a small prayer room for the reservation of the Eucharist. It was the old sacristy.

We then wondered what we should do with the remaining Eucharist. In most churches it's kept in a bronze or marble tabernacle-box. These people do not have bronze containers, nor have they ever seen marble tabernacles.

The main craft the Apaches did before the White man came was to make baskets out of yucca stems. We have two women on the reservation who, because of their knowledge and skill at basket making, were declared "National Treasures" by the Smithsonian Museum. One of these women, Novena Cobb, made us a basket to hold the Eucharist. We have it hanging in a secure area in the Eucharistic Chapel. She also made a reed cover for the basket opening. It has pieces of rawhide attached hanging from it with metal cones at the end of each strip of rawhide.

When the wind blows, the metal cones hit each other and make a gentle chime sound. For the Apache that's the sound of holiness. So, whenever the wind blows in the chapel, the basket itself signals the holiness it holds.



Nick:

The last time I was here you had a young person decorating the rooms with Apache patterns.

Fr. Gino:

The young man is a Zuni named Jesse. He has three children with an Apache woman here on the reservation. I found that he was very skilled at painting. Now we have Apache patterns around the church that represent the mountains. Mountains represent a holy place for both the Zuni and Apache as they did for the Jews. We used three triangles as symbolic for the three peaks that are the sacred mountains here in San Carlos. We also have a book of the Gospels with Apache designs. There is an image of our “Apache” Jesus on the front of the book.

Nick:

The book is beautiful!

Fr. Gino:

I covered it with tin and inlaid turquoise and jasper stones. It's the gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It has rawhide strings with metal jingles on the bottom of the rawhide. These things are familiar to the Apache. I also painted a hummingbird on the front. The Apache understand that the

hummingbird takes our prayers part way to God and brings messages from God to us. Surely, the Holy Spirit would not forbid being represented as a beautiful hummingbird?

Nick:

The book is very special!

Fr. Gino:

One visitor who was impressed with this Church said to me: “I like everything but I don’t like that book.” She went on: “With all the poverty here it doesn’t seem right that you would spend all that money on silver to cover the book!” I told her it was just painted tin... that’s all!

Nick/Fr. Gino:

(Laughing)

Fr. Gino:

We use the Gospel book in this way: after the first two readings of the liturgy, when it is time to hear the Gospel reading, the words of Jesus, an Apache man or woman will go to the altar, pick up the Gospel book and present it to every person in the church. Each person then touches the holy book of Jesus’ teaching and kisses his or her fingers. Everybody, in a sense, is preparing to hear His word.

Nick:

The gesture is similar to what many Hispanics do after they make the sign of the cross. Is that something you instituted?

Fr. Gino:

It's something I learned from Judaism. They do this action on the Jewish feast of Shavuot or Pentecost. When the Jews finish the reading of the Scriptures, they take the Torah around the synagogue and everybody touches it. I thought this was a great thing for us to get people here to do. A lot of our practice reflects Jewish tradition. Well, the Eucharist is basically Jewish!"

Nick:

How do these ideas come to you? Where do you get them?

Fr. Gino:

Well, the ideas come from what I've learned in Theology and what I've studied in the foreign countries in which I've served. My ideas also come from the interests I have and the books I've read.

Nick:

Is there anything else about the service here that you want to talk about?

Fr. Gino:

Everything is pretty normal during the Eucharist itself. Going to Communion and Apache people proclaiming the readings is what happens at any Catholic Mass. Singing is not a major part of the Apache culture. They don't sing as a group. They don't go down the street whistling or singing a tune. The only people who sing would be like six or seven men who sing with a drummer at a dance or at a healing ceremony.

Using religious music at worship stems from the earliest days of the church. So, during the Mass, we use an Apache water drum. It's made of metal with an inch of water inside with a deer skin hide on top. The drummer uses a wooden willow stick made in a circle as a drumstick. We use that drum regularly during the Mass, especially during the Prayer of Thanksgiving. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the drum embellishes the Word of God and reminds us that we are at prayer! I think our people relate well to it because that's the only instrument the Apaches use. They haven't heard guitars or trumpets or sounds like that except in the Charismatic churches where the music is mostly a performance rather than communal praise. Our Apache folks have learned many Christian songs, but it's hard to sing "a capella" if you're not used

to singing without instrumentation. But with the drum, we've done pretty well at including and engaging the community here over the last 10 to 12 years.

In Apache theology, the eagle represents the creature who takes all our prayers to God. The eagle takes the prayers because he's the biggest bird that flies the highest. So, we say that Jesus is like the Great Eagle. I hold up the Eagle feathers, saying that Jesus is the one we have been looking for to take our prayers to the Father.

We also have a little sack of cattail pollen that we use in blessings. In the way Catholics use holy water, Apaches use this cattail pollen.

There's something else to tell you. At the end of the Mass, we all turn to the East with our right hand raised in prayer to God and sing an Indian-style hymn. Then we turn to the South and say a prayer to God's presence in the South. Then to the West, then to the North. Finally, we turn and make a full circle. This is a beautiful Apache way to say that God isn't just in some "holy place", God is all around us. It means that I want to be in the center with God all around me! So, to live a good life on this earth, you don't want to look for God someplace else. You want to have

God all around you all of the time.

Nick:

How truly meaningful.

Fr. Gino:

Oh, (with excitement) this is what we're celebrating this Sunday. We have The Anointing of The Sick and the Laying On of the Hands, asking the Holy Spirit to fill this infirm or elderly or addicted person. Then we anoint each with oil, just as we would do anywhere in the Catholic church. But we add to it something culturally meaningful to our Apache brothers and sisters. Before each person comes for anointing, we ask them to take off their shoes and come up one at a time because, like Moses, they are on holy ground. Taking off one's shoes is a sign of humility. The one to be anointed stands on a special Indian blanket that has butterflies on it, the sign of new life. Hands are laid on them, they get anointed and at the very end each person makes the sacred circle. Each anointed person at the end of the Sacrament, turns around in a circle and spiritually says: "Amen, I want to be in the center with God all around me".

Nick:

Tell us about the incense you use and the Baptismal font.

Fr. Gino:

The Navajo and Apache have a purification ritual they do with the burning of pine needles and the use of smoke. So, we use cedar needles. We dry them, and when they burn, they give off a woodsy smell. When the smoke comes to them, each Apache waves the smoke down at their feet and symbolically move it with their hands to their whole body to symbolically cleanse themselves.

And for the Baptismal font we use a large metal trough. We decorated it with Apache symbols and designs and with the words of St. Paul. A visitor once said to me: “Oh, if we could only raise money to buy a big marble baptismal font, wouldn’t it be wonderful?” Someone with me retorted: “No, this is what the Apaches are used to in feeding their animals... it’s how they see water. People are very hungry here and you want to put a marble font in here for a few thousand dollars! Are you crazy?” So you see, we have a very down-to-earth baptismal font!

Nick:

Wonderful! Is there anything else you want to share?

Fr. Gino:

I want the Apaches always to feel that this is

their church. So, while visitors are always welcome, I would not want the Apaches to feel second rate or uneasy in their their own church.





Choosing to have a metal trough as a Baptismal font and decorating it with Apache signs and symbols and words from Saint Paul is a simple but meaningful example of the way Fr. Gino has molded the Apache way within traditional Catholic liturgy. He does this with faith and artistic creativity and with a heart that has grown to be part Apache!

San Carlos Catholic Church is a place everyone should visit. First, to see for yourself where the Apache people were forced to live. It is a place in the middle of the desert, without sufficient water to grow crops or raise livestock. The land is barren and hope for the future of the tribe is in question. Second, your visit will provide witness to a significant ray of hope that the San Carlos Catholic Church and the Saint Charles Mission School offer the Apache community. You will learn of the full dedication, service and commitment of the Franciscan friars, the Sisters of the Holy Cross and the Sisters of Mercy staff, and volunteers that teach and work at San Carlos.

Come, visit! Alert yourself, and support this wonderful effort... but don't bring a marble Baptismal font!









Information:

How to get involved and/or to contribute to these ministries:

- ◆ To visit St. Charles Catholic Church, travel to San Carlos, AZ -- 125 miles east of Phoenix, just east of Globe --to the north end of San Carlos Ave. (on the right). Sunday mass is at 9:00 AM. To assist Fr. Gino with this mission work, contributions will be graciously welcomed and can be made to Father Gino Piccoli, Saint Charles Catholic Church, P.O. Box 28, San Carlos, Arizona, 85550.
All donations are tax deductible

- ◆ To learn about the St. Charles Mission School serving 120 children in grades K-6 contact: the Principal, Sr. Georgia Greene, RSM at (928-475-2449). Or better, e-mail her at (stcharlessc@theriver.com). You can request a video disk which gives an overview of the San Carlos reservation and highlights the accomplishments and needs of the Mission School. Financial contributions can be made directly to:
St. Charles Apache Mission School
P.O. Box 339
San Carlos, Arizona 85550



- ◆ To learn about the Apache Fair Trade Cooperative, a non-profit project focused on the economic development for each reservation through the production and marketing of Apache-made art, crafts and jewelry, contact: Patti Stills at the Franciscan Renewal Center (480-948-7460) or e-mail her at socialconcerns@thecasa.org.
- ◆ To learn about or contribute usable clothes, small appliances, or furniture to the Saint Charles Free Flea Market (located in a large utility building adjacent to the St. Charles Church) which was organized and orchestrated by Sr. Ruth Barbara CSC, contact her at (928-475-2460).
- ◆ To learn about the White Mountain Apache Reservation and the White Mountain Apaches or Saint Francis Church at Whiteriver contact Anna Reno, Administrative Assistant at (928-338-4432). To contact Fr. Eddie call (928-338-4432) or better yet view his wonderful Inspirational Stories from Whiteriver by going to the web site Franciscan Journey.com. Go to "pace e bene" and click on "Fr. Eddie Fronske OFM".



- ◆ To inquire about a group visit to either reservation, to learn more about the Faith in Action Ministry at the Franciscan Renewal Center or to support the Apache outreach programs with time and/or financial resources contact:
Patti Sills-Trausch or Bonnie Wasniewski at the Franciscan Renewal Center
5802 Lincoln Drive in Scottsdale
(480-948-7460 ext130 or 155).
- ◆ To learn about the Fruit Ministry that buys fruit at cost from Sprouts (including goods they donate) and collects ripe fruit from neighborhood trees in Scottsdale and transports them for distribution to the two missions contact Nick Rayder (during the winter in Scottsdale at 480-949-6630 and in the summer in Crested Butte, Colorado at 970-349-6586).

If you do get involved and can contribute money, time or goods, it would be deeply appreciated. Your life will be enriched in ways that will surprise you! In any case keep the plight of the Apache people and the people working and living at these missions in your thoughts and say a simple prayer or two for their efforts. Thank you!

EACH OF THESE PROGRAMS IS OPEN TO PEOPLE OF ANY RELIGIOUS TRADITION









Addendum:

The Missionary Spirit of Vatican II

by Nick Rayder

I asked Fr. Joseph Schwab, Director of the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, to help me understand how Catholic missionaries are encouraged to respect and recognize cultural values which harmonize with the Gospel.

He guided me to a book titled: *The Documents of Vatican II* and pointed out that “Vatican II calls us to share with all, the spiritual goods of Christ while recognizing the presence of the Spirit in the native culture with whom we work.” (cf: “*Ad Gentes*” #4 p587, #7 p593).

He further explained that rooted in their native experiences, the Apache people now use the Gospel as “a leaven of liberty and progress... of unity, and peace as they continue to shape their future” (*Ad Gentes* #8, p594).

Fr. Joe continued: “As the church grows through the action of the Apache people, they still recognize their ways which help lead them to God and witness to the truth that ‘the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in other religions’ (*Nostra Aetate* #2 pp

661-662 footnotes, cf Justin Martyr).

In fact, missionaries are encouraged to “acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these people as well as the values in their society and culture” (Nostra Aetate #2, p663).

Toward the end of our discussion, Fr. Joe suggested I read in total the exact passages he quoted from in the Vatican II documents to get deeper understanding of the Church’s awakened view of native culture and spirituality. I would invite those of you whose interest in native culture and spirituality has been awakened to join me in reviewing the documents of Vatican II as they relate to native spirituality. Go to: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/. He then emphasized that “these are principles which guide Fr. Gino, Fr. Eddie, other Franciscans and the people of the missions in their shared work of evangelization!”





